

The Evolution of the Library of Congress Subject Headings Diversity Criticism

Society is constantly evolving in the ways that it acknowledges minority groups, especially in the United States. The civil rights movement, women's suffrage, marriage equality, and the many protests that followed brought minority issues and concerns to the forefront of social discussion. These discussions do not stop at the news networks or political institutions; they also affect libraries. In particular, the Library of Congress has been criticized for the shortcomings of its Subject Headings. Numerous books and articles have been published examining the different issues within the LCSH, including race, sexuality, gender, religion, and disabilities.

Since its inception in 1909, the LCSH has been revised and republished 39 times. In the most recent publication, "there were 342,107 authority records in the file...the file contains approximately 24,306 personal name headings of which 23,190 represent family names, 9,892 corporate headings, 6 meeting or conference headings, 481 uniform titles, 241,726 topical subject headings, and 61,438 geographic subject headings" (Introduction, 2017, p.vii). With so many files, it is not surprising that issues would arise, especially considering how popular LCSH is as a tool in libraries across the world: "With the increasing use of LCSH worldwide, librarians continue to raise questions about a topic that first appeared in professional literature in the late 1960s: bias in subject headings" (Knowlton, 2005, p.124). Librarians have led the movement on seeking change in the subject headings. Librarians realize that "libraries are social institutions in a multicultural society and as such have a responsibility to serve all elements in society" (Marshall, 1977, p.7). To fulfill these responsibilities, librarians have been suggesting changes to the LCSH since the 1960s in order to be more inclusive and politically correct.

In his book, *Library of Congress Subject Headings, A Practical Guide*, David Judson Haykin states that “all other considerations, such as convenience and the desire to arrange entries in some logical order, are secondary to the basic rule that the heading, in wording and structure, should be that which the reader will seek in the catalog, if we know or can presume what the reader will look under” (1951, p.7). While this seems like a practical rule for determining subject headings, many of the librarians who have spoken out against the LCSH have noted a major problem with this consideration: “The crux of their objections lies in the identity of the ‘average’ reader: ‘The reader has been identified as American/Western European, Christian, white, heterosexual, and male’ (Marshall)” (Knowlton, 2005, p.124). Those at the Library of Congress who chose or created the subject headings attempted to follow Haykin’s rule but in the process fell into a trap of assuming that the average reader is simply a member of every majority, thus causing these prejudices to be reflected in the subject headings. When these prejudices are perceived by library patrons, it often leaves them questioning their place in society: “*Why don’t I see myself in the subject vocabulary, and what does this tell me about the other ways I feel invisible?*” (Drabinski, 2013, p.107).

In addition to the ways that subject headings influence patrons’ view of themselves, they can also influence the way that society views groups of people:

As users interact with these structures to browse and retrieve materials, they inevitably learn negative stereotypes about race, gender, class, and other social identities. For example, they ‘learn’ that ethnocentric myths are true, like Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are minor religions compared to Christian monotheism. Similarly, they ‘learn’ that heterosexuality is normative, that gay and lesbian sexuality is the only sexual identity

that ought to be examined, and that queer sexuality is inherently deviant. (Drabinski, 2013, p.97)

The original version of the LCSH communicated an idea that the majority is normal while minorities are abnormal. This alienates a huge demographic of library users when they observe subject headings that either ignore or demean them. As a result of these realizations, Joan K. Marshall, author of the 1977 book *On Equal Terms: A Thesaurus for Nonsexist Indexing and Cataloging*, proposed six principles that should be considered when establishing subject headings about groups of people:

Briefly, they are: (1) The authentic name of ethnic, national, religious, social, or sexual groups should be established if such a name is determinable; (2) In establishing sub-divisions for use with the names of people or peoples, consider connotation, in addition to the denotation, of the wording and structure of subdivision; (3) The wording and structure of headings for minority or other groups should not differ from headings for the majority; (4) Be specific and current. Do not use previously established terms to cover new topics; (5) Do not establish headings for some, but not all, classes of people or peoples; (6) Do not allow huge files of undifferentiated cards to accumulate under a heading. (as cited in Nuckolls, 1994, p. 244-245).

Through the use of these principles, subject headings would shed the assumptions of majority readership. These ideologies are applied by each of the critics of the LCSH as they closely examined how subject headings do a disservice to specific minority groups.

