

Intersectionality in users of library knowledge organization systems: Lessons learned from the misrepresentation of Latina lesbians.

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When library users seek information, they expect to find their identity reflected in language they understand and recognize and in a context that does not demean them. Subject headings put identities into words. Classifications place identities in a structure. In both cases, they are controlled vocabularies which define the categories available for representation of all topics, including identities. Library subject headings and classification systems have significantly progressed since C.A. Cutter lumped users into a difference-erasing category called “the public.” Current controlled vocabularies can easily accommodate a user who identifies with a singular characteristic, such as gender, race or sexual orientation; however, when a user belongs to multiple marginalized groups, the ability for a library catalog to reflect this space accurately diminishes. Intersectionality, sometimes called “double jeopardy” or “multiple jeopardy” (Beale 1979) (King 1997), gives a name to the interlocking systems of oppression experienced by minority women (Combahee River Collective 2003). Intersectionality is transformative, not additive, in that it does not merely stack up the oppressions but creates a new manifestation, which is what makes it difficult to represent in a library catalog. Spelman (1988, 123) writes, “An additive analysis treats the oppression of a Black woman in a society that is racist as well as sexist as if it were a further burden when, in fact, it is a different burden.” King (1997, 47) argues that the assumption that “each discrimination has a single, direct, and independent effect” on women’s status, “ignore[s] the fact that racisms, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems.” Rather than examining or fighting each system of discrimination separately, intersectionality theorists look at the space where the various oppressions intersect and often conflict with each other.

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McCall (2005, 1777) outlines three approaches to categorization of groups in feminist theory that underpin various intersectionality frameworks, finding a spectrum, where at one end categories are rejected, and at the other end they are used strategically for political ends. Many feminist theorists have taken issue with categorization, believing that categorization “leads to demarcation, and demarcation to exclusion, and exclusion to inequality.” A weak defense of the elimination of categories is that it will lead to equality, even while acknowledging that categories are politically and linguistically unavoidable. Without categories, the experiences of women of color are erased because labeling them would constitute essentialism. The Combahee River Collective (2003, 167) wrote that “we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic.” Some feminist scholars, Spelman, in particular, has questioned whether members of biological or social groups really have that much in common, or as McCall (2005, 1777) writes, where “nothing fits neatly except as a result of imposing a stable and homogenizing order on a more unstable and heterogeneous social reality” arguing that

“language...creates categorical reality rather than the other way around.” Yet, the group members want to distinguish their experiences from those of the dominant voices, white women. Therefore, a type of strategic essentialism, popularized by Gayatri Spivak (though she later rejected it), advocated grouping together to gain power (Olson and Fox 2010).

Since the late 1980's and 1990's, other marginalized groups have also recognized the phenomena of intersectionality. Age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability, or other classes can be considered facets of multiple jeopardy. Lesbian scholars had long been at odds with feminist scholars, arguing that lesbians and women were not fighting for the same goals and that feminist theory and lesbian theory were not interchangeable, merely because they were both groups of women. The oppression that white lesbians experienced as women intersected with discrimination of heteronormativity, creating a different experience; lesbians of color were subjected to yet another different form of oppression. In controlled vocabularies, and in the specific case of classification, this oppression might be regarded as an act of violence (García Gutiérrez 2007) toward the marginalized groups, a consequence of a deliberate but unavoidable bias according to the goals and values of the classificationist that rules every system. Pragmatist views are not limited to leftist, feminist, or other “alternative” points of view (Hjørland 2009). But, from a pragmatist point of view, the acceptance and recognition of that bias to the detriment of universal critical stances, such as Foskett's (1971), would be a first step to the adequacy and improvement of access to those systems by those marginalized groups.

Experiencing intersectionality can affect the ability to find information in a library catalog. Library users assigned to groups marginalized by logical rules may decrease their use of library materials or misuse them because of a mismatch of representation between the vocabulary of the group and the controlled vocabulary of the library. As Smiraglia (2006) points out, “when a gay adolescent searches for literature to help understand and finds that it all falls under ‘perversion’ then we have oppressed yet another youth.” The most common phenomena affecting misrepresentations include inappropriate terminologies, omissions, treatment as an anomaly (i.e. women doctors), and structural problems. In the case of library systems, the bias is unavoidable because of the linear and hierarchical nature of categories. In these cases, the descriptors used by the marginalized community typically match or mismatch with a preferred term chosen by the classificationist. In cases of intersectionality, the knowledge organization system risks misrepresenting multiple communities at once, as well as adding implied value judgments through hierarchical placement. As Olson (1999, 66) pointed out, these logical limitations are a consequence of the influence of classic Greek philosophers such as Plato, Parmenides and Aristotle, over the European-derived culture that conceived the systems. If the information access problems inculcated by Aristotelian logic in classifications are decisive for a single marginalized facet, in the case of intersectionality, these problems seem to be multiplied.

Several academic works have studied the one-dimensional misrepresentation of underrepresented groups such as Latinas or lesbians in library knowledge organization tools. Some of these studies include the representation of the lesbian and gay

community in Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) (Greenblatt 1990), the representation of the lesbian and gay community in LCSH, DDC and LCC (Christensen 2008), and the extensive works of Sanford Berman and A.C. Foskett on a wide range of one-dimensional categories. Many of these studies were traditionally taken from a critical, although universalist, point of view. However, this approach in the study of lesbian and gays has been also taken by some other researchers from post-structuralist and pragmatist points of view (Olson 2002) (Campbell 2000).

While systems have made an effort to accommodate users of singular oppressions, serving users who experience multidimensional intersectionality have posed a greater challenge, as it requires either a closer classification or a retreat to the universal. In 2007, tatiana de la tierra's "Latina lesbian subject headings: the power of naming" identified, from a user/classifier perspective, the problems of library access to information for those who experience a particular type of intersectionality: Latina lesbians. Considering the five categories of problems related to generic negative bias of library knowledge organization systems identified in the scientific literature by Olson and Schlegl (2001), treatment of the topic as an exception, ghettoization of the topic, omission of the topic, inappropriate structure of the standard, and bias), de la tierra's analysis primarily focuses on the biased terminology and the use of the language that the LC standards, supposedly based on the literary warrant, reflect from the literature. De la tierra's work analyzes the terms used by marginalized user communities and terms found in the specialized literature, and contrasts them with the official alternatives, given by the Library of Congress in the local application of University at Buffalo's BISON catalog. However, most one-dimensional facet studies focus on the standards themselves rather than on any particular use or local catalog, which leaves the responsibility for the problems to the subversion of standards and developing of alternative schemes on the classificationist's part (the developer of the standard). Assuming and accepting that the standards do not appropriately reflect the Latina lesbian condition (according to the language used by the community), de la tierra analyzes a specific case of application in a catalog to find out in situ about the consequences, in order to extrapolate the results to other practical cases.

De la tierra's study is concerned with the practical application of the KO standards, specifically, subject headings, and how the final user perceives the described books in a particular library or collection. However, while de la tierra's work is innovative and revolutionary in many ways, it would benefit from incorporation of a theoretical framework drawn from knowledge organization and post-structuralism. Intersectionality is often overlooked in the study of subject headings perhaps due to the lack a theoretical framework to enable a critical approach. The goal of the present study is to strengthen the theoretical framework to LCSH and de la tierra's work by 1) updating de la tierra's findings on revision of LCSH, and 2) revising and enhancing de la tierra's multifaceted study to include a richer theoretical discussion from critical research on classificatory structure, enabling the application of her work to other cases of multidimensional intersectionality not accommodated by library catalogs and the development of responsible standards to the Latina lesbian and others affected by intersectionality.

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