

Diversity Monitoring in the Library: Categorisation Practices and the Exclusion of LGBTQ Library Users

Kevin Guyan, University of Glasgow, Scotland

Abstract

The collection of data about the identity characteristics of library users is the latest development in a long history of contested categorisation practices. In this article, I highlight how the collection of data about lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people has implications for the undertaking of diversity monitoring exercises in academic and public libraries. Based on experiences in the United Kingdom, I argue that recuperative efforts to ‘fix’ categorisation practices are not enough and overlook how categories of gender, sex and sexuality are constructed through the practice of diversity monitoring, how categories are positioned in time and space, and who is involved in decision-making about who to include and exclude from the category of ‘LGBTQ’.

To encourage those working in the field to uncover and challenge the shortcomings of traditional approaches to categorisation, I conclude with six practical considerations for information professionals engaged in the collection of gender, sex and sexuality data. My critical account of diversity monitoring practices is not a question of (further) politicising the library nor simply a question of doing the right thing; an overhaul of categorisation practices, so that they meaningfully recognise the lives and experiences of people from minoritised groups, is central to the survival of libraries.

Keywords: categorisation practices; data; LGBTQ; libraries; queer

Publication Type: conceptual article

Introduction

Categorisation practices divide the world into groups that are exclusive, discrete and immutable, with each group containing items that are similar in some way (Jacob, 2004). To establish the group where an item belongs, categorisation practices identify and mark commonalities and differences among whatever is under review and present an account of the social world where ideas are frozen in time and space. Within the context of the library, categorisation practices (and the associated field of classification practices) help establish order and enable users to find materials within collections. In this article, I examine how approaches to the categorisation of items in a library collection provide insights into the use of diversity monitoring exercises to make sense of the identities of individuals who use (and do not use) library services. My particular focus is the collection of data about gender, sex, and sexuality as it relates to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people and the use of academic and public libraries in the U.K.¹ Data collection activities might include the use of diversity monitoring forms to capture information about individuals’ sexual orientation and/or

trans/gender identity, for example as part of the library registration process or during the evaluation of library services.

Through an examination of the context and background of categorisation practices in the library, I problematise the view that ‘more data’ or ‘more detailed data’ about LGBTQ people will improve the provision of library services. In place of a congratulatory account of data’s role in advancing equality and inclusion, I describe how data practices can also entrench ideas about identity categories that are harmful, particularly among LGBTQ people. To improve approaches to diversity monitoring, I conclude with a survey of good practice for information professionals engaged in the collection of gender, sex and sexuality data. Although the power of information professionals to overhaul existing ways of working are often limited, my account challenges the assumed benefits of ‘being counted’ and instead positions the expanded roll-out of diversity monitoring exercises in a broader landscape that interrogates the outcomes they aim to achieve, who stands to benefit the most and ultimately asks the question ‘who counts?’

What is Known about LGBTQ Library Users in the U.K.?

The term LGBTQ is historically and contextually specific. A diversity of actions, desires, and identities sit under this umbrella term with links to colonial legacies of legal, medical, and scientific practices (for example, it is possible to trace contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality in some Caribbean countries to the influence of British colonial rule). My account of data about LGBTQ people is therefore explicitly narrow and focused on a particular manifestation of ideas about gender, sex and sexuality in the U.K. since the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010.² The collection of data about LGBTQ people in the U.K. is among the most comprehensive in the world. For example, national censuses in 2021 and 2022 collect data about the sexual orientation and trans/gender identity of respondents aged 16 and over for the first time (Guyan, 2021).³ National censuses follow research conducted by the Office for National Statistics in 2016, which estimated that 2.5% of the U.K. population aged 16 or above identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or a sexual orientation ‘Other’ than heterosexual (LGBO) (GEO, 2018). The U.K. Government Equalities Office has also estimated that between 200,000 and 500,000 trans people live in the U.K.⁴

