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The Location of Classification: Between the Local and the Global

Abstract

This article discusses, through literature review, cultural bias in classification from the standpoint of knowledge organization in an interdisciplinary dialogue with social studies, feminist positions and post-colonial theory. Information is a key aspect to understand the social, cultural, political and economic relations intertwined in the map of the globalized world. The role of classification as an epistemological tool that promotes a culturally biased use of knowledge. Classification systems can be ameliorated to encompass knowledges in a context of cultural diversity.

Introduction

This article discusses, through literature review, a view of classification from the standpoint of social studies, feminist positions, and post-colonial theory. Information is a key aspect to understand the social, cultural, political and economic relations intertwined in the map of the globalized world.

Information can be seen as a key element to understand the socio-cultural, political and economic relations which design the map of our globalized world. The claim to universality and objective representations of reality, and the search for universal laws and truths stripped from context seem to have been replaced, in the 19th and 20th centuries, by a perspective in which context was again taken into account in several disciplines (Olson 2011, p. 114). The ideal of universalism imposes one single viewpoint to all social groups around the world by obliterating difference and making it hard for groups to maintain their social (political and cultural) traits in a globalized world. Postmodern, postcolonial and feminist theories have addressed the challenge of rethinking the world as a multitude of social groups that should coexist on the same level. Santos identifies the need to counteract negative universalism via a consensus around the fact that "no struggle, objective or agent has the overall recipe for the social emancipation of humanity" (Santos 2010 p. 237). Social emancipation is "an ethical and political exigency, perhaps more pressing than ever in the contemporary world" (Santos 2010, p. 237).

Such standpoint makes it relevant to discuss the role of classification as a core tool in knowledge organization. In his article "Declassification in knowledge organization: a post-epistemological essay", García Gutiérrez (2011) sets out to analyze the prevailing epistemological position in knowledge organization in a complex, culturally diverse world. García Gutiérrez argues that it is necessary to form communication networks with other areas of study, as a way to overcome positivist barriers that may have been imposed by a strict view of areas of knowledge. He mentions postcolonial theories and feminist positions as possible areas of overlap which could "promote the in-depth revision of the conceptions, procedures, relationships and actions revolving around KO" (García Gutiérrez 2011, p. 6).

This revision of conceptions might be particularly relevant at a time when information seems to be a key element to understand what is at stake when the contact among cultures is elevated to an unprecedented level in a globalized world. Santos (2000, p. 38) argues that the authoritarian use of information is a revealing characteristic of the present time. In his view, the technical conditions which could allow for the collective enhancement of knowledge in the planet in an egalitarian and democratic way were appropriated by a restricted group of actors.

In this sense, the perspective of interculturality might offer insights as to how to understand these questions within the framework of knowledge organization. From this perspective it is possible to perceive the classification of knowledge as a construct that is not without cultural bias. The ordering of knowledge is a political and ideological act which has a profound influence on the ordering of the world. It can determine which groups produce knowledge and which groups are subjected to knowledge produced by others; which group gets to write and preserve its history, memory and cultural traits and which groups gets it done for them (or not done at all).

A commonly heard criticism to an intercultural approach is that it does not appear to have a clearly defined epistemological or methodological stance, bordering on relativism. Social emancipation demands the construction of an ethical and political position which should not be grounded on an absolute principle or embrace relativism. Thus it poses the challenge of "knowing how to maximize interculturality without subscribing to cultural and epistemological relativism" (Santos 2010, p. 238).

Similarities and differences: classification thought

Classification is present in most areas of our lives, be it in the form of everyday classification or the most elaborate knowledge organization system. The omnipresence of classification may be one of the reasons why classification (and its implications) may seem invisible to us. Classification can be regarded as "the quintessential core of knowledge organization" (Smiraglia 2014, p. 57). Organizing knowledge is a human activity and as such it carries the assumptions, interests and motives of the society where it takes place. Classification is then a powerful means to enforce a determined economic and political view of the world. When the views of one (or few) social groups are privileged, cultural diversity is not being taken into account.

In a globalized world, cultural diversity seems to be taken for granted. The ubiquity of the concept might be disguising the fact that the concept has far-reaching implications which deserve to be examined. As regards the field of knowledge organization, cultural diversity can be seen as the underlying concern behind discussions about classification bias.

