Bias in Subject Access Standards:
A Content Analysis of the Critical Literature

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abstract

This paper reports the results of a content analysis of the literature on biases in classification and subject headings. This study gathers 93 works documenting biases of gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, ethnicity, nationality, language and religion with the goals of: 1) identifying existing research and experience on subject access for marginalized groups and to marginalized topics, and 2) providing a basis for addressing systemic subject access problems. Five variables for each work are analyzed quantitatively — the standards discussed, categories of problems identified, date, basis of discussion (research and/or experience) and the marginalized group or topic discussed. Qualitative analysis adds depth, problematizing the principles of user-focused cataloguing, objectivity and standardization.

introduction

A large body of research and recorded experience has documented biases of gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, ethnicity, language and religion as limits to the expression of diversity in naming information for retrieval. This literature has resulted in changes, especially addressing acute manifestations of bias. However, the diffuse nature of this literature makes it difficult to diagnose the problems, particularly when addressing systemic biases in subject access standards. Our experience in searching for this literature has been an exercise in frustration brightened mainly by serendipity and the kindness of friends. The very problems that this literature discusses make it difficult to find.

The goal of our project is to identify existing research and reported experience relating to subject access for marginalized groups and topics with a view to providing the basis for addressing biases in established subject access standards. Organization of information has, historically, been based on standards that offer consistency. Consistency in representing information fulfils Cutter's gathering function. Standards used across libraries have also afforded efficiency in avoiding duplication of work. These standards, tending to represent the mainstream well and the margins poorly, are now being increasingly challenged. Earlier work, analysed in this project, addresses specific symptoms of subject access problems. Now researchers and professionals are beginning to ask more sweeping questions. For example, a panel at the American Library Association's 1998 annual conference discussed "one-size-fits-all" subject access in the *Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)*, the *Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)*, and *Yahoo!*. This choice of systems is indicative of the transfer from traditional to recently-developed standards. Systemic problems are being replicated over and over again even though evidence exists

that could be used to help avoid them. Unfortunately, that evidence is scattered and difficult to locate. This article is part of an ongoing effort to locate and synthesize this body of literature.

Our research is a meta-analysis intended to serve both theory and practice and to this end we will be making the analysis available in the form of a database on the World Wide Web. It is intended that its immediate use will be to help practising library and information professionals understand the problems of the systems they use. Heuristics in searching, contextualized guides to collections and other measures can be developed by professionals as stop-gap measures. In the longer term, researchers and the professionals who develop standards for subject representation may use this evidence to better avoid harmful biases.

methodology

This research is a content analysis, taking the following steps:

identify relevant literature

We have included both research and descriptive literature dealing with classification, subject headings and/or thesauri, written in English, and published in library and information studies (LIS) sources. We searched *Library Literature* and *Library & Information Science Abstracts*, checked citations in each work to identify other documents not retrievable in the indexing tools, and exploited serendipity to find relevant articles. Because of the difficulties of retrieving this literature (as is the point of the study) it is impossible to perform an exhaustive search. The researchers welcome further citations of similar work from readers of this paper.

identify categories for analysis

Jessica Milstead Harris and Doris Hargrett Clack (1979) identified categories of problems that served as a useful starting point in our analysis. Our categories were further adapted on the basis of the literature gathered. As a result we examined each article or book for the following variables:
    a)   standard(s) discussed
    b)   categories of problems identified
    c)   date
    d)   basis of the discussion: research or experience
    e)   marginalized groups and/or topics discussed
Values for these variables are discussed in the quantitative analysis below.

create a database

A record was created for each work in a ProCite database including the variable data as well as citation, abstract and notes to supplement our analysis. The database is searchable by each of the variables as well as by author, title and keyword and will be made available on the World Wide Web in the near future.

analysis

The literature is analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Quantitative analysis alone is not sufficient in that the individual works are not of equal value — one article on the problems of subject access to materials about people with disabilities is as representative a subject access problem as ten articles on access to women's studies materials. However, it is useful to map the patterns of publication, of problems identified, and of topics discussed. Qualitative analysis adds a conceptual picture that goes beyond the variables.

