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Reflections on Running a critLIS Reading Group

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Introduction

In this chapter we offer our reflections, developed through a collaborative autoethnography, on our experience of running a face-to-face Critical Librarianship and Information Studies (henceforth referred to as critLIS) reading group in an Information School (iSchool) in the United Kingdom (UK). To set our group in context, the iSchool is based in a research-intensive university in Northern England; we have an international staff with a wide range of interests—from public libraries to chemoinformatics—and a large postgraduate community. Although the iSchool delivers a range of postgraduate programs, we have been particularly involved with (studying, teaching on, and directing) the MA Librarianship and MSc Digital Library Management—one-year courses that are regarded as stepping stones to a professional LIS position.

To date, little attention has been paid to critLIS or questions of social justice within UK Library and Information Studies (LIS) education, although we have noted the recent emergence of modules with a critical focus within our own department. A reading of UK LIS course websites, from 2015, did not identify any courses offering modules on social inclusion, equality or diversity, although a minority addressed related issues as part of broader modules.[1] In the UK, accreditation of LIS courses is based on the Chartered Institute of

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1 Elizabeth L. Chapman, "'We Have Made a Start but There is a Long Way to Go': Public Library LGBTQ* Provision to Children and Young People in the Current UK Context," in *Queer Library Alliance: Global Reflections and Imaginings,* eds. Rae-Anne Montague and Lucas McKeever (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017), 26.

Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) Professional Knowledge and Skills Base, which contains no mention of critical theory, although it includes a brief mention of "respect for diversity within society."[2] The expected standards and content for the discipline are set out in the Quality Assurance Agency Subject Benchmark for Library and Information Management, which mentions neither critical theory nor social justice, although there are various mentions of "critical thinking" and "critical evaluation."[3]

The desire for more consideration of critical theoretical and social justice approaches in LIS prompted doctoral students Liz and Dan to set up the reading group in 2013. The group is normally attended by five regular members. Every month, a text is chosen by a group member and an open access copy is circulated to the whole department. We then meet and discuss the text informally, picking apart its meaning, giving our opinions and using it as a springboard to discuss issues within LIS.

Writing this chapter showed that we found it difficult to define what constitutes critical theory. We have deliberately maintained a broad definition, allowing us to read texts from a variety of authors (rather than solely from those drawing on Marxist traditions). Leckie and Buschman write that critical theoretical approaches help us to reexamine LIS issues "in new ways," including considerations of "ideologies, hegemony, socioeconomic forces … spatial practices, and so forth," and it is this interest in reexamining, questioning, and paying attention to issues of power and social justice that motivates many of our text choices.[4] Our reading group texts have focused on democracy and the public sphere, "race," postcolonialism, disability, and the politics of knowledge production.[5]

The overarching theme of this book—tensions between critLIS theory and practice—surfaced during our reflections, discussions, and in the process of writing the chapter, and not surprisingly, group members had different and sometimes conflicting feelings about it. Broadly, however,

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2 CILIP, "My Professional Knowledge and Skills Base," *CILIP,* accessed December 30, 2016, 8, http://www.cilip.org.uk/careers/professional-knowledge-skills-base/access-professional-knowledge-skills-base [membership-locked link].

3 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), "Subject Benchmark Statement: Librarianship, Information, Knowledge, Records and Archives Management," *The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education*, last modified March 2015, http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-librarianship-15.pdf.

4 Gloria J. Leckie and John E. Buschman, "Introduction: The Necessity for Theoretically Informed Critique in Library and Information Science (LIS)," in *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines,* ed. Gloria J. Leckie, Lisa M. Given, and John E. Buschman (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2010), xiii.

