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Classifying Identity: Organizing an LGBT Library

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Abstract

Although we tend to see classification as a socially and morally neutral activity, classification systems often incorporate societal prejudices and marginalize disadvantaged populations. These systematic prejudices are not only problematic because they are oppressive, but they also impair successful information access. In this paper, we will discuss our work as librarians at the Gay and Lesbian Services Organization (GLSO), a pride center in Lexington, Kentucky. We will discuss the problems that resulted from initially using Library of Congress classification to classify a library of LGBT materials, as well as our decision to create a unique classification system for that collection. The process of creating a new system was complex, and we encountered many challenges in determining the structure and priority of concepts. However, we felt that we were able to create a system that was better able to serve our users. We will argue that the standard classification systems libraries use are diverging from new knowledge, particularly in LGBT studies, and that the library profession will ultimately have to address these structural problems in order to continue to support our users and the progression of knowledge.

Introduction

Many authors have described how classification systems tend to disadvantage marginalized populations (see Foskett, 1971; Olson, 2001; Kublik, Clevette, Ward, & Olson, 2003; Keilty, 2009 for examples). As Foskett argues, “when one begins to examine almost any scheme, it quickly becomes clear that, far from being objective, it is likely to reflect both the prejudices of its time and those of its author” (p. 117). Since classification systems are designed to be as simple and efficient to use as possible, they typically reflect public opinion. Therefore, they incorporate their originating society’s assumptions and norms into the very structure. Furthermore, systems also tend to assume that there is one uniform way of viewing the world, which excludes anyone who does not agree with or fit within that viewpoint (Olson, 2001).

The focus on uniformity and efficiency in classification systems limits the ways that marginalized groups can be represented. Christensen (2008) refers to two possible ways of incorporating identities outside the social norm as “minoritization vs. universalization.” He describes these two basic responses as: 1). emphasizing each concept as a part of a homogenous whole (universalization, or not calling attention to differences), or 2). emphasizing each concept as distinct and separating it out from the whole (minoritization, calling attention to categories outside of the norm). Universalization de-emphasizes difference, so it can have the drawback of failing to adequately recognize diverse identities. Minoritization, however, leads to something that some authors have referred to as ‘ghettoization’ (ex. Kublik, Clevette, Ward & Olson, 2003)—listing all categories that are considered non- standard in a problematic and value-laden ‘other’ section, often with groups that have a strong social stigma (such as pedophiles or criminals). Neither approach offers an adequate understanding of LGBT identity, since these topics have this tendency to either be ignored or relegated to the categories that are implicitly abnormal.

This idea of an ‘other’ category is also a problem in the classification of marginalized populations because marginalization sometimes causes us to group subjects that do not naturally make a cohesive whole. The LGBT category, in the form we usually discuss it, is not a particularly stable or cohesive group. The category is typically named by a series of letters encompassing all non-conforming identities relating to gender or sexuality (ex. LGBTQ, GLBTQIP, etc.), and the very nature of the grouping is that it is constantly in flux. Rothbauer (2007) talks about using the term in the “most inclusive sense possible” and warns against treating this category as a homogenous group (p. 112), but that diversity also calls attention to the fact that the category itself may be inadequate. The primary thing binding together these various identities is that they are considered marginalized and deviant from the norm. Keilty (2009) defines it as “a category of that which does not belong” (p. 241). Thus, the lack of cohesion within the category itself may make classification additionally difficult.

Furthermore, classification has a dual effect on any given concept. On the one hand, it makes it searchable and gives it a coherent and meaningful place within the organization of knowledge. On the other hand, it applies limits and defines stable norms for the concept. This process is problematic when we are discussing issues of LGBT identity. Since LGBT topics have this non-standard status, the group encompasses all of the areas of sexuality and gender that are developing or in flux, making it an arena which is constantly changing and redefining norms and boundaries. However, in order to classify materials, we have to force them into static systems.

One obvious issue with our current systems is that their basic structures are over one hundred years old. Thus, our classification systems are not only unable to keep up with modern changes to the understanding of LGBT studies, they assume a badly outdated understanding of sexuality and gender. Thus, we have a situation in which the actual material of LGBT studies is diverging further and further from our ability to classify it. While there have been many positive efforts to update terminology, these changes are typically superficial, such as updating a term or adding a new category. We will argue that it is the essential structure of the system that is problematic.

In this paper, we will discuss the difficulties that we encountered in organizing the library collection of the Gay and Lesbian Services Organization (GLSO). Traditional classification systems were not adequate to organize this LGBT-specific collection due to structural biases within the system. These biases were not only problematic for theoretical reasons, but also negatively impacted the usability of the library and impaired users' access to information.