In a culturally diverse society, the notion of the universality of knowledge must be reviewed. Mai (2013, p. 242) describes the relationship between classification and bias as a reflection of reality. Reality is biased, therefore classifications must also be biased.

Mai points to the fact that the modern hope for universality in classification has been reconsidered in more recent conceptualizations.

In "Classification and universality: Application and construction" (2006), Olson argues that classification is seen as an essential (and natural) aspect in the process of creating knowledge. This view of classification as an innate process has contributed to its acceptance as a "natural" and universally applicable process. The terms "similarity"/ "sameness" and "difference" are the guiding principles of classification in Western culture, and such conceptions carry with them cultural bias. The duality sameness/ difference disregards the fact that what is defined as similar is culturally determined by creating a hierarchy that presents knowledge in categories that are supposedly essential, natural and universal.

According to Olson, "discipline – as the primary facet in our classifications – is the fundamental sameness" (Olson 2001a, p. 117). As such, classifications depend on specialists to decide what content is or is not included in its classes. In such a rigid framework, incorporating new knowledge is not an easy task. Knowledge that does not fall into a pre-determined category might be incorporated into the main structure or not, depending on a number of social, cultural, political and economic interests. In the context of a culturally diverse society, the viewpoint of the "majority" may be imposed on the "minorities" by not acknowledging the fact that knowledge organization systems are cultural and political constructs themselves. As Olson explains it, "effective searching for marginalized topics will require greater ingenuity and serendipity that searching for mainstream topics" (Olson 2001b, p. 639)

A classification has a representational function: it is a set of categories *and* a system (Olson 2007, p. 380). A classification based on hierarchy and the principle of mutual exclusivity leaves out anything that cannot be ascribed to a specific place in the scheme. If different knowledge organization systems can be built from the perspective of different cultures, it follows that these systems, as cultural constructs, are biased towards the culture from which they stem. In other words, knowledge organization systems are constructs that tend to present themselves as invisible (or apparently neutral) to their users (Bowker; Star 2000).

In this sense, to research knowledge produced outside of the legitimized circuits in mainstream knowledge organization systems may prove difficult. Institutions which organize information "reflect the marginalizations and exclusions of the society they serve." (Olson 2001b, p. 639).

García Gutiérrez (2011) notices the classification process is often viewed as a neutral and non-ideological element, even if it does produce ideology and culture. Classification is based on metonymic reduction as a tool to create bias. García Gutiérrez (2011 p. 6) describes classification as a "first-order gnoseological and epistemological operation that impregnates totality, and totally our relationship with the world". Whereas classification occurs in all cultures, epistemology is a product of

Western culture. Classifications are a compelling strategy impose an ordering of the world "by means of essentialist demarcations and ontological purifications in an illusion of universalism and consistency" (García Gutiérrez 2014 p. 393).

These processes of classification, re-classification and re-signification are intensified by the digital technology which amplifies their reach and impact. At the same time, information and communications technology offers unprecedented capabilities for the development of new arrangements which could allow for more social groups to negotiate knowledge production, distribution and access on equal grounds.

The confluence of ICT and cultural diversity present ethical challenges. Capurro (2010) proposes an "intercultural comparative critical reflection" as a means to problematize the bias behind the use of technology in informational processes. Knowledge organization studies on cultural diversity show a distinct connection ethics as a way to create pathways to reduce cultural bias.

The voices in classification

Studies in the field of knowledge organization in an interdisciplinary dialogue with social studies, feminist positions and postcolonial theories suggest that it is necessary to find ways to let the voices that have been obliterated by the presumption of universality be heard.

To Mignolo (2000), the subalternization of knowledge (the colonial epistemic difference) is the origin of the dichotomy between the societies that produce knowledge and the societies that merely absorb that knowledge, or the ones about which knowledge is produced (objects of study). In this manner, the location from where knowledge is produced will determine how (or if) it will be incorporated by institutions that organize knowledge such as libraries. Geographical space and knowledge are both human constructs which are inextricably linked.

Grosfoguel (2008) emphasizes the fact that Western philosophy and sciences have been influenced by Eurocentric paradigms that have not catered culturally diverse perspectives. According to Grosfoguel (2008, p. 119), the locus of enunciation is hidden in Western philosophy and sciences creating the illusion of universal knowledge.

