Indians in the Database: Student Relationships with Subject Headings

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Abstract

The goal of this exploratory research study is to better understand how students in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta relate to terminology for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, namely "Indian", in controlled vocabulary subject headings. The language used in controlled vocabularies to describe resources about Indigenous Peoples does not always reflect terms Indigenous Peoples use to describe themselves, leading to a disconnect between users and subject headings. Although this issue is beginning to enter academic discourse, to date no research study has examined how students react to this issue. In this study, interviews were conducted with five students from the Faculty of Native Studies to better understand how they relate to terminology. Students reported feeling uncomfortable at being forced to use language they saw as racist or insensitive. Future research should be conducted to better understand student relationships with subject headings, particularly at different institutions.

Keywords: Critical cataloguing; Indians of North America; Library services for Indigenous Peoples; Subject headings; Indigenous Peoples in Canada

I n Canada, there are multiple different terms used to describe Indigenous Peoples with varied degrees of acceptability. An individual may prefer the term Indigenous, Aboriginal, Native, Indian, or prefer to identify with a particular nation or community. Further complicating this issue, institutionally accepted terminology has shifted over time. I will be using the term "Indigenous", which is a generally accepted blanket term that encompasses First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, however at the time of writing this article the term "Indians of North America" continues to be an officially used and

recognized subject heading in many libraries across Canada. Although existing literature speaks to the complicated logistics of subject heading alterations, to date no study has sought to understand how students relate to the terminology used for Indigenous Peoples in subject headings. As one of the primary users of the academic library catalogue, student voices represent a crucial missing element to ongoing discourse around responsible cataloguing practices.

I chose to conduct a qualitative study grounded in an Indigenous methodological framework and aligned broadly with the goals of radical cataloguing. The goal of this exploratory study was to better understand how students in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta relate to subject headings for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The purpose of this study is not to create a list of proposed changes to subject heading terminology, something that is beyond the scope of the particular study; rather, I hope to elevate the previously missing voices of students to help contextualize future alterations to subject headings. It is equally important to note that this exploratory study is not meant to offer generalizable findings, rather it highlights only the relationships that five students have with terminology for Indigenous Peoples found in the University of Alberta library catalogue. It is my hope that this paper acts as a catalyst for future research that engages in critical cataloguing alongside students. In this paper, I will highlight the findings of these interviews.

Before beginning, I want first want to situate myself in this conversation. I am Métis born in Métis Region 3, Treaty Six territory. The impetus for this research was born from my own discomfort with the term "Indian", therefore I inevitably carry my own convictions and biases into this study. In accordance with an Indigenous methodological framework, I acknowledge that I am decidedly not objective, but instead approach this topic in a way that allows me to engage with student participants from an honest and open perspective.

Literature Review

I want to begin my acknowledging work that has influenced this research. Some institutions have already begun to examine their terminology critically, although this is not yet widespread in Canadian University libraries. In the final report of the University of Alberta Libraries Decolonizing Description Working Group (2017), the group notes:

It is vital that all of our users can see themselves appropriately and respectfully represented in our metadata records, yet the fact that this is not always the case, in particular with the use of standard vocabularies in describing Indigenous peoples and contexts, is well documented. (p. 1)

At the University of Saskatchewan, Indigenous librarian Deborah Lee chose to conduct surveys with librarians and other academics at various Indigenous-focused conferences to better understand their relationships to subject headings for Indigenous Peoples in Canada (Lee, 2011). Lee (2011) notes the general discomfort with existing terminology, as no survey respondent wished to maintain the current terminology. However, Lee further notes that a consensus option for a universal subject heading thesaurus is impossible, and consequently institutions should be responsible for creating their own thesauri that reflect their users. Other institutions across Canada have been involved in creating or modifying Indigenous knowledge organization systems, including Red River College and the University of British Columbia (Cameron, 2020; Doyle et al., 2015).

This research sits within the broader field of critical cataloguing. Emily Drabinski, a key figure in this movement, speaks to this topic in her essay "Teaching the Radical Catalog" (Drabinski, 2008). This approach emphasizes elevating communities who were previously disempowered by traditional cataloguing rules by showing the user the inner workings of the library catalogue, thereby allowing them to advocate for changes they feel are important (Drabinski, 2008). Similarly, Lember et al. (2008) state "radical cataloging seeks to give a voice to people and concepts that are difficult to access through library subject searches" (p. 1). Critical cataloguing is not limited to engaging with race, but also gender, sexuality, and other limitations found in traditional cataloguing (Adler, 2017; Adler & Tennis, 2013; Berman, 1993; Hasenstab, 2008; Olson, 2002).