5 Critical Theory Reading Group, "Information School Critical Theory Reading Group," *Critical Theory Reading Group*, last modified October 3, 2017, https://criticalischool.wordpress.com/.

we agreed that setting "theory" and "practice" in irrevocable opposition to each other was unhelpful and did not reflect our experiences as researchers and practitioners. We felt that "theory" was such a broad term that it was impossible to generalize about it — some theories could be regarded as very "practical," and others less so. We questioned what counted as "practical." For instance, if a theory changed our perceptions, forced us to reassess our assumptions, or sparked an idea, did that make it "practical"? We discussed how framing this relationship as praxis, that is as a consciously-examined tension between "theory" and "practice," might be a more constructive way of understanding the relationship. As a concept, praxis allows for a recognition of the differences between theory and practice, but also understands them as elements in mutually constitutive process, informing one another in a recurring loop. We also disputed the idea that as academics we were not practitioners. The majority of us either have been or still are library or information workers as well as academics, and we also recognize our academic work as practice. Conducting research, publishing, and teaching all have the potential to be informed by theory, and the theories that we produce as academics are influenced by our practice.

However, we also acknowledged that theoretical work does not always feel useful or relevant to practitioners. We have all read theories that made us think, "that person hasn't been near a library for a while," that seemed elitist and out-of-touch, and that did not acknowledge the complex reality of day-to-day work. Moreover, time pressures, overwork, understaffing, bureaucracy, and work cultures which are unsupportive and target-driven, all leave little space for practitioners to read and reflect on theory, or to produce theories of their own. It is with this conceptualization of theory and practice as intertwined and socially situated, as praxis, that we approach our reflections throughout the chapter.

We begin by reviewing LIS literature focusing on academic "Journal Clubs" and Reading Groups, followed by an explanation of our methodology, and a discussion of pertinent themes which arose in our reflections. We will not attempt to evaluate the "effectiveness" of the group, but rather raise questions which will allow us to develop our work further and perhaps help those who are seeking to run similar groups.

Journal Clubs and Reading Groups in LIS

To help us situate our reflections within LIS scholarship, we begin by briefly reviewing the literature on Journal Clubs (JCs), a popular method of discussing and sharing research literature among both academics and practitioners, and Reading Groups, a term less commonly encountered in

LIS. This comparison was prompted by Sheila, who is also involved in co-facilitating virtual JCs.[6]

The JC literature is dominated by articles relating to healthcare: indeed the term is said to have originated within that discipline.[7] JC is also the term generally adopted by librarians, and is defined by Fitzgibbons et al. as "meetings where participants engage in discussion or critical appraisal of research publications and other professional literature."[8] This inclusion of "other" (non-research) publications is associated with JC goals of keeping up-to-date professionally, and is a particular feature of librarian JCs outside the healthcare sector.[9]

While articles from within the healthcare sector (including those written by librarians) have a strong focus on the JC's role in improving evidence-based practice through improvement of critical appraisal and research methods,[10] librarian JCs also value accounts of current practice and may even want to avoid scholarly critique.[11] The JC literature focuses mainly on investigating benefits, aims, value and impact (on understanding and practice) of JCs, barriers to JCs, and best practice in running JCs (what makes them sustainable and effective).[12]

The issue of what to call this activity is not discussed in the literature: in adopting JC as a label, librarians may be legitimizing themselves as a

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6 Marshall Dozier and Sheila Webber, "Running a Journal Club," *Journal of the European Association for Health Information and Libraries* 11, no. 3 (2015): 22–24, http://eahil.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/journal-3-2015-link-web1.pdf.

7 Yamini Deenadayalan, Karen Grimmer-Somers, Mathew Prior, and Saravana Kumar, "How to Run an Effective Journal Club: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 14, no. 5 (2008): 898–911, doi:10.1111/j.1365-2753.2008.01050.x

8 Megan Fitzgibbons, Lorie Kloda, and Andrea Miller-Nesbitt, "Exploring the Value of Academic Librarians' Participation in Journal Clubs," *College & Research Libraries* 78, no. 6 (2017): 774–85, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.78.6.774.

