Podcast- Warrant and Disability
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Podcast Script

Please note, headings and references listed below each section are for organizational purposes only and not spoken during the recording.

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast about library and information science. My name is Hillary Anderson. I'm a MLIS student at Western University and I'll be your host for this episode.

Today we are looking at cataloging or classifying social topics, meaning any subject related to populations and society. Specifically, we're going to look at how a conceptual framework, which is called a warrant, impacts the types of terminology used in a classification system and the implications it has on decision-making overall.

Defining Warrant and Its Role in Classification

References: Kwasnik (2010).

To begin, we should start with "what is a warrant?". It's the lens that you use to guide decision making when designing a classification system. Without it, a system would just be made up of one person's or organization's perspective of what they think is correct and that's problematic for several reasons. The world is a complex place and assigning labels to things in it, which is essentially what classification system do, should include multiple perspectives. Warrant takes decision making from, essentially, 'because I say so' and turns it into 'because this is what a community of people with expertise says so'. Now, this doesn't mean that that authority source itself is always right or that adjustments won't have to be made by the person creating the classification system, but it's a good starting point and way to check if the decisions that have been made have merit. And there are several sources for warrant, some of which we will discuss later, but understandably the source needs to match with the type of information you're cataloguing in your system. In our case, we're going to look at classifying specific groups of people.

Defining Disability and My Authority to Speak on This Subject

References: Adler (2017), Brown (2021), Government (2020), Thompson (2023).

However, the discipline of social studies is quite broad, so I thought it would be helpful to pick a specific group to use as an example throughout this podcast. I will be using the disabled

community for that purpose and first, we need to discuss what I mean by disability because it's not as easy to define as you may think.

According to the Accessible Canada Act, disability is defined as "any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society." Disability is also sometimes defined in other ways, based on someone's ability to work, do certain tasks, or emotionally connect to others. If that's right or wrong is outside the scope of this podcast, but for what we're going to talk about today, it's important to remember that not everyone sees disability in the same way, and it can vary depending on context.

I've selected the disabled community for a few reasons. First, my two areas of scholarly interest are cataloguing and accessibility studies, so I feel comfortable speaking on both topics. Also, when it comes to marginalized groups, disabled people are historically under-studied and often the oppression they face is left out of conversations about EDI (meaning equity, diversity, and inclusion). So, I want to highlight a community that is often not discussed in society. Finally, I identify as a disabled person. I am chronically ill with an invisible illness, which is a way to describe people who can 'pass' as able-bodied to casual observation. Listening to my voice or seeing me in person, a stranger would likely not describe me as disabled.

So, for all these reasons, I feel comfortable speaking using my personal and academic experience, with the authority they bring, to not misrepresent the disability community in this podcast. That being said, we're going to discuss various types of terms to describe disability, some of which are incredibly offensive and outdated. I'll do my best to handle this material with the sensitivity it deserves, but some might find hearing such language triggering. If that is the case for you, perhaps it would be best to not listen to this episode right now.

Literary Warrant

References: CrippledScholar (2017), Kwasnik (2010), Molkentin (2022).

Now that we've determined what a warrant is and how it works in classifying topics, as well as selected our social group, we can examine how this is reflected in the warrants used in cataloguing systems.

Let's start with a fairly common example. A literary warrant works by using the language in your source materials to guide the language used in a classification system. In some respects, literary warrant can be an appropriate way to describe disability. By using the source material to determine the language used to describe disability, found in material like a documentary or an interview with a disabled person, it allows the way a person describes themselves to be reflected. For example, writer and accessibility consultant Kennedy Healy describes herself as Fat, Queer, and Crip, so using those terms to categorize her would honour her self-perception.

However, literary warrant also opens a lot of really offensive possibilities to describe people. Conversations about disability aren't the sole property of disabled people. It also includes doctors, psychologists, and other medical practitioners who treat disabled people and record their observations. And, based on personal experience, I can assure you that doctors viewing someone don't always describe your medical symptoms and your health situation accurately. Humans are fallible and it's not always possible for us to perfectly understand each other without really important information being lost in translation.

As well, some able-bodied people also describe disabled people using slurs and out-dated terms that can be conveyed in artistic works. For example, a book or movie containing a scene where an intellectually disabled person is called something offensive, using a system of literary warrant, would be catalogued using that name. And I can't imagine anyone who would like to use the offensive things we've been called in our lives as a defining factor of ourselves.

Disabled people can also be described in ways that are offensive for reasons that have good intentions. For example, some able-bodied people like to use euphemisms to describe disability. This is often done because they're uncomfortable with the word "disability" and think using terms like "special" or "differently abled" will remove some of the stigma that disabled people experience. While there might be some disabled individuals who are comfortable with this, many in the community find this demoralizing or infantilizing, because stigma comes not a specific word but by the way a person is treated in society. So, like slurs, euphemisms being used to describe a disabled person in source materials aren't the best ways to describe disability. So, unless a collection consists solely of first-person autobiographical works written by disabled people, literary warrant probably isn't the best option to use.

Scientific Warrant

References: Adler (2017), Imrie (2004), Kwasnik (2010), Reynolds (2018).

The other commonly found lens for classifying information is called scientific or philosophical warrant. It uses research or consensus is a specific area of academia or similar type of authority as the source for language used to describe concepts. And at first glance, this might seem like a good fit for describing disability, because disability is a medical issue. In fact, there are several established systems that use scientific warrant to describe disability from a medical perspective. One well-known example is the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (also known as the ICF). Medicine typically looks at disability as an impairment that requires treatment of some kind and uses biology-based terminology to describe the human body.