This line of reasoning has direct ties with Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a connection Drabinski (2008) notes in her article. She argues the current paradigm of librarian-user is similar to the teacher-student view in Freire's work (Drabinski, 2008; Freire, 1983). In attempting to engage the user in the inner workings of the library catalogue the user is able to advocate for themselves. Freire (1983) writes "[the radical] does not consider himself the proprietor of history or of men, or the

liberator of the oppressed; but he does commit himself, within history, to fight at their side" (p.24), a statement which has much in common with the goals of radical cataloguing. In working alongside the user, the radical cataloguer gives that user the tools to engage in praxis and thereby shift the paradigm from one of paternalism to one that engages in problem-solving alongside the user.

There is ample discussion in the literature about the complex work of large-scale alterations to bibliographic records, with many case studies offering the perspectives of different libraries around the world that are grappling with Indigenous subject access (Bone & Lougheed, 2018; Doyle et al., 2015; Lee, 2011; Parent, 2015; Rigby, 2015). Rigby (2015) speaks to the many complexities of altering library metadata practices in relation to the Nunavut library system. Although Inuktitut and syllabics were incorporated into their system, the article highlights both the complexity and the ongoing challenges those changes entailed (Rigby, 2015).

Similarly, there are numerous examples of ways cataloguing has been used to support fundamental changes to the library in support of Indigenous users (Doyle et al., 2015; Leonhardt, 2018; Lougheed et al., 2015; Rigby, 2015, Sandy & Bossaler, 2017). Lougheed et al. (2015) state that a key aspect of decolonizing information centres is to replace the "sameness of universality with the concepts of diversity, complementarities, flexibility, and equity or fundamental fairness" (p. 606), although it should be noted the authors were referring to an archive and not a library. Regardless, this speaks to a potential fundamental overhaul to current library organization structures that respectfully altering subject headings could entail. Altering subject headings should consequently be a key part of any institution looking to improve relationships with Indigenous students.

Finally, it is critical to note that no author examined in this literature review sought feedback from Indigenous students; it is this gap which this research hopes to begin to fill. Understanding how Indigenous students relate to subject headings which they view as racist or insensitive will be an important first step in determining how best to alter problematic terminology still found in subject headings.

Methods

Methodology

I chose to ground my research in an Indigenous methodological framework that centers relationships and reciprocity. The methodology for this study was heavily influenced by *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* by Shawn Wilson (2008), and *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* by Margaret Kovach (2009). In particular, this quote from Shawn Wilson (2008) has defined my approach to research: "the shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality (relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality)." (p.7).

My goal throughout this project was to build and maintain reciprocal relationships with research participants. If a researcher is to engage in good faith with Indigenous Peoples, the researcher must be prepared to adopt their methods to better support an Indigenous epistemology (Datta, 2018; Howarth & Knight, 2015; Kovach, 2009; Roy, 2015; Wilson, 2008). Datta (2018) argues that many western research methodologies can be adapted to better fit an Indigenous worldview, however the researcher must remain cognisant of the many power dynamics at play, especially as a researcher operating in a colonial institution conducting research with Indigenous Peoples. Wilson (2008) similarly notes that Indigenous research must be based in the relationship between researcher and participants. Indigenous researchers must therefore keep their relationship to the community in mind, whoever that may entail, ensuring the participants have the opportunity to benefit from the results (Datta, 2018; Howarth & Knight, 2015; Lougheed et al., 2015).

