

Methodological Aspects of Critical Theories in Knowledge Organization

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the methodological configuration of critical theories in the knowledge organization domain. We present these critical theories as a response to the ethical problems that affect particular groups in universal classification systems. We analyze the epistemological stances and methodological implications of three instances of critical theories applied to knowledge organization. As a result, we present a framework of methodological dynamics composed of three steps: 1) *aporetic*; 2) theoretical framework; and 3) proposition. We conclude that certain epistemologies (such as pragmatism) present a more developed methodology according to this framework.

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1.0 Introduction

The knowledge organization domain has incorporated a stream of authors and publications that challenge universality in knowledge organization systems and also acknowledge the influence of critical theories in the epistemological, conceptual, methodological, axiological, or even rhetorical spheres. In a broader sense, Birger Hjørland has summarized (e.g., 2009, 2013) the four main epistemological schools (classes or "families" of theories) that underlie every study as follows: empiricism, rationalism, historicism, and pragmatism. As also noted by Hjørland (2013, 173),

critical theory can be included in this classification too. Drawing from these four epistemological stances, Beak et al. (2015) have detected a correlation between epistemological stances and research methods in the articles published in some special issues of the journal *Knowledge Organization* (e.g., the special issue for *Ethics of Knowledge Organization Conference* proceedings, that arguably might presuppose a common critical sensibility), therefore suggesting that there might be some methodological choices and even dynamics that are more common in certain epistemological stances.

Historically, Foskett (1971) is considered an important milestone in the critique of library classifications such as

the *Dewey Decimal Classification*, as he raised some ethical concerns about the consequences (although not the causes) of using universal systems. However, as argued in Martínez-Ávila and Guimarães (2013), this and many other “critical” studies (critical as in critique, not necessarily as in critical theory) never abandoned a universal stance (universal as in universality, universally applicable and neutral, see for instance Olson 2002). These studies are commonly grouped together with other critical studies of classification of any nature, in spite of the disparity of methodologies. On the other hand, critical theories and the application of critical theories to knowledge organization (many times following a pragmatist or post-structuralist stance) were able to challenge universalization while allowing the strategic adoption of the point of view of a community previously “othered” by the mainstream WEBCHAM (white, ethnically European, bourgeois, Christian/protestant, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male). Examples of studies on these “others” in the KO literature include: non-white people and Critical Race Theory (e.g., Furner and Dunbar 2004, Furner 2007, Martínez-Ávila et al 2015), Africa (e.g., Amankwe 1972), non-Western languages speakers (e.g., Kua 2004), religions other than Christianity or mainstream Christianity (e.g., Afolabi 1992, Oh and Yeo 2001), LGBT and queer theory (e.g., Greenblatt 1990, 2011, Campbell 2000, 2004, Christensen 2008, 2011, de la tierra 2008, Keilty 2009, 2012a, 2012b, Adler 2009, 2012, Ornelas 2011, Martínez-Ávila et al. 2012, Pinho and Guimarães 2012, Drabinski 2013), women and feminist epistemologies (e.g., Olson 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2007, Kublik et al. 2003, Samuelsson 2010, Fox 2011, 2012, Fox and Olson 2012), etc. The critical position of such theories should include, although they do not always do so, the explicitation of the epistemological, conceptual and methodological attributes, which together form a notional framework that is symmetrically opposite to that of the theories that conceive classification systems from a universality point of view.

In this paper, we aim to discuss the methodological aspects of critical theories in classification. We conducted an analysis and characterization of the epistemological stances and methodologies of critical theories, based on three expressions of their operational concept. These methodologies, in their richest form, combine ethical, social justice-seeking, pragmatic elements/values, from the position and point of view of some social groups that are not considered by universal systems. We characterized the dynamics of the methodologies in these three examples as stages of a theoretical construction process that is revealed to be more or less developed depending on the epistemological stance.