Although an increasing amount of data is collected on the lives and experiences of LGBTQ people, much remains unknown about specific topics such as the use and experience of libraries. When we consider academic libraries, higher education institutions collect and return data on the sexual orientation and gender identity of students to the Higher Education Statistics Agency on an annual basis. In the 2018-19 academic year, among institutions that returned data, 6.3% of students described their sexual orientation as ‘Gay man’, ‘Gay woman/lesbian’, ‘Bisexual’ or ‘Other’ (23.3% of respondents refused to provide this information or left the question blank) (Advance HE, 2020). In terms of trans and gender diverse students, 0.8% of students described their gender identity as ‘Different from that assigned at birth’ (19% of respondents refused to provide this information or left the question blank) (Advance HE, 2020). Although we cannot say to what extent this data provides a demographic picture of library usage among LGBTQ students, it seems likely that LGBTQ students constitute a sizeable minority of academic library users and are proportionally greater than the profile of LGBTQ people in national-level data.

Outside of higher education, data on the use of libraries among LGBTQ people is patchier. In Scotland, the annual Social Attitudes Survey disaggregated responses by sexual orientation in 2018 and reported that 72.2% of heterosexual respondents were ‘Very or fairly satisfied’ with

the provision of council library services, compared to 67.8% of LGBO respondents (Scottish Government, 2018). However, due to the relatively small number of LGBO respondents in the sample (300) and the high degree of error (8.8 +/- for LGBO respondents) we cannot say much from these findings.

Even without comprehensive data on the scale or experiences of LGBTQ library users, scholars have explored the importance of libraries in the lives of LGBTQ people. For example, Oltmann (2016) has investigated the library as a site to advance the safety and acceptance of LGBTQ young people, while Vincent (2015) has documented initiatives in public libraries such as LGBT History Month and the weaving of LGBTQ content into mainstream library provision. This article goes deeper and interrogates who is the intended beneficiary of these initiatives and to what extent they presuppose an LGBTQ subject. Improvements to the collection of diversity monitoring data will enable libraries to better assess who they currently reach, the effectiveness of ongoing initiatives and provide an evidence base to expand, make changes or stop practices that are not working. However, as this article explores, the capture of data on LGBTQ library users is contested and any expansion of categorisation practices brings the risk of further excluding individuals who already find themselves on the margins of library provision.

Queering Categorisation Practices in the Library

Bowker & Star's (1999) influential work *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences* described how 'classification systems are often sites of political and social struggles' that are hidden from view as 'politically and socially charged agendas are often first presented as purely technical' (p. 196). In the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars in the field of information studies began to challenge assumptions of neutrality associated with categorisation practices and the catalogue's function as more than simply a representation of what is contained within a collection. Olson (2001) observed, 'Naming information is the special business of librarians and information professionals' and that 'in our role as "neutral" intermediaries between users and information, our theories, models, and descriptions are as presumptuous and controlling as scientists' construction and containment of nature' (p. 639). Commenting on the work of Olson, Nowak & Mitchell (2016) describe a growing acknowledgement that categorisation systems 'incorporate their originating society's assumptions and norms into the very structure' and 'tend to assume that there is one uniform way of viewing the world, which excludes anyone who does not agree with or fit within that viewpoint' (p. 1).

Efforts to respond to these criticisms tended to focus on the design of library categorisation systems, such as Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress. For example, the Dewey Decimal system has historically categorised materials related to LGBTQ people under subject headings including 'Mental derangements (132)', 'Sexual inversion (159)', 'Neurological disorders (616)' and 'Social problems (363)' (Robinson, 2020). Actions have included the addition or relocation of subject headings to better represent LGBTQ topics, although the ongoing use of subject headings such as 'Sexual relations (306)' is not without problems as it continues to foreground the sexual dimension of LGBTQ lives. Attempts to revise categorisation systems have undoubtedly helped address some of the moralistic assumptions about LGBTQ lives and experiences, yet the recuperation of existing systems has ultimately failed to solve the problem of meaningful LGBTQ inclusion in the catalogue. Although topics related to LGBTQ people are now better represented, these efforts did not challenge or unsettle underlying structures that held in place particular ideas about gender, sex and sexuality. Drabinski (2013) has noted that recuperative actions do not queer the catalogue but further entrench the validity of categorisation practices that are

incompatible with the fluidity and diversity of queer lives. Mirroring the views of Critical Race Theorists on structural change and racial justice, efforts to fix the catalogue tend to explain problems as the fault of individuals who make bad decisions rather than something built-into the system they are attempting to fix.⁵ As Drabinski (2013) observes, ‘While this work has been productive, its emphasis on correctness locates the problem of knowledge organization systems too narrowly as the domain of catalogers themselves’ (p. 95).