Recruitment

I opted to recruit students from the Faculty of Native Studies, specifically from the Fall 2019 class of NS290: Introduction to Research and Inquiry. The Faculty of Native Studies was chosen because I was confident the students there would have frequently encountered, and thus developed some form of relationship with, the subject headings used for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. I approached the instructor of NS290 to ensure they were comfortable with the goals of my research and gave a short recruitment pitch during one of their classes. I chose to recruit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous

students, a decision that was not made lightly. Ultimately, I felt it would be important to understand the relationships that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students have with the term "Indian", however I do not want to imply that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students would offer the same responses, nor that they approach this issue from the same background.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study I opted to conduct semi-structured active interviews, a decision that was motivated by a number of different factors. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) note that semi-structured active interviews allow the student participants to guide aspects of the conversation and direct the line of questioning where they chose. In accordance with Indigenous methodologies and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this stresses that meaning making is a collaborative process between myself and the participant (Freire, 1983; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

Students had the option of either being named in the study or to remain confidential. I wanted to recognize the students who chose to participate for their time and emotional labour, however it was also important that students had the option of remaining confidential, as the topic was personal and had the potential of evoking traumatic language. Students had the option of altering their decision up until the submission of this article, in recognition that students may decide later that they do not want their names associated with particular responses. Three students opted to be named: Wil Fraser, Carry Perrier, and Calista Strijack. I will specifically name these students when referring to their responses. The other two students opted to remain anonymous, therefore when including their responses I will simply refer to them as "students".

Although I prepared various conversation prompts, allowing the students to direct the interview process was critical. Data were collected in November 2019, with interviews conducted in meeting rooms booked at the University of Alberta Library. All interviews were conducted by myself, and each lasted roughly one hour. During the interviews students were asked a variety of questions relating to their own experiences and relationships with subject headings and the library more broadly, with the goal of

understanding the effect that subject heading terminology had on their experiences in the library.

After interviews were conducted, all five interviews were transcribed verbatim in separate word documents. Transcripts were sent to the respective students, giving them an opportunity to review the conversation and correct any errors in my transcription. These transcripts were then uploaded into MAXQDA for coding. Transcripts were coded according to themes that emerged in the interview, with a particular focus on relationships and emotional responses.

Results

"Indian" as a Term

All five students reported feeling various degrees of discomfort with the term "Indian". When asked to identify subject headings that they viewed as problematic, four students directly listed "Indians of North America", and while Wil did not directly state "Indians of North America", he did speak about the term "Indian":

> "For me, growing up, my parents were in the residential schools so most of my youth before school was in the residential school, so I heard and saw the term Indian all the time but I was brought up knowing that that's who I was right? So that term, at the beginning, was okay. Because that's who I was. Over the years, like, more recently than when I was younger, it started to become, like, kind of offensive, understanding that that was a mistaken name given to us."

I directly asked students the terminology that they use when speaking or writing about Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Students had different relationships with different terms, and there was no consensus best option. Calista said:

> "I usually use the word Indigenous or First Nations depending on the professor's preference or if they refer to Indigenous people as "Indigenous" I use that word, if they refer to them as "First Nations" I use that word mainly 'cause that's what you usually are comfortable with, but I won't use anything else. Or I usually don't even like to say First Nations or Indigenous I'd rather like, if I know a specific person or I'm talking about a specific tribe I just use the tribe's name, or who the person identifies as".

Wil answered: "And Aboriginal, never felt comfortable with the term Aboriginal, to me it's always been like Australia, right? And I get we're both Indigenous people but we're... like that term to me is offensive". Later, in response to the same question, he said: "I'm comfortable with Indigenous I'm comfortable with Nehiyaw. Indian I don't - it's not offensive when… when it's me personally, because that's how I was brought up, but when I see or hear non-Indigenous people using the term then it is offensive". When asked if they felt any relationship with the term "Indian", Calista said: "no, not at all. I kind of separate myself from that because, I feel like, as Indigenous people we are always making that step to decolonize ourselves, and when we use those words it's like, we're taking ourself a few steps back". One student reported:

> "I feel like it's definitely a negative relationship. I've… definitely heard it being used, kind of… I've seen it being used in a very negative context through, like, the studies I've done even before coming to post-secondary, as well as the relationship to the Indian Act. In my mind they're kind of… when I hear Indian I also think, kind of Indian Act and so those historical issues related to legislation and that kind of come up in my mind too, and so I wouldn't say-- yeah I would definitely say it's negative".