Race

The tendency for ethnocentrism in the LCSH has been a hot-button topic in the library community. Many of the subject headings are in clear disagreement with Marshall's principles, most notably principles 1, 2, and 5. For example, there are currently subject headings for the following: *Alien Criminals*, *Asian American Criminals*, *Catholic Criminals*, *Irish American Criminals*, *Italian American Criminals*, *Mexican American Criminals*, *Russian American Criminals*, *Chinese American Criminals*, *Japanese American Criminals*, *Indian Criminals*, and *Vietnamese American Criminals*; however, there is no heading for *White Criminals* (Knowlton, 2005, Appendix, p.130). This violates the fifth principle by establishing criminal headings for minority groups without establishing a criminal heading for a majority group. This creates a hidden narrative that these minorities are inherently criminal in some way, or that their criminality is in some way different than the criminality of the majority.

Issues regarding the authentic names of ethnic minorities are also an incredibly prevalent problem in the LCSH. For example, "LATINOS, another ethnic term, becomes a UF reference for HISPANIC AMERICANS" (Nuckolls, 1994, p.249). To some, this may not seem like an issue, but the issue arises from the fact that *Latinos* and *Hispanics* are not interchangeable terms. The two terms refer to two different ethnicities and are specific to different geographical locations. To perpetuate, using a UF reference, that the two terms are the same is an instance of mislabeling ethnic groups. This problem can also be observed in the previous subject heading for the Romany people; previously, the subject heading used for this group was *Gipsies* and it contained a cross reference to *Rogues and Vagabonds* (Knowlton, 2005, Appendix, p.131). It has since been changed, but it is important to note that it was possible for the LCSH to contain racial slurs. In addition to this, the cross reference to *Rogues and Vagabonds* is in contrast with the second principle by establishing a negative connotation through a subdivision. This

cross-reference has since been removed. Perhaps the most notable of a racial mislabeling is the LCSH's use of *Negroes*, which was not replaced as a subject heading until the fall of 1975 (Knowlton, 2005, Appendix, p.130). This outdated term reminds many blacks and African-Americans of the hardships of slavery and discrimination. Like many of the changed headings, it was by the recommendation of Sanford Berman in his book *Prejudices and Antipathies* that the term was eventually changed.

Another major racial issue that has garnered much literary attention is the subject heading *Indians of North America*, which is still in use in the LCSH today. Deborah Lee examined this issue by surveying Indigenous persons in her article, "Indigenous Knowledge Organization: A Study of Concepts, Terminology, Structure and (Mostly) Indigenous Voices." She examines many issues in the LCSH, but her, and many of those she surveyed, main concern was the *Indians of North America* subject heading:

Many Aboriginal researchers (or those using library catalogues or databases) in Canada today are offended by the subject heading, 'Indians of North America'. One explanation is that the word 'Indians' is a term that originated from Christopher Columbus' mistake in thinking that he had landed upon the country of India in 1492 but he instead 'discovered' North America, or what Indigenous North Americans call 'Turtle Island'.

(Lee, 2011, p. 2)

Despite members of this ethnic community speaking out against the subject heading it is still in use. In her survey, Lee also sought to learn what terms would not be seen as offensive: "It seems that the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal', First Nations', and 'Native' were recurring preferred terminology throughout the six examples of subject heading changes" (2011, p.20). Hopefully, in

the future, the Library of Congress will listen to these Indigenous voices and change the subject heading to something less offensive.

Sexuality

Another aspect of a person's identity that has received a great amount of criticism is human sexuality. Emily Drabinski used Queer Theory to examine the ongoing issue in the LCSH's handling of queer topics in her article "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction." Drabinski raises the issue that the terminology in the queer community is constantly changing so "even when subject headings are updated to reflect current usage—for example, the inclusion of *Lesbian* as a heading in 1976 concurrent with the rise in lesbian visibility—they do not account for all the other words users might use to describe themselves" (2013, p.95). Returning to Haykin's rule of using the terminology which the reader will seek, it creates problems for the queer community when the terminology is limited:

For example, a user seeking information about identities that are not listed in LCSH but related to identities that are named—for example, *genderqueer* versus *transsexuality*, or *aggressive* versus *lesbian*—could be led to the general point in the classification where related materials could be found and engaged in a discussion of why the knowledge they come seeking by name is invisible in the structure. (Drabinski, 2013, p.107)

While Drabinski discusses the different terms that are used by queer people and how they do not exist in LCSH, she also suggests a way that librarians can use this shortcoming as an educational opportunity with patrons until the problem is addressed; however, she also acknowledges that the problem may never be fixed because of the evolving characteristics of queer identities: "No matter which name is fixed—whether *Homosexuality* or *Gay men* or *Lesbians*—other identities

will emerge at the boundaries of what can be contained by this language” (Drabinski, 2013, p.102).