2.0 Critical theory and post-structuralism

In the German tradition, the intellectual origins of critical theory can be traced to the Frankfurt School of social thought/critique at the Institute for Social Research founded in 1923, affiliated with the University of Frankfurt am Main. This School is usually associated with the leadership of Max Horkheimer during the 1930s, with other authors such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Wilhelm Reich, and later, Jürgen Habermas. In spite of the disparaging intellectual agendas, common characteristics of the School of Frankfurt were their neo-Marxist point of view and the characterization of positivism (Agger 1991, 109) as “the most dominant form of ideology in late capitalism in the sense that people everywhere are taught to accept the world ‘as it is,’ thus unthinkingly perpetuating it.” Related to the School of Frankfurt, although slightly later, there was a Gallic tradition of authors that are also identified with the critical theory movement, which includes Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Andre Gorz, Henry Lefebvre, and Alain Touraine. Similar to the German tradition, rough common characteristics of these authors include an influence of Marxism and the extension to the “critique of political economy” towards a broader critique of society and culture as a whole. Finally, other names commonly included together with the Frankfurt and Gallic schools of critical theory include some postmodernist and poststructuralist French authors such as Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jean-François Lyotard. These authors departed from the Marxian and Hegelian foundations of the Frankfurt School presenting as common characteristics a pluralism and inclusion of groups that have been traditionally marginalized by the hierarchical structures of power and classification, previously dividing people between the “one” and the “other” such as in black people vs. white people, women vs. men, homosexuals vs. heterosexuals, etc.

3.0 Critical theory in classification and knowledge organization systems

Critical theory in classification and other knowledge organization systems has sometimes used theoretical frameworks from these schools of philosophical, historical and sociological thought. Some applications of critical theories to knowledge organization have drawn on authors of the Frankfurt, Gallic and postmodernist/post-structuralist schools, from Habermas (e.g., Andersen and Skovvig 2006, also using Foucault) to Derrida (Olson 1997b, 2001b, 2003, Fox and Reece 2013), Foucault (e.g., Campbell 2007, 2011, Moulaison et al 2014, Martínez-Ávila and Fox 2015,

Martínez-Ávila et al. 2015), and other authors of the subsequent waves of feminist, post-colonial and other critical studies such as Hélène Cixous (e.g., Olson 1997b, 2001b), bell hooks (e.g., Olson 1998, 2001a), Homi Bhabha (e.g., Olson 2000, García-Gutiérrez 2007), Derrick Bell (e.g., Martínez-Ávila et al. 2015), Trinh T. Minh-ha (e.g., Olson 1999, 2001a), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (e.g., Campbell 2000, Christensen 2008, Keilty 2009), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (e.g., Olson 2001a, Olson, 2003, Olson and Fox 2010), among many others. These authors and theories were introduced to the knowledge organization domain to support and strengthen the responses to ethical problems (offensive terminology, misrepresentation, non-representation, etc.) in the contexts of the social groups that are not being adequately considered by universal systems, in other words, to study or represent particular approaches to knowledge organization.

In this sense, critical theories can be classified according to the particular social group they are positioned with and the conceptual framework they use to serve this group in the critique of classification systems. For a particular purpose, critical theories can be classified according to the “other,” previously marginalized by the system, to whom a voice is given. Of course, there is always the risk of considering particular “others” from a universalist position, often accompanied by a naive pretension of neutrality and ethical commitment in knowledge organization. As previously noted, this has been the case of many studies and critiques of classifications that consciously or unconsciously seek to eradicate bias from universal systems, without realizing that every system has a mainstream and margins and thus it is impossible to represent every group equally distant from the margins, because the spatial composition of a system will always be relative and dependent on the position of its components. To illustrate the different stances and possibilities in the representation of particular groups, we discuss three instances of “others” that will allow the elaboration of a framework of analysis for the identification of possible methodological dynamics in critical theories. This framework can be used as a hallmark for the evaluation of the state, depth and understanding of critical theories in classification and their application in knowledge organization.

3.1 Feminist epistemologies

Feminist epistemologies comprise a variety of approaches that, as Fox and Olson (2012, 79) have pointed out, “challenge traditional approaches to knowledge-generation, knowing, and objectivity by questioning whether those approaches are inclusive of women and women's concerns, or merely buttressing sexist claims through