Drabinski traces this oversight to a broader and longer-term tension in LGBTQ scholarship between those who look to uncover identities in existing structures, described by some as ‘Lesbian and gay studies’, and those who seek to examine how structures affect the construction of identities. In the discipline of history, for example, rather than searching to locate identities excluded from traditional retellings of the past, queer theorists such as David Halperin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sought to investigate how gay and lesbian identities were constituted in different temporal and spatial contexts. In the discipline of history and beyond, a queer approach questions the presumptions, values, and viewpoints that position some topics in the centre and some on the margins (Dilley, 1999), the presentation of topics related to LGBTQ lives and experiences as ‘abnormal’ (Zosky & Alberts, 2016), and embraces an ambivalent attitude toward categories (Pascoe, 2018). When applied to the work of information professionals, a queer approach introduces a tension between dividing the world into categories, which serve as a basis for action, and resistance to classificatory efforts. In addition, recuperative (or *non-queer*) efforts to ‘fix’ categorisation systems—through the addition or relocation of subject headings—represent a hidden danger: the appearance that something is being done to repair a broken system can revitalise practices that continue to preclude a huge amount from view. By suggesting that categorisation systems are capable of change, this potentially silences critics and provides a second life to practices that are inherently antithetical to queer lives and experiences.

The Categorisation of LGBTQ Library Users

Building on Drabinski’s critique of recuperative efforts, I turn attention to consider the impacts—both positive and negative—of expanding categorisation practices to include LGBTQ library users. Knowing your audience is fundamental to the effective operation of libraries, museums, galleries and other cultural organisations (Vincent, 2017). An evidence base that provides information on the demographic characteristics of current users, as well as those who are missing, can ensure that the allocation of resources and the design of services best meet people’s needs. To populate this evidence base, libraries collect diversity monitoring data to confirm or deny whether their users mirror the profile of the wider population. As a fairly common form of data collection, diversity monitoring forms are short surveys that ask individuals to disclose information about their identity characteristics. In the U.K., the categories presented often align with the nine characteristics included in the 2010 Equality Act. Browne (2010) notes, ‘In Britain the impulse to count can be seen as part of the “inclusion” of marginalised identities that seek to render “other” lives knowable in terms of the equalities legislation’ (p. 244). Libraries might invite individuals to disclose information about their sexual orientation and trans/gender identity in engagement surveys (where a sample of library users are asked to share their views and information about themselves), in evaluation forms distributed to attendees after public events, or as part of the registration process for new members. In addition, and as is the case with all organisations that collect and manage large amounts of data, digital library environments present opportunities to extract data about individuals’ online browsing activities, search terms used to locate items in a catalogue, and types of books borrowed. Although this form of data capture does not explicitly invite individuals to disclose information about how they identify, the volume of data collected

makes it possible for analysts to draw conclusions about the characteristics of library users. In other words, without asking users if they identify as LGBTQ, the extraction of data about an individual's actions in digital environments could enable a library to reasonably discern someone's sexual orientation and trans/gender identity. The topic of data extraction extends beyond the scope of this article and is most commonly associated with the activities of Facebook, Google, and other corporations that use data to target advertising and bespoke content (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). However, as libraries expand the volume and granularity of data collected about their users, information professionals should remain mindful of commercial pressures to use data in ways that do not improve the quality of services provided for those about whom the data relates.

