Impact of Subject Heading Bias on Search & Language
Erin Butler
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Background
- Bias in subject headings has been a major topic of study since the 1970s.
- Established subject headings privilege a point of view that is white, male, Christian, heterosexual, and cisgender.
- Changes to subject headings have been slow and incomplete.

History of Library of Congress Subject Headings
- 1898: Beginnings of LCSH
- 1902: ALA calls for standardization through LC's Card Distribution Service
- 1909-1914: The first edition of LCSH is printed
- 1943: LCSH begins to use "See also" cross-references
- 1984: LC publishes a manual for subject cataloging

Changes to LCSH
- Important publications:
  o *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People* (Sandy Berman, 1971)
  o *Revolting Librarians* (Celeste West & Elizabeth Katz, Eds., 1972)
  o "Three Decades Since *Prejudice and Antipathies*: A Study of Changes in the Library of Congress Subject Headings" (Steven Knowlton, 2005)
- Critical theory influences:
  o Feminist Theory; Social Influences (Hope Olson, 1990s-present)
  o Critical Race Theory (Jonathan Furner 2000s)
  o Queer Theory (Emily Drabinski, 2010s)
- Current areas of concern:
  o LGBTQIA populations
  o Gender
  o Indigenous knowledge
  o Western bias

Study Design
- Online survey distributed to Simmons SLIS students
- 10 semi-structured interview

Survey Results
- People put less of a focus on using the terms they consider appropriate in everyday conversation.
- Library signage sees the highest use of appropriate terms.
- There is a disconnect between how students perceive the use of subject headings and their comfort with the use of certain terms in subject headings.

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Interview Results

- Most students have felt discomfort with subject headings in areas related to marginalized communities and Western bias.
- There is a desire to participate in activism for change, but students are not yet doing this because they feel uninformed and do not feel empowered.
- Search strategies rely on keywords rather than subject headings.
- Students' use of language generally does not change based on subject headings.
- Results of discomfort with subject headings in searching:
  - Stopped searching
  - Changed topics
  - Unable to find enough or appropriate sources
  - Use of other sources than the catalog, like Goodreads and Amazon, to find materials
  - Awareness that subject headings are not necessarily reflective of the material they describe
  - "Translation" of the subject headings into more appropriate language for users