methodological, theoretical or political bias.” Following Sandra Harding's *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986), feminist epistemologies can be divided into three categories: empiricist/positivist approach, standpoint approach, and poststructuralist approach, from the greatest objectivity to the greatest subjectivity in the relationship between the knowing subject (the knower) and the known object. On the objectivity extreme, the empiricist/positivist approach considers a common material and objective reality that can be studied by scientists to generate universal scientific truths. In this approach, the universal knower focuses on methodology and the neutrality of the scientific method in the quest for scientific knowledge, proving that women and men are effectively equal when the androcentric bias, particular goals and agendas, and methodological flaws are left aside. Context is rarely considered here. This approach is the one that is primarily followed in studies where bias is considered something negative that should be removed from universal classifications for the sake of neutrality and equality between women and men. In this approach, the problem is rarely considered systemic and authors do not go further studying domain-specific theories that support the point of view of the marginalized group. They would rather see those positions as an equivalent problem that is equally opposed to neutrality, i.e., another kind of bias. On the subjectivity extreme, the poststructuralist approach suggests subjective and dynamic realities that differ from one subject to another. The definitions of subjects (knowers) and knowledge are considered unstable and constructed through various forms of discourse. This stance acknowledges the existence of multiple and contextual truths, while also rejecting the idea of a universal knower and a universal knowledge. Regarding this, poststructuralist feminist authors such as Hope Olson have been very outspoken against the idea of a universal subject as a person (a knower) whom the knowledge organization system can serve universally well, such as in the assumption of a singular (and masculine) “public” that is found in classic texts on knowledge organization and library-and-information science (e.g. Olson 1997a). As an alternative, poststructuralist feminists would use theories and works that study the specific representation of women in order to construct a system that is not universal and considers the specific needs of the group.

3.2 Queer theory

Queer theory (Browne and Nash 2010, 5) “challenges the normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities along the heterosexual/homosexual binary as well as the privileging of heterosexuality as ‘natural’ and homosexuality as its deviant and abhorrent ‘other.’” In order to

avoid a positivist trap, queer theory is commonly acknowledged to be an unstable, unclear, fluid, multiple and ever-shifting label, although it is sometimes mixed and studied together with other areas such as gender studies, women studies, men's studies, masculinities studies, LGTBI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, and Intersexual) studies, etc. for strategic reasons. In spite of the similarities, queer studies and these other labels are not considered the same thing. For instance, as Drabinski (2013, 93) pointed out, lesbian and gay studies have been concerned with a recuperative action of these identities in history, while queer theory has argued that this recuperative approach is dangerous because it freezes identities in time and universalizes them, erasing the real differences that accompany same-sex sexuality on the scales of time and place. These epistemological differences between labels can also affect their methodological dimension, as queer theory seems to be more aligned with post-structuralist positions than others. As Drabinski also stressed (96), while gender and sexual identities are the object of study in lesbian and gay studies, queer theory is more interested in how those identities come discursively and socially into being. In this vein, queer scholarship has extensively recognized and used the work of post-structuralist authors such as Foucault more concerned with the "how" than the "what." On the other hand, as Browne and Nash have pointed out (2010, 5), not everyone in the community is enamored with queer theory's deconstructive tendencies. As an example, Campbell (2000, 127-9) discusses different binarisms present in queer theory, for the context of a community-based system of subject access based on sexual orientation, including the essentialist views vs. constructivist views of homosexuality ("homosexuality as a permanent, unchanging reality vs. homosexuality as the construction of specific historical forces and contexts"), and minoritizing views vs. universalizing views ("homosexuality as the lifestyle of a minority of the human community, vs. homosexuality as a concept with universal implications for everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation"). Christensen reviewed this minoritization vs. universalization tension, in the context of the Library of Congress *Classification* and other knowledge organization systems, as an issue of marked and unmarked representation (2008, 236):

The minoritizing view calls for marked representation, terminology and hierarchical structure that draw attention to difference, making the part stand out from the whole. The universalizing view, on the other hand, calls for unmarked representation, terminology and hierarchical structure that don't call attention to differences, emphasizing instead the unified whole.

Christensen also concluded that, in the end, it is a matter of which facets are highlighted and ignored in the system (i.e., sexuality and gender). As for the different stances within the community, Campbell has suggested that "if the gay community is split between two concepts of survival -integration into a universal whole and separation into a visible minority- then a classification system will have to negotiate that split," while Christensen noted, on the other hand (p. 237), that scientific publications in the domain lean to the minoritization, i.e., non-universal, view (such as the *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, and *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*).

3.2 Critical race theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a movement that according to Delgado and Stefancic (2001, 2) comprises "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power." Although CRT was born within the field of legal studies, it is claimed by Delgado and Stefancic (p. 4-5) to be related to other movements including radical feminism, European philosophers and theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Jacques Derrida (i.e., classical critical theory-poststructuralism-postmodernism), the American radical tradition exemplified by figures such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Power and Chicano movements of the sixties and early seventies. Among the characteristics of CRT, Jonathan Furner (2007, 143) identifies a triple commitment: an ethical commitment to social justice, a methodological commitment to radical action of both intellectual and physical kind and an epistemological commitment to the social construction of concepts such as race, combined with an ontological commitment to the reality of populations such as the races. Indeed, although the concept of race cannot be maintained from a biological or genetic point of view (i.e., by no means can it be considered real), the concept of racism is very real in those cases in which people are being socially discriminated against on the basis of a perceived or aggregated physiological feature. In those cases of racism people are labeled a "race" that groups them with other individuals (or even by themselves to explain those social acts of discrimination). As Delgado and Stefancic put it (2001, 7), "races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient." On the other hand, an epistemological tension has been reported in the legal sphere (Bell 1995, 899) that Angela Harris characterized as between its commitment to radical critique of the law (which is normatively deconstructionist) and its commitment to radical