Opportunities exist for information professionals to collect more data about the identity characteristics of library users and the subsequent tailoring of services to ensure they meet people's needs. Yet, any drive for more detailed data about library users needs to critically assess the methods used to collect this information. My caution here is rooted in the belief that categorisation practices, whether applied to objects or individuals, do not simply represent the social world but also partly construct the world they claim to describe. Scholars from a range of disciplines have described how phenomena are brought into being through the practices used to describe them. For example, discussing research methods commonly found in the sciences and social sciences, Law (2009) notes, 'it is possible to say that they are practices that do not simply describe realities but also tend to enact these into being' (p. 239). Spade (2015), describing the productive effects of administrative practices such as birth certificates on individuals, argues that 'administrative systems that classify people actually invent and produce meaning for the categories they administer, and that those categories manage both the population and the distribution of security and vulnerability' (p. 11). Keilty (2009), detailing the practices of information professionals, explains how 'classification has both coercive and productive effects for queer' (p. 248). And, most famously, Butler (1990) described how gender is constructed through the repeated performance of speech acts and gestures that, over time, congeal to 'produce the appearance of substance, or a natural sort of being' (p. 33). As described in the works of Law, Spade, Keilty, and Butler, identity characteristics are not transcendent concepts that sit outside of our social world but are instead enmeshed in and constructed through the tools we use to explain them.

When the collection of data about LGBTQ library users is reframed as a means to bring a category of people into being, this poses new questions as to how knowledge is constructed, its intended uses and who *really* stands to gain from the expansion of categorisation practices. Although my account of these practices might seem abstract or overly philosophical, the design of diversity monitoring forms affects information professionals and LGBTQ library users in at least three ways, which will now be described.

Design, Norms, and Exclusionary Practices

The design of a diversity monitoring form involves decisions about what identity characteristics to include and exclude from the exercise, as well as more detailed deliberations as to the design of question stems, response options and supplementary guidance. If time and resources permit, the design process might involve stakeholder engagement and user testing. The design process culminates in an output (a diversity monitoring form) that collects data in line with the designer's intentions and can influence the undertaking of data collection activities in other contexts. For example, if the British Library conducted a major diversity monitoring exercise of its users and

made its diversity monitoring form public, it seems likely that other U.K. libraries engaged in diversity monitoring activities would adopt the British Library's approach. Each element of the design process invites input from specific individuals, who bring with them particular biases, while leaving others excluded. Any biases introduced during the design of the original diversity monitoring form are therefore repeated and normalised (Nowakowski et al., 2016). Over time, in place of being understood as a project with a particular history and purpose, a diversity monitoring form is transformed into a natural and apolitical addition to a library's administrative toolkit.

Decisions made during the design process bring some identity characteristics into focus while casting other identity characteristics further into the shadows. For example, a diversity monitoring question on sexual orientation that presents only three options—'Heterosexual/straight', 'Gay or lesbian' and 'Bisexual'—might seem preferable to having no question on sexual orientation. However, this development risks exacerbating the exclusion of those who identify in other ways such as 'Queer', 'Asexual' or 'Polysexual'.⁶ Similarly, efforts to make data collection activities more inclusive can face difficulties when they encounter technological systems that are incapable of change—for example, online registration portals that only allow users to enter the binary options of 'Male' or 'Female' for their sex or gender (though the limitations of the system used to collect data should never determine what type of data is collected). To address past omissions, through the addition of new questions and/or response options, the designers of diversity monitoring forms can default to exclusionary assumptions about who is imagined as an 'LGBTQ library user'. For example, in place of an intersectional approach, the capture of data about sexual orientation can presuppose a subject who is gay, cis, white, non-disabled, affluent and already fully welcome in library spaces (albeit for their status as a sexual minority). Swept-up in the congratulatory excitement of 'making things better', the design process can distil identity characteristics in a way that brings to the fore the *least* marginalised among minority groups. As Fisher et al. (2019) observe, 'A cisgender gay white man moves through the world with different options and experiences different injustices than a transgender man of color, and a genderfluid person living on disability income has different experiences than someone who is able to work full-time' (p. 76). Fisher et al. underscore how the intersection of privilege and marginalisation are complex and that lives and experiences that fall under the LGBTQ umbrella are neither uniform nor universal.