Gender

Sexism has also been discussed as a systematic issue within the LCSH, most notably in Marshall’s book. She first evaluates the role that language plays in creating sexist thesauri: “Prescriptive grammarians have required the use of male sex-linked words to describe all of humankind. These words conceptually exclude women and impede the development in women of a positive self-image and thereby limit her conception of her role in society” (Marshall, 1977, p.4). While prescriptivists assume that society views a term like *Man* to encompass all of humankind, many only associate it with half of the population, thus making *Woman* passive. Luckily, the Library of Congress “has been changing other related headings to reflect further the escalation of women in the workforce, e.g. FIREMEN to FIRE FIGHTERS” (Nuckolls, 1994, p.247). These changes exclude the assumed all-encompassing *Men* root in favor of terms that do not reference gender or sex at all. Additionally, Marshall’s third principle also comes into the spotlight in terms of gendered subject headings:

The *as* form, WOMEN AS LIBRARIANS for instance, has been abandoned by LC under women; it persists in other entries in the LCSH...The *in* form also persists although the arguments against its use are the arguments against the *as* form. Its use connotes peculiarity (the people so described are acting out a somewhat inappropriate role) and passiveness (they are not actively participating in that role). (1977, p.8)

The structure of the headings is what Marshall criticizes. The wording communicates to readers that there is a difference between the minorities place *in* or *as* something than the majority, violating the third principle. This can also be observed in a case similar to the racial

inconsistencies referenced earlier; today, there exists a subject heading for *Female Offenders* but none for *Male Offenders* or *Male Criminals* (Knowlton, 2005, Appendix, p.139). Again, this creates a dynamic where the majority is excluded from headings that may be less than flattering, creating a narrative about the criminality of minorities.

Religion

Despite the Constitution's assertion that Church and State shall remain separate, many still believe that the United States of America is a Christian nation, and this assumption is carried over into the LCSH. "Three Decades Since Prejudices and Antipathies: A Study of Changes in the Library of Congress Subject Headings" by Steven Knowlton examined the changes in LCSH after Sanford Berman published his recommendations and noted that "The 80 items that remain unchanged (some 36% of Berman's suggestions) show some patterns of thought that persist in the Library of Congress—for example, many subject headings pertaining to the Christian religion remain unglossed" (2005, p.127-128). Berman recommended a number of changes in relation to religion and Christianity, but almost all have been ignored. In particular, it is the sixth principle that is breached by the current lack of changes. *God, Angels, Hymns, Preaching, Revelation*, and many other religious terms still remain as standalone subject headings, despite criticism that they ignore the fact that these ideas exist widely in many different religions (Knowlton, 2005, Appendix, p.141-142). Without creating subcategories or cross references, someone searching for non-Christian information will likely find themselves overwhelmed by non-relevant material. This also allows a large number of files to accumulate under a single subject heading, rather than dividing each into separate headings by religion.

Disability

Finally, the LCSH has a history of improperly denoting groups of disabled people, promoting ableism. This issue was first addressed by a study in 1979:

Among their findings in their 1979 study, Ms. Milstead Harris and Ms. Clark objected to LC's denoting four groups of people by adjectival forms used as nouns, 'a form of labeling that seems to deny humanity to them': AGED, BLIND, DEAF, and HANDICAPPED. They suggested adding the word 'people' to each one. (Nuckolls, 1994, p.246)

In addition to denying disabled people their humanity through these terms, these headings are also abnormal for the typical form of subject headings: "Subject headings may consist of one word or several. A one-word heading is usually a noun" (Introduction viii). *Aged*, *Blind*, *Deaf*, and *Handicapped* are technically adjectives, though the Library of Congress is attempting to use them as adjectival nouns in the case of these headings. Adding *people* to the headings would realign the headings with the typical form. Mental disabilities have also been grossly mislabeled in the past; until the winter of 1993, the Library of Congress used the subject heading *Idiocy* for *Mental Retardation* (Knowlton, 2005, Appendix, p.134). Using the terms *Idiot* or *Idiocy* to refer to those who are developmentally delayed is outdated and offensive. By 1993, the term would have been completely out of use and politically incorrect.

Conclusion

By consciously or subconsciously assuming that the default readers and library patrons are white, heterosexual, able-bodies, Christian, males the Library of Congress has alienated entire groups and cultures of people. "Of the 225 headings Berman suggested changes in, 88 (or 39%) have been changed almost exactly as he suggested, while an additional 54 (or 24%) have

been changed in ways that particularly reflect Berman's suggestions" (Knowlton, 2005, p.127).

Berman's suggestions were just the beginning of many to come for revisions to the LCSH, but many have still been left unaddressed. As a bisexual, Unitarian Universalist, woman, I want to be able to accurately see myself in the LCSH, just as anyone else would. With the current state of the LCSH, only members of the majority are guaranteed a non-biased representation.

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