quantitative results

A total of 93 — 58 articles, 34 books or chapters in books, and one web page — were examined in this project. The following tables show the values for the major variables in this study. In most instances more than one value of a variable applies to at least some of the 93 records in the database. Therefore, the totals for a given variable add up to more than 93. The percentages in the following tables represent the percentage of the 93 records having a particular value (except as otherwise stated). Therefore, in the same manner, they will add up to more than 100%. Because the total number is relatively small and the quantitative data is only meant to be indicative, not conclusive, no statistical tests have been performed on the data.

standards addressed

The first table relates to the standards addressed in the works examined. It is important to remember that while the articles generally critique subject access standards, not all standards mentioned are subject to critique. For example, the articles that mention *Bilindex*, which is a Spanish-language version of the *LCSH*, may suggest that *Bilindex* is an alternative that should be used in libraries serving Spanish-speaking populations.

table 1 — standards

Variable	number	% of records
Type of standard		
classification	41	45%
subject headings	73	78%
Standard(s) discussed		
AACR2R	1	1%
Bliss Bibliographic Classification	4	4%
DDC	31	33%
LCC	30	32%
UDC	4	4%
Other classifications	7	8%
LCSH	68	73%

Bilindex	2	2%
MeSH	2	2%
PRECIS	5	5%
Sears	11	12%
Other subject headings or thesauri	4	4%
General	3	3%

Not surprisingly this table indicates that the major standards used in North America are also those most scrutinized in our literature. What is also interesting is that subject headings are far more commonly examined than classification. This might be because the omissions and racist, sexist, xenophobic, etc. biases in subject headings are presented to us directly on the screens of our online catalogues. Biases in classification are more subtle and many still regard classification as simply a shelf address, disregarding the influences of context in how a work is perceived. As classification becomes a more important online tool it may come in for more critique.

type of problem

As indicated above, this study divides problems of bias into five categories. The first category, treatment of the topic as an exception, was taken to mean that the topic was represented as being outside of some accepted norm. Examples are critiques of the now obsolete *LCSH* headings for "women as ..." such as "women as physicians." An example in classification is the treatment of literatures by language. Several national literatures will share a language as is common in colonized countries, but the European literatures in that language are privileged in coming first, and having more space allotted and more specific chronological subdivision (Pacey 1989).

Ghettoization, the second category, is simply the problem of gathering and then isolating a topic rather than integrating it. A classic instance is the treatment of Native North Americans in classification. In both *DDC* and the *Library of Congress* Classification (*LCC*) Native North Americans are separated from mainstream North American culture and are largely relegated to history as though there were no contemporary Native culture (Yeh 1971; Young and Doolittle 1994).

Omitting a topic, the third category, is often a problem of lack of currency in subject access standards, but may also be a problem of underlying assumptions. For example, the functionalist paradigm of *LCSH* makes it difficult to describe different ideological stances such as the dialectical tradition in which Pierre Bourdieu has written (Alvarado 1994). A second example is the omission from *DDC*, *LCC* and the *Universal Decimal Classification* (*UDC*) of African independent churches that embrace Christianity and African tradition while rejecting foreign elements (Afolabi 1992). Mainstream Christianity in Africa, other · African religions and independent churches in the United States can be represented, but independent churches in Africa cannot.

The fourth category of problems is related to the structure of subject access standards. For example, classification of Africana often exhibits inaccurate understanding

of African languages and peoples in the ways they are grouped, poor allocation of space to African cultures compared to European and North American cultures, and an inappropriate mechanism of division (by language, as described above) (Amankwe 1972; Mowery 1973; Amaeshi 1985; Pacey 1989; Aderibigbe 1990). In subject headings the syndetic structure may fail to connect appropriate topics, and limitations in the construction of subject heading strings may transfer the burden of coordination to users through Boolean searching as Doris Hargrett Clack (1989 and 1994) has demonstrated in materials about African Americans and African American culture.