emancipation by the law (which is normatively reconstructionist). In spite of this report by one of the fathers of the movement, from our point of view, these two positions should not necessarily be mutually exclusive or contradictory, but rather two sequential stages that can indeed go together in some cases. Among the methodological characteristics of CRT as listed by Derrick Bell (1995, 899), are the frequent use of the first person, storytelling, narrative, allegory, interdisciplinary treatment (of law), and the unapologetic use of creativity. Many of these methods serve the purpose of challenging the positivist and rationalist claims of value-neutral science in the academia, from where non-white people have been traditionally excluded.

4.0 Methodological aspects of critical theories in classification

The methodological sphere of critical theories applied to classification systems is positioned at a point that acknowledges: the influence of theoretical frameworks derived from philosophical and social movements; knowledge classification systems as part of the activity focus of knowledge organization; and the perception of ethical *aporias* (“*aporia*,” problematic aspect), such as prejudices, omissions, hegemonies and systematic disregard of idiosyncrasies in universal systems. The underlying dynamics of the methodological framework of critical theories can begin with the finding of a problem, then the search of theoretical schools of thought that create a framework to support an antithetical response to the option presented by the universal system, and finally the proposition of a response that synthesizes the ethical, theoretical and classification elements. This is a response to the inadequacy of the system to address and represent the ethical aspects of the knowledge to be organized, and whose elements are disregarded by the universal classification. Provided this, it is possible to infer a dynamic methodological framework for critical theories that begins with: 1) an *aporetic* step of finding an inadequacy in the representation of knowledge in the context of a given social group in a classification system; 2) a consciously theoretical step which actively seeks input on schools of thought that consider this social group from different points of view (philosophical, historical and sociological); and 3) a propositive step that presents an antithetical response to the ethical *aporia* found at the first stage of the process.

For instance, in the case of feminist epistemologies, the *aporetic* stage would correspond to the perception of misrepresentation of women in the conceptual schemes of the classification system (and the gnosological foundations of those schemes), something that can be detected and studied while adopting any epistemological

stance; the consciously theoretical step would be present mainly in those cases that adopt stances other than positivism or empiricism, as authors acknowledge the existence of differences between women and men and therefore research the literature for specific theories on the representation of the group; the propositive step would be present in those cases that propose a solution for the problem that is different from the problem itself, i.e., acknowledge that universality/ neutrality is the problem and therefore do not propose a “universal” solution. In this vein, it could be argued, for instance, that positivist studies do not propose an antithetical response to any position *per se* as they hold and seek the value of neutrality (that it is paradoxically a position in itself but it is not recognized as such, and thus the goals of the privileged group are not recognized). In the case of queer theory, the theoretical and propositive steps would be arguably better articulated in the minoritizing view, where researchers are more likely to consider and research on the specific representation and characteristics of the community, looking for theories in the literature to support the representation of the group. As for the CRT, the propositive step would be more obvious in the radical emancipative approach, where an antithetical response is clearly stated.

5.0 Conclusions

We identified three steps in the methodological dynamics of critical theories in classification and knowledge organization: *aporetics*, theoretical framework and proposition. Certain epistemologies in the critical studies (such as pragmatist positions) seem to be more likely to present a methodological dynamic that is more developed or that presents all the steps. Critical studies adopting other stances might skip the propositive or consciously theoretical steps. Thus, it might be possible to conclude that there is a correlation between approaches that challenge universality in classification, and fully-developed methodological dynamics in the application of critical theories. The ethical-theoretical-pragmatist component of these fully developed methodological aspects also reveals an ontological basis in the universal classifications that assume a double objectivity: in the knowledge to be organized, and in the categories used to classify that knowledge. Thus we observe a contrast between the methodological dynamics of critical theories and the logic of building universal classifications, as the latter seeks to reflect characteristics of knowledge that are considered objective and neutral, while critical theories should, in their most developed form, reflect an ethical-theoretical stance that challenges that neutrality.

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