9 E.g. Eugene Barsky, "A Library Journal Club as a Tool for Current Awareness and Open Communication: University of British Columbia Case Study," *Partnership: a Canadian Journal of Library & Information Practice and Research* 4, no. 2 (2009), https://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/perj/article/view/1000/1557#.Wi7jvrQ-f-Y.

10 Deenadayalan, Grimmer-Somers, Prior, and Kumar, "How to Run an Effective Journal Club"; Liz Doney and Wendy Stanton, "Facilitating Evidence-Based Librarianship: A UK Experience," *Health Information & Libraries Journal* 20, (2003), doi:10.1046/j.1365-2532.20.s1.13.x; Nicola Pearce-Smith, "A Journal Club is an Effective Tool for Assisting Librarians in the Practice of Evidence-Based Librarianship: A Case Study," *Health Information & Libraries Journal* 23, no. 1 (2006), doi:10.1111/j.1471-1842.2006.00638.x

11 E.g. Philip Young and Luke Vilelle, "The Prevalence and Practices of Academic Library Journal Clubs," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 37, no. 2 (2011), doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2011.02.004; Fitzgibbons, Kloda, and Miller-Nesbitt, "Exploring the Value."

12 Deenadayalan, Grimmer-Somers, Prior, and Kumar, "How to Run an Effective Journal Club"; Tom Roper, Igor Brbe, and Jil Fairclough, "Assessing the Value of a Librarians' Journal Club" (presentation, 15th EAHIL Conference, Seville, Spain, June 6–11, 2016), accessed December 30, 2016, http://www.bvsspa.es/eahil2016/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/D4.pdf; Young and Vilelle, "The Prevalence and Practices."

scientific and professional group that values self-improvement, progress and "best practices." The term "reading group," by contrast, is most commonly used to describe similar activities in softer disciplines or leisure groups outside the university sector. One of the rarer examples of the term "reading group" to describe LIS activity is in Cooke, Sweeney, and Noble's account of setting up a reading group as part of a strategy to "support critical discussions of race, racism and white privilege."[13] The paper describes how a reading group was felt to be more welcoming and inclusive than the original idea of "creating research spaces dedicated to critical theory frameworks and methods."[14]

We envisage our critLIS group as falling more into the "reading group" category, although we often found ourselves reflecting on how the articles we read might (or might not) inform our practice. What is missing from these accounts, even Cooke et al.'s paper, is an insight into the feelings of the JC participants about the group itself, and their part in it, and a narrative which teases out the tensions and contradictions. This is where we feel our autoethnography can make a contribution to the literature.

Methodology

Our methodological approach to writing this chapter has been collaborative autoethnography (CA). When planning the chapter, we felt that the critical reflexivity required for autoethnography made this appropriate.[15] Autoethnography has been defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)."[16] It moves beyond personal anecdote to illuminate a wider sociocultural context. CA similarly entails self-questioning and self-analysis, but performed co-operatively with a group of researchers. Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez identify that CA enables equality between participant and researcher, since everyone has this dual role, and it stimulates deeper interrogation of personal data.[17] CA can enrich meaning-making and also provide a supportive space in which to

13 Nicole A. Cooke, Miriam E. Sweeney, and Safiya Umoja Noble. "Social Justice as Topic and Tool: an Attempt to Transform an LIS Curriculum and Culture," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 86, no. 1 (2016): 107–24, https://doi.org/10.1086/684147.

14 Cooke, Sweeney, and Noble, "Social Justice as Topic and Tool."

15 Carolyn Ellis, "Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others," *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (2007): 3–29, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077800406294947.

16 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4 (2011): 273, http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095#gcit

17 Heewon Chang, Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, and Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez, *Collaborative Autoethnography* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013).

rehearse and analyze our own stories. We hope that the writing we produce from this analysis will contribute to the same critLIS literature that we have been reading and discussing as a group, and may perhaps be discussed and critiqued by others in its turn.