The GLSO Project

From 2012-2015, the authors of this paper volunteered as the librarians of the Gay and Lesbian Services Organization in Lexington, Kentucky. During that time, we were responsible for organizing, maintaining, and establishing the policies for the organization's library collection. When we arrived, the collection was organized using Library of Congress classification, but the library had not been maintained for several years. After examining the structural and practical problems with how the collection was classified, we decided to reorganize it according to a system that we developed. This section will discuss our work on this project, including our process for creating a new system.

The GLSO is a pride center that was founded with the goal of serving the needs of the LGBT community of central and eastern Kentucky. It strives to promote the cause of LGBT rights in those communities and serve as a gathering place for LGBT people. The library was founded in response to a lack of LGBT resources at a typical academic or public library. The collection consists primarily of donated materials, including fiction, non-fiction, music, movies and materials about the history of the organization. All materials relate, in some way, to LGBT issues or topics. The library is located along the back wall of the organization's meeting room and consists of about 1600 volumes.

When we arrived, the library had not been maintained for several years. Although most of the books were categorized using Library of Congress classification, many of the books were unlabeled and boxes of recently donated books were sitting on the floor. There was no posted system for borrowing or locating books, and most of the materials were badly outdated.

The primary decision we had to make was whether to continue with the current system of classification (Library of Congress). When we began examining the collection, however, we started to notice some problematic trends. The first issue was that most of the books were grouped into one or two very small call number ranges. These groupings made it much more difficult to locate call numbers or to browse, since most of the call numbers were nearly identical.

This problem has been described in other studies of topic-based libraries, particularly if the library is focused on an area that is underrepresented or marginalized in the call number system. For example, Idress and Mahmood (2009) reviewed the use of the Dewey Decimal System in Islamic studies libraries. Since Dewey only has one number for Islamic studies (297), Islamic studies libraries face the absurd situation of having collections in which nearly every book has the same call number. This problem reflects not only the specificity of the topic, but also the prejudices built into the classification system, since Dewey has ninety numbers for topics in Christianity.

The collection we were working with was disproportionately labeled with HQ—a subset of the social sciences in Library of Congress. Our first concern, as previously stated, was that this made the collection very difficult to browse or locate call numbers. Since this library was oriented towards all members of the community, we also had library users of a variety of educational backgrounds, including those who did not have a college degree or experience with an academic library. This factor, in addition to the challenging groupings of call numbers, made us concerned that it would be extremely difficult for community users to find books.

Furthermore, we noticed that the arrangement of books within the HQ section did not seem to follow any logic that enabled browsing. We were unable to understand, looking at the shelves, why certain topics were paired together and why some similar books were on opposite sides of the shelves. Therefore, we researched how the section was actually organized, and found some problematic patterns. See the table on page 5 for the entire HQ section.

Table 1: The HQ Subclass of Library of Congress Classification. Subclass HQ

HQ1-2044	The Family. Marriage. Women
HQ12-449	Sexual life
HQ19-30.7	Sexual behavior and attitudes. Sexuality
HQ31-64	Sex instruction and sexual ethics
HQ71-72	Sexual deviations
HQ74-74.2	Bisexuality
HQ75-76.8	Homosexuality. Lesbianism
HQ77-77.2	Transvestism
HQ77.7-77.95	Transexualism
HQ79	Sadism. Masochism. Fetishism, etc.
HQ101-440.7	Prostitution
HQ447	Masturbation
HQ449	Emasculation. Eunuchs, etc.
HQ450-472	Erotica
HQ503-1064	The family. Marriage. Home
HQ750-755.5	Eugenics
HQ755.7-759.92	Parents. Parenthood
	Including parent and child, husbands, fathers, wives, mothers
	Family size
HQ760-767.7	Children. Child development
HQ767.8-792.2	Including child rearing, child life, play, socialization, children's rights
	Youth. Adolescents. Teenagers
HQ793-799.2	Young men and women
HQ799.5-799.9	Adulthood
HQ799.95-799.97	Single people
HQ800-800.4	Man-woman relationships. Courtship. Dating
HQ801-801.83	Matrimonial bureaus. Marriage brokerage
HQ802	Matrimonial advertisements
HQ802.5	Temporary marriage. Trial marriage. Companionate marriage
HQ803	Breach of promise
HQ804	Desertion
HQ805	Adultery
HQ806	Divorce
HQ811-960.7	Free love
HQ961-967	Polygamy
HQ981-996	Polyandry
HQ997	Illegitimacy. Unmarried mothers
HQ998-999	The state and marriage
HQ1001-1006	The church and marriage
HQ1051-1057	Widows and widowers. Widowhood
HQ1058-1058.5	Aged. Gerontology (Social aspects).
HQ1060-1064	Retirement
HQ1073-1073.5	Thanatology. Death. Dying
HQ1075-1075.5	Sex role
HQ1088-1090.7	Men
HQ1101-2030.7	Women. Feminism
HQ1871-2030.7	Women's clubs
HQ2035-2039	Life skills. Coping skills. Everyday living skills
HQ2042-2044	Life style

Source: Library of Congress, n.d.