Currently a discussion is brewing regarding the subject headings for people in poverty with suggestions from Sanford Berman that calling people an adjective, "the poor," is not considerate. Terminology in classification is also a concern as it influences cataloguers' application of classification and, increasingly, as technology makes it more visible. For example, *DDC* considered changes in the wording of captions important in the latest 21st edition since they were being used in online sources.

table 2 — type of problem

Type of problem	number	% of records
treatment of the topic as an exception	27	29%
ghettoization of the topic	8	9%
omission of the topic	48	52%
inappropriate structure of the standard	46	49%
biased terminology	70	75%

Given the emphasis on subject headings in critiques of subject access standards it is not surprising that biased terminology is the most common type of problem discussed. The fact that some types of problems, most notably ghettoization of a topic, are explored less does not indicate that they are of less importance. Ghettoization of a topic is a problematic issue. It suggests that all of the works on a single topic are located together rather than integrated into the larger classification. In areas such as women's studies there has been considerable discussion about whether women's studies materials should be gathered (following Cutter's second function of the library catalogue) or if they should be integrated into disciplines as are other topics (providing what Susan Searing has called "serendipitous consciousness-raising"). Therefore, ghettoization may not be seen as a problem by all authors and is less likely to be represented in the literature.

The following table looks at the correlation between type of standard and type of problem. Many articles dealt with both classification and subject headings. Therefore, a more useful indicator of what type of problem relates primarily to classification or primarily to subject headings is to consider articles treating only one or the other, not both (the last two rows of table 3).

table 3 — type of problem in relation to type of standard

	treatment of the topic as an exception (% of n)	ghettoization of the topic (% of n)	omission of the topic (% of n)	inappropriate structure of the standard (% of n)	biased terminology (% of n)
Classification n=41	14 (34%)	7 (17%)	21 (51%)	35 (85%)	20 (49%)
Subject headings n=73	22 (30%)	4 (5%)	38 (52%)	28 (38%)	66 (90%)
Classification only n=19	5 (26%)	4 (21%)	10 (53%)	18 (95%)	3 (16%)
Subject headings only n=51	13 (25%)	1 (2%)	27 (53%)	11 (22%)	49 (96%)

This table confirms that the high number of critiques of subject headings accounts for the high number of critiques of biased terminology. Not surprisingly, works addressing bias in classification make up the majority of critiques of the structure of a standard. While the syndetic structure of subject headings is sometimes criticized, it is more common that the juxtapositions and hierarchical placement of topics are of concern in classification schemes. Recalling that only 45% of the works deal with classification while 78% deal with subject headings, it is reasonable to conclude that the problems of treatment as an exception and omission are not linked predominantly to either type of standard in this body of literature. The percentages also suggest that ghettoization is of more concern in classification than in subject headings which, given the spatial nature of classification, makes sense. However, the numbers are too small to draw any conclusions.

basis for discussion

The basis for the content of the works considered was divided into research and experience. As can be seen from the data, some works drew from both. In fact, only seven were based on research alone. Research was perceived as having a clear and stated research design. Everything else was considered "experience." Therefore, an analytical approach may have been used for works categorized as "experience," but without consideration for research design. Again, because most research, especially quantitative research, will have considered each subject heading, classification number or topic to be of equal value such research may not always be the most fruitful approach, but it does have the advantage of being subject to the rigours of the process.

table 4 — basis for discussion

Basis for discussion	number	% of records
Research	20	22%
Experience	86	92%

The growing amount of research suggests that at least some members of the field consider it to be a sound approach:

table 5 — trends toward research

Decade	Research
1970s	2
1980s	6
1990s	12

topics

The topics addressed by the various works are both diverse and diffuse. They themselves illustrate a problem of classification. For example, Maori and New Zealand could be plausibly grouped together as could Maori and Native Americans. Similarly, Judaica may relate to Jews as an ethnic group or to Judaism as a religion. In our categorization units larger than country are used except for Canadian topics. This raises a problem with the South Pacific where three of the four articles are specifically about Melanesia and are written by the same author. We have chosen to display some topics that contain only one example, but have grouped others (*e.g.* "primitive" headings and "people-helping agencies") under "other." The basis for doing so is that some individual topics, such as "Asian Americans" contribute to a larger topic such as "Ethnic groups" and that this connection would be lost if they were listed under "other." The topics included in "other" generally do not have an obvious connection.

table 6 — topics of critiques

Topic	number	% of records
Africa and Africana	13	14%
African Americans	4	4%
Asia	1	1%
Asian Americans	1	1%
Baha'i faith	1	1%
Canadian topics	1	1%
Children	6	6%
Ethnic groups	8	9%