It soon became apparent that both the chapter word count and the timeframe were insufficient to undertake a full scale CA. This chapter is therefore a first step on our CA journey which preserves rather than synthesizes our individual voices. It remains reflective at this point rather than deeply analytical; a next step for us would be to link our own reflections more fully to wider contexts, structures and systems. Hernandez and Ngunjuri identify the challenges of CA: forcing collaborators to engage with power structures and identities, requiring trust and risking ruptures in existing relationships.[18] However, we experienced CA as something which drew us together and (to varying degrees) was personally illuminating. The main stressors were external: competing work priorities, family ill health, timetabling meetings, and (in one case) surgery. As part of the process of CA, we discussed ethical research practice, and obtained ethical approval from the university to conduct the research.

We aimed for full and concurrent collaboration at all stages, writing simultaneously and independently (rather than starting with one person's reflection and building on that).[19] It was agreed that we should each reflect on our last critLIS discussion of David J. Hudson's article, "On Dark Continents and Digital Divides," (a critical race analysis of scholarly literature concerning the "digital divide")[20] and that Liz and Dan should reflect on critLIS origins. People were then free to add further reflections, and there was some cumulation, with one person stimulated by another's reflections. Three face-to-face meetings took place at various points throughout the reflection, coding, and writing process, and in between we communicated online. Writing, and commenting on each other's drafts, took place in a shared Google Drive folder.

In the following subsections, we present our reflections on key themes that emerged from the data: namely the aims and purpose of the group; our relationship with critical theory; in/exclusion; and identity. These

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18 Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez and Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, "Relationships and Communities in Autoethnography," in *Handbook of Autoethnography,* eds. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010), 262–80.

19 Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez, *Collaborative Ethnography.*

20 David J. Hudson, "On Dark Continents and Digital Divides: Information Inequality and the Reproduction of Racial Otherness in Library and Information Studies," *Journal of Information Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2016): 62–80, https://atrium2.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10214/9862/ Hudson_On_Dark_Continents_and_Digital_Divides_IR_copy.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

themes often overlap, and therefore it is hard to completely untangle one from another, and from this book's central concerns of theory and practice, which manifest themselves in relation to all four themes.

Aims and Purpose of the Group

The group's founders, Liz and Dan, begin by reflecting on their different, yet overlapping aims for setting up the reading group. Both had some experience of critical theory from previous study in other disciplines (French/German literature and development studies, respectively) and identified a lack of attention to this area, in the department (at that time) and in UK LIS more generally. This was also noted by Emily:

> "[The Librarianship MA] was my first introduction to reading and thinking about open access, information literacy, and the social and political context of libraries and information; however, I think it would be fair to say it doesn't incorporate critical librarianship in the same way that some North American universities seem to."

Liz and Dan hoped that the reading group would begin to create a space within the department for their personal academic interests. Dan also expressed a more explicitly politicized goal:

> "I also wanted to start it to raise the profile of critical theory in the department, to agitate in a way."

For Dan, the reading group also served a practical use in that it directly supported his doctoral study. It also, therefore, served as "a spur for me to focus on my PhD when I had a lot of other demands on my time (job, family, writing, etc.)." In contrast, Liz was already in the later stages of her PhD when the group was created, and her interest was thus more abstract (although the theory discussed in the reading group did have some unforeseen influences on both her doctoral thesis and later teaching practice).

Both Liz and Dan also had social goals in setting up the reading group, hoping to create a space and time for discussions with like-minded researchers. Liz acknowledged that the diverse range of research interests within the department—most of which had little or no overlap with social justice concerns—"could at times be isolating." Similarly, Dan commented, "I felt in positioning myself as someone who did critical theory stuff I excluded myself from a lot of the seminars/research in the department." In fact, the social benefits of the group were mentioned independently by many of the authors in their individual reflections, with Jess referring to the "sense of belonging"; Sheila noting that it is "a freeing sort of space, in which I

can often relax"; and Emily stating that, "it gives me a kind of 'academic community' within the department." However, the complex nature of in/exclusion and belonging to this community is explored in more depth in the following sections.