Some students did recognize potential pitfalls in altering terminology. One student said "it might make it more difficult if, if I'm searching our library versus like, a library source from a different country or like, even I know that UBC uses a different library system", although they later noted "but if that means that people get recognized appropriately then it's worth the work". Carry said "I understand that some people that haven't been educated might still use these terms, people not in Native Studies for example. So they might use those terms but I don't think that they should… that doesn't mean they have to be subject headings". A different student noted that keeping "Indian" as a term will actually make things more difficult:

> "I think that it's actually-- would be the opposite, because as we move-- as society kind of moves further and further away from using terms like Indian or other, kind of negative terms to refer to Indigenous Peoples it won't come up as much to think to look at that outside of maybe a legal context where you're looking at, you know, Status or the Indian act or things like that. So I think as we

move towards more inclusive language or more language that is informed by how people actually want to be identified, I think, yeah using Indian makes less and less sense instead of making it easier."

Ultimately, students recognized that issues relating to terminology are inherently complex without simple solutions. In one question, I asked the students how they responded to a potential argument that "Indian" is kept in the catalogue because "Status Indian" remains a legal term in Canada. Wil answered:

"I get that... It's only kind of now and more recently that the Indigenous people are speaking up and saying you know that's not the proper way to direct us so, I get that's how the... the settler angle is that they're using what they know as well from the past but I, I also expect that they're gonna eventually change the wording to suit this day."

Along similar lines, Calista shared:

"Yeah, so I don't think that's okay, mainly 'cause it's clear that they're not just using it in a historical context. It's more like 'okay I don't want to change my way of thinking' and as a University I feel like we're always trying to make steps to be more inclusive and stuff, so why aren't we changing our library catalogues? I understand it's a lot of work, but I mean… it's kind of just life, you know?"

Effect on Students

Several questions asked the students how they reacted when encountering the term "Indian". One student said: "firstly the use of the word Indian has a very traumatic historical context and for me whenever I hear that I kind of flinch a little bit, even just in my mind". When I asked the same student if they felt the same when seeing it in the catalogue, they said:

"Yeah, just kind of seeing it I think… you know kind of "oof", like it's... kind of a sore spot and then when I hear it in conversation kind of feel the same way that it's just a term that I, obviously as someone who's not Indigenous don't feel personally, but with my understanding and like, my knowledge of historical traumas it's something that still upsets me a little bit, and makes me feel… yeah".

I asked Carry how they felt when coming across the term "Indian" in the catalogue, they simply stated: "Yeah I don't… I don't like it. And I really like it even less when I actually have to use it to find what I need". When asked the same question, Calista reported feeling:

> "…pretty shitty because it's just not a professional term and it's a very dated term, but the problem is that in the United States they still recognize the term Indian as appropriate so when you go to the States, like often times that's the word used, but… I understand it from that standpoint, but we aren't in America and it's really, really offensive, especially because we're on treaty six land and that word should usually, in my opinion, never be brought up unless it's used in a historical context or in quotation marks".

In one section of the interview related to familiarity with the catalogue, Calista reported no longer using the University of Alberta Library:

> "I personally don't like using the library catalogue. I use IPortal, you've probably heard of it 'cause it-- I find it's a bit more of a safer place to be than the library catalogue because when I go through the library catalogue I find a lot of terms like Indian, and then I always still find it kind of complicated because if you search up-- like when you have to search up racist terms to find your information… it's like 'why should I ever have to be typing this?'"

Near the end of the interviews I asked the students if changing library terminology would affect their research process. Calista responded:

> "I think it would because it's prevented-- I know personally myself and a lot of other of my friends who have just stopped using the library catalogues in general because we feel like it's not a safe place and a lot of us have traumas so, it's not a safe place to research so we have to go to other places, and that's not inclusive. Like if a person that is paying the fees to attend school can't access the library catalogues because they don't feel safe to use them then how is that fair?".

Student-Offered Solutions

Although I did not ask questions related to potential solutions, three students independently offered similar solutions. One student said: "It'd be cool if you could work

it where if you typed in something where you could check a box or could automatically search other similar topics without you having to physically type it in."

Wil spoke to something similar, saying: "I don't know, it's… there's gotta be a way, like to, to use the new terminology but somehow link the old words so that it all comes up under one heading". Finally, Cary said: "I don't know if the university can do any kind of redirect for subject headings so they don't have to have them labeled as such, but if somebody searches they can get redirected".

