

The consequences of the heterosexual norm

How we organize and retrieve gay literature

by Anna Johansson

Librarians may exclude people accidentally. This is so because there is a widespread use of classifications and subject headings reflecting the heterosexual norm. Critical classification theory tackles this norm for the reason that it affects the retrieval of gay literature. In order to allow a reconsideration of this exclusive practice in the LIS community I challenge two main questions: Firstly, how does the heterosexual norm appear in classification systems and subject headings lists? And secondly, what are the consequences of that practice for the retrieval of gay literature?

This paper focuses on the professional practise in Swedish public libraries. If subject cataloguing prevents Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgender (LGBT) finding their literatures, then Swedish public libraries are upholders of the exclusive heterosexual norm in society.

Theory

Classification theory is about creating universal systems aiming to be objective. Despite this there are norms and prejudices in the systems (Johansson & Johansson 2005, p. 8f). Critical classification makes an effort to point this out by doing an extended analysis of the political and ideological influence on classification systems.¹

Queer theory is used to criticise the heterosexual norm. As I see it the problem with not being included in the norm, which Rosenberg expresses so well, is that the person in superior social position almost never have to explain his- or herself but the person in a non-norm position has to question his/her social belonging and also explain his- or herself to the outside world.²

Classification and indexing in Sweden

When it comes to classifying fiction in the Swedish classification system (SAB) the classification codes will merely tell us which language and form the book has, the code does not say anything about subject or genre. Therefore the key to retrieving fiction by subject lies in the fiction indexing. In 2004 the first subject headings list for indexing of fiction was published in Sweden, and the step towards controlled vocabulary (assigned-term system) in fiction indexing was taken.

The male heterosexual norm in classification and indexing

Organizing information in library catalogues has two basic functions, according to Hope A. Olson, to find known items and to gather like items.³ It seems like we are failing at our job here. Studies show that the heteronormativity in the SAB-system has been reinforced during time by being more specific when it comes to homosexuality. There is also a code for heterosexuality in the system which is hierarchically higher placed than homosexuality.⁴ Olson describes the biggest problem in subject access to be in representing the groups and subjects that does not fit in to this norm⁵. "Libraries are often asked to recommend works of fiction, but this can be hard when contents are described poorly, if at all"⁶. What separates homosexuals from other minorities according to Marianne Michelet is the difficulty to find someone to identify with.

¹ Hansson 1999

² Rosenberg 2002, p. 19

³ Olson 2002, p. 10

⁴ Johansson & Johansson 2005

⁵ Ibid. p. 15

⁶ Saarti 2000, p. 6

Most other minorities find each other on more or less visible features.⁷ Herlof Hatlebrette means that gay literature can help break this pattern of non-existence.⁸ Ericsson and Hvidén's Master's thesis *Dykes and information needs* (2003) show that both libraries and fiction are important for this group. The interviews conducted by Ericsson and Hvidén revealed that six of ten informants turned to the public library in their first search for information relating to their gay identity.⁹ Additionally, Söderman (2006) searched library catalogues for indexing terms of known gay literature finding that six out of 17 books had not been given any indexing term pointing to the homosexual characteristics of the book.¹⁰ According to Joacim Hansson marginalised, alternative subjects are included though separation in the Swedish classification system. A selection of the examples that Hansson (1999) gives on norm versus alternative are:

Norm	Alternative
Christianity	Other religions
General politics	socialism, anarchism, communism
Men	Women ¹¹

Although Hansson does not specifically apply his inclusion though separation theory on the heterosexual norm the Swedish classification system I find it relevant to do so.

Hope A. Olson (2002) makes a similar study about Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) and the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). Discussing about how "the others" in relation to the male western norm. The male/female dichotomy is noticeable in LCSH, putting men at the workplace and women in the home.¹² The tendency to separate "the others" is also apparent in DDC that shows a clear European male norm.¹³ Example of bias relative to gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, ethnicity, language and religion have been described as limitations to the representation of diversity and to effective library service for diverse populations¹⁴. The male heterosexual norm is self-evident and unspoken. One example that Söderman (2006) gives shows this clearly. When interviewing librarians about the indexing process and asking if heterosexuality could be a useful word to add to the subject heading list, they unanimously said that it would be a pointless word. Heterosexuality is implied and for example placed under sexuality.¹⁵ This gives us a pretty good idea of how strong the heterosexual norm is, in society and in organisation of information.

The Swedish subjects headings list AIS (2004) include indexing terms like lesbian love and homosexuality. These terms are crucial for finding books about these subjects. The question here is how we can find these books without including by separating "the alternative", what is seen as different, by pointing it out while we leave the norm unspoken, self-evident? Would the answer be, as Söderman (2006) suggests, starting to use heterosexuality as an indexing term?

Discussion and conclusions

When organizing information in public libraries we use classification codes and indexing terms to describe the content of the book. There are both codes and indexing terms that describe homosexuality, but descriptions of heterosexuality are fewer, implying the obviousness of it. Analysing these tools for knowledge organization and retrieval I find shortages in the systems as can be expected in a universal system which cannot possibly be as specific as a special system. But the problems with our description tools go a lot deeper than that. By manifesting a norm that among other things are male, heterosexual, Christian and west world orientated it not only exclude "the others" but also, when including the others, including them by separating them from the norm (Hansson 1999).

⁷ Michelet 1988, p. 3

⁸ Hatlebrette 1986, p. 7

⁹ Ibid. p. 40

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 23ff, 36

¹¹ Ibid p. 194-195

¹² Olson 2002, p. 155

¹³ Ibid. p. 171

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 7

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 30f.

Because SAB and AIS manifest heteronormativity, public libraries therefore become one of the institutions that help maintain heterosexuality as a normative sexuality. The heterosexual norm in the subject headings list AIS is visible mainly by lacking heterosexuality as an indexing term. It is also visible in the way it is used, interviewing librarians about indexing Söderman (2006) shows that heterosexuality is self-evident, it need not to be mentioned. What it all comes down to is the importance of securing everyone's right to information. The purpose of our public libraries is to serve the public. It is time to realise that the public is more diverse than the white, Christian, heterosexual man. Library and information science have a responsibility to proceed in this area, acknowledge the problem and bring LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) into their field of research.

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