Even among the most forward-looking approaches to the collection of diversity monitoring data, which capture data on library users who identify as trans and/or non-binary, there is a risk of entrenching particular ideas about gender, sex and sexuality that ultimately cause harm. For example, asking a diversity monitoring question about whether a library user identifies as 'Trans' or 'Cis' forwards a particular understanding of these concepts. Glick et al. (2018) note that 'for some people, the term transgender relates more to an experience or process, rather than a label that would apply to their gender identity' (p. 1370). Similarly, Darwin (2020) argues that binary gender schemas, including cis/trans frameworks, 'obscure the gender diversity that actually exists' (p. 21). Although seemingly an improvement on past data collection practices, which failed to even recognise the existence of trans people, you can see how this development might instil a new binary between cis and trans people that perpetuates the exclusion of individuals who fail to adhere to evolving requirements of legibility.

Shaping how LGBTQ People Make Sense of Themselves

The trickle-down impacts of collecting more data about the identity characteristics of library users go beyond the introduction of new diversity monitoring norms or expansion of exclusionary practices that further hide individuals who identify in ways that sit beyond the view of designers. Spade (2015) has described how administrative practices, such as data collection exercises, shape how individuals come to know themselves, including ‘the ways we understand our own bodies, the things we believe about ourselves and our relationships with other people and with institutions, and the ways we imagine change and transformation’ (p. 6). Describing this encounter as a ‘subjection’, Spade’s observation highlights how a decision that might appear inconsequential (such as the response options offered in a diversity monitoring exercise) can impact how people think about themselves.

In a blog for the U.K. LGBT organisation Stonewall, Robinson (2020) argued that ‘without having books and research papers on LGBT history and identities publicly available, we and future generations risk remaining uninspired, unempowered, and uneducated on LGBT topics’. Robinson (2020) identifies how this education shapes the lives of both LGBT and cis/straight library users. However, while the availability and accessibility of materials in U.K. libraries related to cis gay men and lesbians has improved, other identities that fall under the LGBTQ umbrella often remain overlooked. Feeling seen, whether in a library collection or as a response option on a diversity monitoring form, can positively shape how people understand themselves and their relations to others. The addition of more response options to a diversity monitoring form and expansion of the LGBTQ umbrella might help further this ambition. Yet, is there an end-point to this approach or is it feasible to collect data about the gender, sex and sexuality characteristics of library users that brings everyone into view? And to what extent does this proposed solution (the provision of more options or more detailed options) disable us from interrogating the potential for categorisation practices to cause harm? Taking this observation one step further, Spade (2015) argues that administrative practices, even when presented as means to recognise minoritised groups, constructs ‘deserving and undeserving populations’ that ‘makes certain populations inconceivable or impossible, and establish modes of distribution that make some people more secure at the expense of others’ (p. 113). The collection of detailed information about the identity characteristics of library users also expands the reach of classificatory systems, naturalising practices that can function as a means to include and exclude people.

When a queer line of enquiry is followed to its logical conclusion and the construction of knowledge about LGBTQ library users is contested, do we lose sight of the subject (in other words, the LGBTQ library user) and weaken calls for LGBTQ-specific provisions in the library? For example, how can information professionals argue for the provision of more services for LGBTQ library users without a clear idea of what is meant by an ‘LGBTQ library user’? Also, failure to introduce new categorisation practices which better serve LGBTQ library users might mean that collections default to historical biases and remain inaccessible to those who wish to investigate topics positioned outside the norm. The freezing of identity categories in time and space for a data collection exercise provides both the basis for oppression and the potential for political gains (Gamson, 1995). Drawing an analogy between the categorisation of individuals and items in a library catalogue, Keilty (2007) has explained that ‘Without the catalog, history is silenced, literature muted, science crippled, thoughts and ideas arrested’ (p. 3). Yet, these critiques do not mean that categorisation practices are incapable of change. For information professionals engaged in the collection of gender, sex and sexuality data, a responsibility exists to consider how data practices might strategically navigate these dangers to ensure data about library users

serves to improve people's experiences of libraries rather than perpetuates exclusionary practices.