Gays, lesbians and sexuality	9	10%
Hispanic Americans	3	3%
Homelessness	1	1%
Interdisciplinary fields & area studies	2	2%
Islam	1	1%
Jews and Judaica	5	5%
Maori	1	1%
Middle East	3	3%
Minority groups	2	2%
Native Americans	9	10%
New Zealand	1	1%
Other	10	11%
People with disabilities	5	5%
Popular culture	2	2%
Race	1	1%
Religion	7	8%
Rom	2	2%
Senior citizens	5	5%
Sex	4	4%
South Pacific	4	4%
Teenagers	7	8%
Third World Peoples	1	1%
Women	25	27%

The most interesting factor about the distribution of topics is to speculate on why some topics receive considerable attention while others do not. The fact that women (including feminism and women's studies) is by far the largest category probably does not reflect a more dire state of affairs in representing women in subject access schemes as compared to other identifiable groups. One can speculate that a female-intensive profession such as librarianship might notice bias against women more readily, but there are no indications that libraries are hotbeds of feminism. Perhaps the academic recognition of women's studies which calls for librarians to specialize in services to that group might account for some of this emphasis, but there are also many African studies and African American studies librarians. Still, the fact that those areas combined are the next most popular focus may suggest that academic librarians who are often required to publish may account for some of this distribution. However, another factor for consideration is that 26 works or 28% of the

records have the same author, Sanford Berman, a public librarian. Perhaps the predominance of critiques relating to women, African Americans and a third group, gays and lesbians, stems from a recognition of the demographics of the United States (where most of these works originate).

In the long run the distribution of topics is most useful for identifying topics that have been addressed as opposed to topics that have been neglected. With these numbers it would be difficult to propose that any topic has been exhausted. However, the small representation of some topics and absence of others suggests where future work is most needed.

qualitative analysis

This section of the paper will examine three topics that are problematized in the body of literature examined in this study: 1) user-focused cataloguing, 2) objectivity and 3) standardization.

user-focused cataloguing

Thomas Yen-Ran Yeh (1971) suggested that, in relation to Native North American history in *LCC*, the word "massacre" might often be replaced with the word "incident" since the major difference between the two seemed to be who perpetrated it on whom. The reply to Yeh from Eugene T. Frosio (1971), then Principal Subject Cataloger at the Library of Congress (LC), raises an interesting problem. Frosio says that the name of a historical event used by LC must follow the form used by scholars in the field. A similar stance was taken in response to Steve Wolf's (1972) critique of *LCSH* for homophobic terminology. He quotes C. Sumner Spalding, then Assistant Director for Cataloging at LC, as having replied that LC does not establish usage, but follows it. In these responses, LC adheres to the general notion in LIS that "the user" is the arbiter of the language used for subject access. Holley and Killheffer (1982) in a critique of *LCSH* follow this user-focus in suggesting that "biased terms may have to remain as cross-references unless we are prepared to sacrifice access for patrons who are accustomed to using the biased alternative" (126). The problem becomes the identity of "the user." Echoing Joan K. Marshall's (1972) image of a "majority reader," Mary M. Huston and Joe L. Williams (1987) suggest that while the underlying philosophy of *LCSH* is to keep the reader in focus, the assumption is that that reader is "white, Christian ... male, and heterosexual" (92). Kathleen Bethel (1994) found similar assumptions causing problems for first year university students who rarely express topics in the same terms as *LCSH*. The impact on specific users (as opposed to a "majority reader") is expressed by Marielena Fina (1993) in her personal reaction to finding her own ethnicity referred to as "culturally handicapped" or "socially handicapped" in a public library catalogue.