Relationship with Critical Theory

Our interactions with critical theory have been shaped by previous experiences of academic study, work, and political engagement. Liz reflects that none of us can be regarded as critical theory "experts," but we all approach the texts that we read with perspectives and experiences drawn from different parts of our lives. Emily comments that when she stumbled on LIS through "an unplanned series of paraprofessional jobs followed by a Librarianship MA" she was happy to find Critical Librarianship—a theoretical and activist movement which seemed to chime with ideas from her English Literature and gender studies degrees. When reflecting on the perceived theoretical "gap" in LIS, Liz questions whether this gap seems odder to people who have studied for degrees where critical theory is an established part of the discipline. We ask ourselves—does LIS count as a "proper" social science discipline without a critical theory component, or is that just academic snobbery? After all, in many other areas, theory is criticized for being inaccessible and elitist; should we be fighting so hard to embrace it in LIS?

On the other hand, it was often a very "practical" interest in political engagement and activism which sparked our interest in critical theory. Dan reflects on coming to critLIS through "anarchist theories, bits of Marxism," whereas Emily relates it to an interest in "work by queer, feminist and disabled writers." These different routes relate back to our previously discussed "loose" definition of critical theory. We talk about the implication of leaving the definition broad; Liz reflects that, "everyone has shown enthusiasm for reading papers by/about a range of theorists" and Jess feels that she is "resisting defining what critical theory is…as it makes sure it's a club I'm invited to."

We do not all, however, identify as "critical theorists." "I am not and never have been a critical theorist," writes Jess. She does not always like the texts we read, but nonetheless enjoys the group, valuing the process of "talking round an article." Sheila is also ambivalent about Critical Librarianship as a movement, commenting that the critical librarians risk "turning to theory in other disciplines, including critical theory," rather than valuing work that has already been produced within the discipline of LIS. She questions whether we are potentially missing insightful ideas

in an attempt to always look "outwards." These tensions trouble the idea of a cohesive critLIS community, and instead point to a group that is partly characterized by anxieties centering on boundaries and in/exclusion.

In/exclusion

Some of these anxieties focus on the material that we have chosen to read. We worry that our reading list is insular. Emily comments: "looking through our reading list so far, it is completely dominated by authors from the Global North… I think (again) that I should make more of an effort to read a diversity of writers."

We also worry about the membership of our group. There was a shared concern about the fact that the regular attendees are all White, have English as a first language, and are mainly middle-class, and that this does not reflect a department where there are many people of color (in particular international students). Liz and Dan both also contrast their hopes for a group that would engage faculty and students across the department with the reality of the small core group of the writers of this paper.

However, Sheila challenges this focus on classifying people according to categories such as ethnicity or job title. She suggests that people's decisions on whether to attend are based on a complex web of factors, and that feelings about critLIS are symptomatic of wider issues within the iSchool. Researchers in the department work in very diverse areas—many are involved with quantitative projects in the areas of chemoinformatics or information retrieval, for instance, which seem to make critical theory less relevant to their day-to-day work. Another possible factor is that critical librarianship is infused with Western values. This is supported by our awareness of the limitations of our reading list and could be an area for us to explore further, by talking to department members who have chosen not to attend.

Jess relates people's attendance at the group to privilege and confidence, feeling that being able to say "I don't understand [a difficult text]" is a position of power. This suggests that the group's position is a complex one—we may feel peripheral to the department and to traditional LIS, but we also have the confidence to experiment with texts and theory that we are not necessarily experts in.

A later reflection by Sheila notes that practical exclusions are also important; the time of the group excludes some—now including Liz—as does its physical location within an academic department of a university.

However, there is a tension between our desire for inclusion and our desire to feel we belong. We all explicitly value having a friendly space to talk with the like-minded and feel part of a community. Writing this chapter

has brought this tension to our attention, and addressing it will require further reflection and action. Sheila says, "frankly I have lots of places and occasions where I feel challenged and stressed, so I can see that for me having a slow-changing set of companions in critLIS is desirable."