García Gutiérrez proposes the introduction of pluralism in classification through the process of declassification, a process that requires the awareness of incompleteness, of bias and of subjectivity. It does not reject classification but introduces the principle of contradiction to it, acknowledging that "a thing is also another thing" / "a thing could always be another thing" (García Gutiérrez 2011, p. 11). Consequently, declassification operates within open categories.

The notion of pluralism is further developed by Mai (2011 p. 723) as a dynamic concept which "[…] is not something that can be set aside as simply something that has to do with culture, society and language, but it is *also* something that has to do with the individual." In this view, a classification system should veer away from the idea of

consensus and instead embrace the idea that "[…] any document and any domain could be classified from multiple equal correct perspectives" (Mai 2011 p. 723).

The idea of multiple perspectives may be daunting to groups accustomed to the certainty of "one truth", which would tend to view such an approach as lacking in epistemological and methodological foundations. According to Mai (2009 p. 639), accepting the idea of plurality in classification systems does not mean that "everything goes". Rather, it poses the challenge or dealing with bias in a transparent and critical way.

Bowker and Star (2001 p. 324-25) propose three features that could facilitate dealing with the ethical dimensions of classification in a culturally diverse society. They highlight the importance of: 1. recognizing the balancing act of classifying, namely being aware of cultural diversity by incorporation of ambiguity; 2. making voice retrievable by making the system politically flexible; 3. being sensitive to exclusions.

The positions taken by the authors mentioned appear to have in common the notion that acknowledging cultural diversity is essential to practices which involve knowledge in all its facets. As far as knowledge organization is concerned, the importance of recognizing classification as a culturally-sensitive activity is clear. It is less clear, however, in which fashion cultural diversity is supposed to be integrated into knowledge organization practices.

Szostak (2014) poses a crucial question in this regard: "what exactly should we want a classification to do in order to respect and support diversity?" (Szostak 2014, p. 160) Szostak points out that the efforts which have been made to make classification more open to social diversity have only had a limited effect. Szostak suggests that the reason for such limited progress is related to the fact that classifications are hierarchical structures. Szostak refers to Olson's "How we construct subjects: a feminist analysis" (2007) to introduce the idea that hierarchies are more "reflective of a masculine perspective, and that a classification that blended hierarchy with a web-of-relations approach would be more gender-neutral" (Szostak 2014, p. 164).

Beghtol (2002) proposes cultural hospitality as an ethical warrant for knowledge organization systems. The concept of cultural hospitality "refers to the ability of a classification notation to incorporate new concepts and to establish appropriate semantic and syntactic relationships among the old and the new concepts." (Beghtol 2002, p. 518) According to Beghtol (2002), adding different cultural warrants could contribute to making the concept of cultural hospitality more efficient in catering to the information needs of individuals within their cultures in an ethical way.

Ethical concerns about knowledge organization systems stem from the concept of cultural warrant, as they provide "the rationale and authority for decisions about concepts and what relations among them are appropriate for a particular system" (Beghtol 2005, p. 904). A cultural warrant is related to the notion that the culture in which a knowledge organization system is based may facilitate or hinder the access to

information: the users belonging to the culture in which the system has been built would be at an advantage in relation to the users not pertaining to that culture. In this way, a more "visible" and "permeable" system has better chances of catering to a socially-diverse society.

Smit (2012) suggests that disclosing information about the processes involved in knowledge organization and institutional policies to users is a necessary step to instill information ethics.

Developing strategies (techniques, policies, approaches) to make knowledge organization systems and institutions more amenable to cultural diversity is a great challenge. As Olson (2001b, p. 659) points out, techniques to make knowledge organization systems more permeable ("redemptive technologies") involve *relinquishingpower* to the other and might prove difficult to develop.

Conclusion

The ethical dimension of knowledge organization in relation to cultural diversity is brought to the fore by a number of authors. An ethical relationship with the "other" should allow for the inclusion of marginalized knowledges and cultures.

Classification systems are an intrinsic part of information and communications technology. An intercultural information ethics, such as proposed by Capurro (2010), may allow for the establishment of a cultural ethos through local and global intercultural networks. The notions of cultural warrant and cultural hospitality also seem to have a potential to make classification systems more amenable to deal with the challenges brought about by culturally-diverse world.

The new information and communication technologies have a potential to become the cornerstone to foster changes in knowledge organization systems that would be more open to cultural diversity. Identifying bias and subjectivity in classification systems and dealing with such bias in a critical and ethical way is the first step.

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