Analysis

From this small number of interviews, a number of insights can be gleamed. First, students appear to be genuinely interested in better understanding cataloguing rules. The five students I spoke to were all grateful to be exposed to the catalogue through NS290. The relationships these students have with the catalogue are not solely born out of frustrated ignorance, rather they have a solid understanding of how to shape cataloguing practices to better meet their information needs. Partnerships between libraries and students, such as the one created by the class of NS290, can provide excellent opportunities for students to impact the library to better suit their information needs. Mobilizing student engagement could offer a powerful tool in future subject heading alterations.

There was also widespread understanding that altering terminology is a complex process, and that identity is an inherently personal and equally complex topic. While there was no agreed-upon best term, the use of Indigenous appears to offer a commonly accepted option. Although many students expressed a desire to be more specific if possible, no student stated that they felt uncomfortable with the term Indigenous. This is particularly noteworthy, given that "Indigenous Peoples" is already an accepted subject heading in Library of Congress Subject Headings.

Students reacted differently to encountering the term "Indian" in the library. Most adapted their search strategies to include the term "Indian", however the students stated they were unhappy when forced to do so. Other students, such as Calista, reported that the continued use of "Indian" actively pushed them away from using the University of Alberta Library catalogue, instead choosing to search using the IPortal at the University of Saskatchewan. Students like Calista are left wondering why their tuition supports a

library that asks them to search using terminology they feel is racist to describe themselves. While there are ongoing efforts to change terminology, on its own this offers little reassurance to students.

Finally, students independently offered possible solutions to existing issues around terminology. Students were hopeful that cataloguers could find some way to hide problematic terminology from the user, while keeping these outdated terms attached to the record. These students are aware that alterations may affect findability of resources and were invested in mitigating any associated disruptions. Such an option would mean users would still find the information they needed, however the term "Indian" would no longer be visible as a subject heading while searching the catalogue.

Limitations

It is important to note the various limitations inherent in this study. As I mentioned previously, rather than attempt to appear neutral I have embraced my own biases in this study. Consistent with my methodological approach, I recognize that any attempt to be bias-free would at best be disingenuous and at worst detrimental to my results. It is also possible that students who agreed to be interviewed held stronger than average opinions on subject headings. As students were the ones to contact me there is no way of knowing if their relationships with terminology are reflective of the rest of the NS290 class.

Future Research

As this was an exploratory study in which only five interviews were conducted, generalizable conclusions cannot and should not be drawn. Indeed, generalizability may be impossible with such a study. A future research project could include a larger number of interviews or include students from different faculties, potentially allowing for more rigorous conclusions to be drawn, however even then caution should be advised. Indigenous research is not intended to be generalizable but is instead focused on productive action targeted in a particular area (Wilson, 2008). To better understand how a particular community relates to terminology, different institutions would be better served in conducting their own studies, which could provide a valuable area for future research.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated support among the students interviewed that subject headings for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, namely "Indians of North America", need to be changed. Although terminology for Indigenous Peoples remains a complex and dynamic issue, the continued use of "Indian" forces students to contend with various issues. While some students are able to incorporate terms they see as racist or insensitive into their search strategies, others feel so strongly they opt instead to conduct their searches elsewhere. In both cases, there is clear evidence that subject headings are acting as a barrier to research.

In adopting the framework of Indigenous centred critical cataloguing, this research has attempted to critically engage with these issues alongside students. Including the voices of students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, represents an important step in library cataloguing practices. Although the objective of this study was not to draw generalizable conclusions, the adoption of local thesauri for individual institutions may offer one potential solution to the inherent complexity of cataloguing identity. This would allow different libraries to engage with local Indigenous communities and decide for themselves the most appropriate terms to adopt. In the interim, hiding terminology students identified as racist, such as "Indian", from the user may allow Indigenous users to once again feel comfortable using the library catalogue.

Students are among the most important stakeholders in the university library, however to date their voices have not been included in literature on the topic of Indigenous subject headings. This represents a crucial missing piece in ensuring that subject headings are altered in a respectful and culturally appropriate manner. As is evident in these interviews, at best a failure to adjust subject heading terminology leaves students feeling deeply uncomfortable; at worst it drives students away. Relationships with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are being damaged, and only through targeted action that includes and supports the voices of students can we begin to address these issues.

Conflict of Interest Statement

None declared.

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