Identity

The identity of the reading group is bound up with the identity of the people within it. A number of sub-themes relating to identity emerged, including academic identities; library/practitioner identities; and activist identities. These different identities are intertwined, and develop or change over time.

The most frequent way we identify ourselves in our reflections relates to our embedded position in the culture and hierarchy of UK academia. Emily introduces the authors by saying that, "There are five of us who meet regularly, four PhD students at different stages of their projects, and a faculty member." This hierarchical categorization extends to those who have not participated: Liz and Dan both note that, in founding critLIS, they had hoped for participation from "faculty and students at all levels" (Liz).

The reading group offers a potential space of resistance to these structures, although it is impossible to escape them altogether. Sheila became disturbed about being identified as the lone faculty member. She writes about how she values critLIS as a place where she can take a break from her normal roles (she self-identifies at various points as educator, faculty member, doctoral supervisor, examiner, research group head). However, she notes how one incident "made me aware of myself as an iSchool academic…all the time aware that I have to be careful not to say things which might upset students." Other members are conscious of the pressures of the academic marketplace. Emily admits to "a sneaky [neoliberal?] feeling that other PhD students…are in competition with me, in some way, just in terms of jobs and stuff afterwards."

Another we will highlight is that of activist. This emerges explicitly in Dan's reflection on wanting to "rock the boat," but activist identity emerges in our other affiliations: for example, the Radical Librarians Collective and #critlib Twitter chats. It might also be inferred from a concern that emerges in all our reflections that engaging in critLIS should bring about change, in our own practice and thinking, or more widely.

This emerges when we reflect on our relationships with LIS as a discipline, and Librarianship as a profession. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, many of us have been and/or continue to be library practitioners. However, Jess states firmly that she does not identify as a librarian, and Sheila that she is "a researcher who has BEEN a practitioner." We also identify with alternative practitioner identities: teacher and

researcher. One so often sees theory and practice put in opposition that it is easy to forget that teaching and research are also practices that have to be learned. There are statements in our reflections about how critLIS has affected all of these areas of practice. For example, Sheila comments that a desire to incorporate theory into her teaching has to be balanced with the pressure to provide a course that is practically useful, and which will produce employable librarianship graduates, and Liz writes that her doctoral thesis on LGBTQ* provision in public libraries was informed by thoughts on neoliberalism developed through the reading group.

Conclusion

We hoped that the process of collaborative autoethnography would help clarify what the reading group means to us, and provide insight into how we operate as a group. By reflecting on the existing LIS JC literature, we found that despite its more instrumental focus, there are points that resonate with our own experiences of the reading group. Previous research identified that JCs could provide a safe, non-judgmental space for discussion, without the usual hierarchical barriers, that was welcoming and even fun.[21]

In our reflections, we found that the group successfully provided this kind of welcoming and non-judgmental space. However, the process of collaborative autoethnography clarified that our aims differ from a JC — rather than seeking to strengthen our "evidence-based practice," we aim to develop more theoretically-informed practice.

Our autoethnography has also highlighted our difficulty in defining "critical theory," and has touched on a number of pervasive anxieties around inclusivity. These anxieties relate both to the reading list, and the group's membership. Are we too inward-looking — focusing too much on our own white Western critical "canon" — or are we too *outward*-looking — missing insights from our own discipline by trying to understand the contributions of others? Should we attempt to reach out to other members of the department who do not currently attend, or should we focus on building relationships within the group?

The reflections discussed in this chapter do not provide answers to these questions. However, we feel that they provide a jumping-off point for further work; both in reflecting on our reading, and actively using these reflections to develop our theoretical understanding and our research, teaching and librarianship practice.

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21 Young and Vilelle, "The Prevalence and Practices"; Fitzgibbons, Kloda, and Miller-Nesbitt, "Exploring the Value."

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