When we examined the structure of HQ, we noticed several issues that did not seem to be compatible with the material we were collecting and arranging. The first issue is that the subset is called ‘The Family. Marriage. Women.’ When we saw this heading, we were very surprised that the majority of our LGBT materials were categorized in this way because it is unclear how this is a description of many LGBT topics (ex. the transition process for transgender men). We were also concerned by the grouping of family, marriage, and women within one heading, since it was not immediately obvious why they were listed together.

Most of the books in our collection were labeled with numbers from the ‘Sexual life’ section of the subset, and that section introduces several problems. It does not ever specify heterosexuality as a concept, implicitly defining it as a norm that does not need to be specified. For example, it appears that items about heterosexual relationships are listed under ‘The Family. Marriage. Home’ while non-heterosexual relationships are listed under ‘Sexual life’—this implies that heterosexual relationships can be significant family relationships, whereas non-heterosexual relationships cannot. Books on gay marriage, for example, are often listed under sexual life, instead of marriage.

All of the identities addressed in library materials—such as transgender people, bisexual people, gay men, and lesbians—were listed as part of the section that begins with ‘Sexual deviations’ and includes rather morally loaded categories such as prostitution and emasculation. In other words, all LGBT identities are currently relegated to an ‘other’ category of sexual deviations. This problem is also not simply terminological. We did note the use of non-preferred terms such as ‘Transexualism,’ but the placement of the concept within the system would be problematic even if the term were updated.

Furthermore, the library had a wide range of books about gender identity, including a large number of books on feminism, and we noted that there were several problems with the way these issues were treated in this subset. One of the projects of feminism is to challenge the traditional role of women (as being primarily defined by their marriages and their place in the home). The structure of this classification scheme, however, seems to be actively undermining that project. Women are explicitly paired with marriage and family, implying that that group of concepts forms a coherent whole. Later in the section, the concept of ‘Women. Feminism’ is above ‘Life skills. Coping skills. Everyday living,’ suggesting that domestic tasks are a subset of women and feminism. Thus, the way these materials are being classified seems to be directly at odds with the materials themselves.

After we examined these categories, we were concerned by both the structural implications

and the practical problems created by classifying a collection according to this system. Structurally, we felt that the system was actually contrary to the goals of the GLSO. The GLSO intended to provide a safe and supportive place for people of all identities, and the classification system implied LGBT people were deviant and not worthy of serious consideration. The system also undermined queer and feminist theory by marginalizing the disciplines, making it an inappropriate choice for a library focusing on those disciplines. We were facing the prospect of organizing the books in a way that oppressed our library's users.

In addition to these theoretical concerns, we found that these problems also negatively impacted the user experience and threatened the usability of the library. How a library is organized undoubtedly impacts a user's experience, and even though few library users probably know what call numbers *mean*, they can certainly notice if books about lesbians are right next to books about prostitutes or 'sexual deviations.' Other studies have also found that LGBT students and information seekers can have difficulty navigating traditional information systems, frequently because of outdated terminology and organizational problems. Schaller (2011) interviewed LGBT college students and found that many of them were dissatisfied with library services and search processes. One student complained, "Why do I get books about Muslim woman, when I search for the term gay?" (p. 106). Many LGBT people have also expressed dissatisfaction with libraries and instead focus on the role of other information providers, like LGBT or feminist bookstores (Rothbauer, 2007). LGBT college students said that bookstores were preferable to libraries "because there are experts available" (Schaller, 2011, p. 106). Although it is understandable that these organizations may be preferable because they are more specific, librarians should still be disturbed by the idea that bookstores are seen as supplanting libraries as sources of expertise about information. There seems to be compelling evidence that traditionally organized libraries are inadequate to LGBT information seekers' information needs, and we believe the outdated structure that we have identified in this paper contributes to this problem. Therefore, in order to try to best serve the people who were using our library, we concluded that we did not want to keep using the Library of Congress system.