However, this one is also highly problematic. To focus exclusively on how well a body is functioning completely removes the social influences on disability, such as the stigma we touched on earlier in this episode. It also views disability in an exclusively negative light and that means a person who has feelings in ways that can make them feel defective or less-than a normal person. It also taps into the huge power imbalance medical professional have over their

patients, which can sometimes lead to the people receiving the medical care feeling like their voice is being diminished or ignored by the professionals who sometimes quite literally have the power to keep them alive. Fortunately, the medical community is becoming aware of this situation due to decades of work by disability activists and there is a movement to administer health in a more holistic way that considers the social influences on disability. This is timely, as the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how many view disability because long-COVID symptoms have made disability more visible.

Changing perceptions of disability in health care also need to be reflected in the ways we as society describe it and those who create medical classification systems are aware of the changing nature of disability. The ICF was published in 2001 to replace the older International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps, which as you may be able to pick up from its name alone, was a 1980 standard very focused on disability based on the limitations found in a person's abilities. But the shifting nature of medical terms can cause harm because it can be hard to remove or change older problematic terms once they enter cataloguing systems. The National Library of Medicine in the US has a classification system called Medical Subject Headings, also known as MeSH, that was created in 1954. It used the medical terminology at the time to describe disability and some terms hung around long after they were no longer used in medicine or considered appropriate ways to describe a person. For example, some physically disabled people were classified under the heading 'monsters' until 2009. This isn't to say that these systems are full of offensive terms, in fact the 2015 update to MeSH included the replacement of 'handicapped' and replaced it with 'disabled', which is a very positive step, but there are plenty of examples showing that it can take a long time to remove or update language once it is in place.

Cultural Warrant

References: Government (2020), Koford (2014), Kwasnik (2010), Silverman (2021).

In some ways, the obvious solution is to ask the disabled community what terms to use to describe them. This is a form of cultural warrant, where one cultural group decided how to classify information on a topic of importance to them. By asking the community to provide the language to encompass their experience, there is the possibility of circumventing offensive labels placed by other people or organizations who view disability negatively.

However, this also is problematic solution because the disabled community isn't one group of people. If we go back to the definition from the Accessible Canada Act, disability covers physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory impairment. Any of these can be temporary, episodic, or permanent in nature. Plus, one person can have multiple impairments, making their situation much different than another person who has a single impairment. And all these groups of people don't agree on how to describe themselves. For example, some use the people-first model, who want to make the individual and not the impairment the most important aspect of a person's identity. Instead of talking about "disabled

people", a person using this model would use the term "people with disabilities". Others consider their disability an integral part of their identity, so they reject the people-first model. And that's just one example of how to describe disability. There is also no consensus on many terms related to specific kinds of impairment or words used to describe the severity of disability. So, it's not as easy as getting a group of disabled experts together, asking them to come up with one universal system, and fixing the problem.

However, it is very important to use terms that are relevant to the disability community. By using terms that are problematic because they're out-dated, offensive, or not encompassing the day-to-day life of most disabled people, it makes information about disability hard to find. For example, in a study about how researchers studying disability look for information, the author found that it was often harder to find information classified by disability compared to other subjects. One participant explained that an article about feminist disability theory would be easy to find if searching for it based on a feminist perspective (being categorized as 'feminist theory') but was invisible if the disability aspect was searched because it was categorized as 'handicapped'. By using an outdated term that was outdated when the work was written, it renders it difficult if not impossible to find.

Problems Classifying Disability in General

References: Adler (2017), Brown (2021), Koford (2014), Kwasnik (2010).

By looking at literary, medical, and cultural warrants, we've seen how challenging it can be to select one. However, it is a worthwhile exercise, not only to pick a source of warrant when creating a classification system but also to evaluate the type of warrant that has been used in existing systems. Examination can reveal several things, including the type of bias that is implicit in that system. Any activity, like cataloguing, that involves people making a judgement is going that have some bias woven into it. As we've seen, selecting a warrant can help make those decisions less arbitrary and more evenly applied but none of them are perfectly objective. Some bias can be easy to spot and ultimately see why that it isn't a good fit to describe the disabled community. However, other types of bias are harder to see because it's part of the everyday power structures one finds in society. And that's very important to examine when classifying groups of people who have been marginalized and discriminated against, which is the case for the disabled community. It's impossible to eliminate all form of bias, but by looking for it, we can do our best to make decisions that minimize the harm we inflict on others.

While there is no perfect solution for the language used to describe disability, what is clear is that disabled people must be involved in the decision-making process in some way because it's an extremely diverse group of people and their life experiences are too complex to judge from the outside. Some disabilities are invisible, like mine, so they can't be easily perceived and can be challenging to understand. Disability can also occur suddenly or change over time, which is at odds with how classification is supposed to work because most systems assume that once a book, concept, or group of people have been given their assigned label, that's how they will be

described perpetually. But that's not how people work, which is why selecting a source of warrant and any other aspect of creating a classification system for social topics is so difficult.

So, we've come to the end of our journey. I hope you've enjoyed listening to this overview about how warrant is used in cataloguing, why it's so difficult to classify basically anything involving people, and have hopeful learned something about the disabled community in the process. If you were looking for a simple solution how to catalogue concepts related to disability, you're probably disappointed, but unfortunately that's the reality of the situation. But by exploring the messiness, I think we do a better job of understanding each other's lived experiences and ultimately will be able to come up with better solutions for classification challenges.

Thanks for joining and hope to talk to you again soon.

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