Harris and Clack (1979) evaluated subject access for its ability to provide "access via the terms most likely to be used by the intended audience," but this goal presents serious problems. Similar to Holley and Killheffer's assertion that biased cross-references may have to remain, it exacerbates the tyranny of the majority. An excellent example comes from Ian Hancock (1987) who suggests in relation to the term "Gypsy" compared to the preferred term "Rom" that "the more familiar term is only better known in that it conjures up a deeply-

rooted fictional image that bears little resemblance to Romani people" (31). What is mainstream is most commonly used and often most "user-friendly" if one considers users only in a narrow sense. It may still be biased and offensive.

objectivity

Yeh's example of "massacres" *versus* "incidents" shows a lack of objectivity in dealing with North American history. The goal of objectivity is common to most of our efforts in subject access. Many critics of subject access schemes have enunciated objectivity as a criterion for subject access standards (*e.g.* Wolf 1972; Harris and Clack 1979). However, objectivity raises several fundamental questions. First, is it a desirable goal? What is commonly used terminology is often confused with what is objective, but this is not necessarily the case. If, as discussed above, we also have a goal of being user-focused does objectivity necessarily contribute to users' effective retrieval, and, conversely, are user-focused standards likely to be objective? A second question is how we define objectivity? A.C. Foskett (1971) suggested that while we try to avoid "critical classification" our schemes reflect their origins. The influences of colonialism bear out Foskett's point. The example of classification of African literature, as discussed above, is echoed by Berman (1981) describing the use of *LCSH* headings such as "Africa — Discovery and exploration" and "Negroes in Africa" while cataloguing in Zambia. More recently, A.L. Dick and M. Burger (1995) examined the politics of subject access in South Africa raising the difference between equality and equity of subject access in the context of a country where the risks of "separate but equal" treatment have been only too apparent. Objectivity presumes a neutrality that does not consider the context of a topic or user, but tries to impose an equality on subject access. Equity considers the contexts of both topics and users. Wolf (1972), recognizing the need to pursue equity, not merely equality, pointed to the responsibility of librarians to challenge the status quo rather than affecting a stance of unachievable neutrality.

standardization

Are standards a vehicle or a barrier in the quest for user-focused, objective, equitable subject access? Obviously the standards addressed in the 93 critiques examined in this study were viewed as biased by the authors of these critiques. The standards themselves are deemed to reflect cultural ideologies and include specific perspectives that render them biased. However, there are two aspects of standardization that are out of the hands of the systems' creators: effective application and local adaptation. If a standard could avoid bias it would not ensure that the catalogue records using that standard were not biased. In each instance the standards are applied by cataloguers who may also introduce bias into the process. Most typical is the problem of "under-cataloging" (Berman 1984; see also Olson 1992) or failing to use standards to their capacity. Also limiting are policies that restrict the number of subject headings assigned to each record (Gerhard, Su and Rubens 1998). The same problem arises in the failure to apply classification with sufficient specificity.

However, even if standards are optimally applied the fact of standardization creates homogenized cataloguing that leads to equality across institutions rather than equity. Local

adaptation of standards is the key to more equitable subject access for different groups of users (Weinberg 1992). North Americans, slow to take up alternatives due to costs — such as use of the Spanish-language subject headings, *Bilindex* (Fina 1993) — might consider the example of other parts of the world such as Africa and the Arab countries that develop and use supplements to major standards. Alternative standards, adaptation of standards, and creative (or even subversive) use of standards can ameliorate bias in subject access.

conclusions

This content analysis will need to be an ongoing effort. A continued search for critiques and further analysis, particularly qualitative analysis, is merited by the evidence discovered thus far. However, at least four conclusions can already be attempted regarding the critique of subject access standards. First, librarians have a laudable ethic of self-reflection that allows these critiques to appear in our literature. Second, the standards for subject access have not yet completed the task of eliminating bias. Third, the problems of subject access are reasonably well-defined from this body of literature. Fourth, while it would be simplistic to expect that all groups and topics confront the same problems, some commonalities, probably defined by the underlying presumptions of existing standards, do exist.

Following these critical conclusions are three discernible threads that suggest three principles to keep in mind in addressing bias in subject access. First, users must not be regarded as homogeneous. The danger of speaking of "the user" is that that phrase suggests a particular user, a "majority reader," rather than the heterogeneous groups of users that vary from one context to another. Second, objectivity can be a rigid concept and the notion of equality as a means toward objectivity can result in separate but equal treatment of differences when what is required it equitable treatment tailored to needs and context. Third, standards have value in that great intellectual effort has gone into their making, but they lose their effectiveness if they are not carefully and equitably applied. Careful application requires that a standard be fully and accurately utilized. Equitable application requires adaptation to local context, whether "local" is at the institutional, national or cultural level.

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