Designing a New System

Our next step was to examine our other options for organizing the books, since the collection was clearly large enough to necessitate some form of organization. We briefly researched the Dewey Decimal System, but found that it also relegated LGBT topics to small, marginalized

pockets of call numbers. We also contacted several other libraries that specialized in LGBT topics, but found little information that was helpful towards designing or locating a new system. One academic library collection told us that they used Library of Congress because they had joint catalogs/holdings with a larger academic library system. Another library told us they used a modified version of Dewey, but we were unable to obtain a copy of their call number system. In short, we were unable to identify any currently existing system that we would be able to use. Therefore, we decided to try to design our own uniquely for the GLSO collection.

We located several lists of topics and bibliographies to try to identify topic areas that we would need to cover. Notably, we found the *Guide to Gay and Lesbian Resources: A Classified Bibliography Based upon the Collections of the University of Chicago Library* (Conaway, Hierl, & Sutter, 2002) to be extremely useful, since it categorized LGBT materials into major topics that closely reflected the composition of our collection. We used that resource to help identify some of the major subject areas we would need to classify. However, the main way we identified the major topic areas was by looking through our collection and noting significant trends in how the materials were distributed.

As we have mentioned, the population served by the GLSO was diverse, so the collection's organizational method needed to be accessible. For this reason, we tried to keep the organization principles as simple as possible. We organized fiction alphabetically by author (similar to Dewey) in a separate section. For non-fiction, we then listed the major topics we had decided on. These categories were broad, such as art, relationships, current issues, etc. We were aware of the limitations of basing a system on currently available books—notably, the likelihood that newer books and topics would not fit neatly into the established system. Therefore, we wanted to make the system as expandable as possible. Once we had a rough list of the major topics we wanted to use, we arranged them in alphabetical order, to best accommodate new topics as they arose. The deficit of this system is that related topics (like relationships and sex) would not necessarily be next to each other. Related topics sometimes ended up on opposite sides of the non-fiction section, depending on their alphabetic placement. However, we thought that the advantage of expandability offset this disadvantage.

Once we had our list of major topics, we defined subcategories for each of the topics. For example, the subcategories of relationships are: family, romantic, violence in, and weddings. As discussed earlier, these sections and subsections were determined primarily by warrant in the collection. In other words, if we found we had several books on weddings, we made a new

subsection. Another example is the category of history, which has three subcategories: ancient, modern, and general. We used these subcategories because the books in our collection seemed to fall into these categories, although we would have included additional terms if we had we found a substantial number of items in the collection.

We then used three or four-letter codes for each topic and subtopic to define call numbers. For example, the books about weddings (relationship category, wedding subcategory) had the call number RELA-WEDD. The book *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality*, by Jonathan Ned Katz, was labeled HIST-GEN (history-general) because it is a historical book that is not confined to any particular era. For the complete list, see Table 2 on page 10.

We used this system to re-label the entire collection, and posted the list in visible places around the library. We did not attempt to organize within each subsection, since it was typically less than twenty books, except by rough alphabetic order of the author's last name. Some types of non-fiction books, such as autobiographies/biographies and anthologies, were also organized within their subsection by the author or subject's last name.

As we proceeded with the relabeling, we ran into additional problems that highlighted the challenges of creating a meaningful organizational system. The most obvious problem was that we could not establish any means of determining priority among topics. For instance, we had a book on the history of gay Christians in the military. That book could have been plausibly considered a current issue book focusing on the military, a book focusing on LGBT Christians, a history book, or a cultural study of gay men. If there was a conflict, we typically did not consider the fact that the book was LGBT-relevant to be a primary topic, since every book in the collection was related to LGBT issues in some way. Specifying a book was LGBT-relevant did not distinguish it from other books in the collection very successfully. Other than that, however, we had a great deal of difficulty determining primary subject matter. As we completed the project, we began building a catalog using the website LibraryThing, and we used that system to supplement the primary topics with keywords, but there was no obvious way to use those keywords to assist with browsing.

Table 2: GLSO Taxonomy

Anthology (ANT)
Author's last initial

Art (ART)
AIDS (AIDS) Film (FILM) Performance
(PERF) Visual (VISU)

Biography (BIO)
Subject's last initial

Cultural Studies (CULT) Feminism
(FEMI) Gay (GAY) General (GEN)
Lesbianism (LESB) Race (RACE)
Transgender (TRAN)

History (HIST)
Ancient (ANCI) General (GEN) Modern
(MOD)

Current Social Issues and Events (ISSU)
Activism (ACTI)
AIDS (AIDS)
Hate (HATE) Military (MILI) Rights
(RIGH) Workplace (WORK)

Law (LAW)
Hate (HATE) Rights (RIGH)

Literature (LIT)
Humor (HUMO) Journal (JOUR) Poetry (POET)

Psychology (PSYC) Issue (ISSU)
Sexuality and Gender (S&G) Therapy (THER)
General (GEN)

Relationships (RELA) Family (FAM) Romantic (ROM)
Violence in (VIOL) Weddings (WEDD)

Reference (REF) Religion (RELI)
Christianity (CHRI) General (GEN) Judaism (JUDA)
Spirituality (SPIR)

Self-Help (SELF) AIDS (AIDS) Development (DEV)
Family (FAM) Identity (IDEN) Recovery (RECO)

Sex (SEX) Travel (TRAV)

We also had the same subsection show up under several major sections. For example, AIDS showed up as a subsection in art, current issues, and self-help.¹ Hate (the term we used for prejudice or violence against LGBT people) showed up in law and current issues. As a result, we had subsets that repeated within the collection, separating material about similar topics.

We also recognized that our system was limited by the fact that it was created based on available materials. In fact, the collection consisted almost entirely of pre-owned donations, so it also tended to be dated. During our time as the librarians, we made a major effort to weed the materials that were no longer relevant, but we still had access to very few new books. Thus, we may have been organizing a library system based on the literature of five or ten years ago.

However, we thought that there were some very positive features to the system, which ultimately made it a better choice for categorizing our collection. The fact that we were assuming every book related to LGBT or gender issues allowed us to organize around more precise topics. This advantage allowed us to avoid the lumping that we were seeing with Library of Congress (ex. half the collection listed as HQ) and allowed a genuinely browsable collection.

We also appreciated that we could add as many new major subjects and subcategories as needed, making the system expandable—this was the benefit of the alphabetically arranged topic structure. Since we did not define the relationships between the major topics, we could add as many major topics as needed. We did not include newer LGBT topics, such as pansexuality, simply because we did not find that we had literature that we could categorize under that label. However, we wanted to be sure that the system could include those materials once they arrived.

Furthermore, the new organizational system seemed to be more approachable to our library's users. The system was fairly straightforward, so it did not depend on the user's educational level. We were able to include all the information a library user would need on a single sheet of paper. Also, since we were able to avoid the clumping effect caused by the minimal call number range given to LGBT topics in Library of Congress, we were able to make a collection which allowed users to more easily find materials related to their interests. We also valued the fact that our system avoided much of the marginalizing assumptions present in Library of Congress, and we believe our system is better able to support the inclusive nature of the organization we were serving.

¹ We want to clarify that we do not think of AIDS as an LGBT-specific issue, since the disease affects people of all backgrounds without distinction. However, we made these subcategories because we had a large number of books on AIDS and needed to categorize them. Our collection was also somewhat dated, so it included a large number of books about the AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s and its aftermath.

Conclusions

After completing this project, one of our primary concerns was the relationship between newly created materials and our efforts to classify them. With books about LGBT studies, we found that the new materials had diverged so far from the classification system that our efforts to classify could be undermining the potential for growth and change in the field. Our solution to this issue was to create an entirely new system to try to hold this new knowledge.

If our classification systems lose their ability to adequately classify new materials, that is going to have a severe impact on the usefulness of libraries for the pursuit of knowledge. If we cannot classify novel ideas, our users will have a harder time locating them. This will reduce our quality of service but, more importantly, it could potentially restrict the informational exchange that is essential for the progression of knowledge.

Clearly, LGBT studies is going to be one of the more problematic areas for a dated system. Our understanding of sexuality and gender has changed dramatically in the last hundred years. Also, as we previously stated, since the category is defined mostly by being outside of the norm, it's naturally going to be subject to a high degree of change, upheaval, and redefinition. However, as our systems continue to age, it is inevitable that these tensions will continue to build, and that they will affect a greater portion of the organizational schema. As the system diverges from the knowledge that it's categorizing, information access could grow increasingly difficult.

We also believe that, if other collections make a similar choice to branch out from the primary systems, these tensions could lead to a fracturing of classification systems. If the primary systems are increasingly unable to adequately classify materials, libraries will feel compelled to try idiosyncratic options. The development of new systems may provide better organization for our users, especially in topic-based libraries, but will exclude libraries from the benefits of a shared system or shared catalog.

This difficulty has caused us to question whether it is in the best interest of our profession, and our users, to set the classification structure in a historical moment and continue to use that system indefinitely. As a profession, we may need to develop some system of revising or recreating classification systems, at a fundamental rather than superficial level, in order to support our users and the progression of knowledge.

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