Small Numbers, Anonymity and the Potential for Harm

Finally, the scope and granularity of data collection exercises have implications for both information professionals and LGBTQ library users. When data is analysed, the research questions that information professionals wish to answer should guide the approach adopted. However, cutting data by individual LGBTQ identities and other intersectional analysis (for example, to uncover the experience of Black lesbians or disabled trans people) further reduces the number of individuals in each group. In situations where diversity monitoring exercises engage numerically small communities and/or undertake intersectional analysis, the risk of presenting data in a way where an individual is identifiable is heightened.

Information professionals therefore need to scrutinise the risks involved when working with small numbers and review how data is collected, analysed and presented to ensure that it is impossible to discern the identity of anyone contained within the sample. Before sharing their data, LGBTQ library users also need to interrogate whether they can remain anonymous in a dataset. Even with the removal of all 'identifiable' information (such as an individual's name or address), it can remain possible to discern someone's identity through the piecing-together of multiple data items about their identity characteristics. The inability to genuinely anonymise some respondents means that those with access to the dataset might find it possible to out individuals as LGBTQ. In national or cultural contexts where same-sex behaviours or gender diversity are taboo, illegal, or punishable, the management and security of gender, sex, and sexuality data is a matter of high priority with potential life or death consequences. Yet, even in contexts with a greater tolerance or acceptance of LGBTQ people, it remains important that information professionals consider what might happen to the dataset in the future after the project has ended and those in positions of power at the library have changed. A dataset of LGBTQ library users can both inform positive interventions and provide an evidence-base to justify further marginalisation and exclusion. Future-proofing a dataset (for example, arranging for its deletion after a fixed number of years) can help ensure that the data contained within is not used for purposes other than those intended by those who designed the project.

I note these cautions in response to reasonable concerns about the management and security of data about LGBTQ people. However, in my work in the U.K., I am more accustomed to the use of 'small numbers' as a pre-emptive excuse to not undertake data collection activities. Without knowledge of the size of the population under discussion, small numbers can function as a justification for inaction among information professionals that do not wish to expand or adapt data collection activities in ways that might improve the services provided to LGBTQ library users. Diversity monitoring in the library is a balancing act and it is the responsibility of information professionals engaged in data collection activities to minimise the potential for harm. Yet, citing small numbers as the sole reason not to include LGBTQ people in data collection activities can also perpetuate the invisibility of this key demographic group.

Good Practice

The realisation that all categorisation practices, to varying degrees, are exclusionary does not mean that information professionals should abandon efforts to organise the collection or learn more about people who use libraries. Current ways of working will not transform overnight and

the agency of individual information professionals to initiate change might, at times, seem limited. It is therefore the role of information professionals to raise awareness of the inherent dangers of categorisation practices, which are often presented as neutral and ahistorical, and advance a strategic approach to categorisation that rebuffs its exclusionary tendencies. I hope that this article does not leave readers feeling despondent with the current situation, but instead encourages those working in the field to uncover and challenge the shortcomings of traditional approaches to categorisation, whether applied to objects or individuals (Montague & McKeever, 2017). To strengthen this mission, I conclude with six practical considerations for information professionals to embed in work related to the collection of gender, sex and sexuality data:

- **Engage library users in the design of data collection activities**—during the design of data collection activities, such as questions for a diversity monitoring form, it is vital that information professionals meaningfully collaborate with people/groups with lived experience of the identities under discussion.
- **Abandon the assumption that identity characteristics are singular and discrete**—many people experience their identities as something fluid that is difficult (or impossible) to describe using exclusive terms (Suen et al., 2020). With these points in mind, data collection activities should enable respondents to select multiple response options to questions about their identity characteristics (for example, someone might identify their sexual orientation as both ‘Bisexual’ and ‘Queer’).
- **Empower respondents to describe how they identify in their own words**—rather than attempt to provide every sexual orientation and trans/gender identity as a response option, ensure that all questions include a write-in box so that respondents who do not identify with any of the options listed can describe themselves in their own words. The provision of a write-in box for sexual orientation and trans/gender identity questions is particularly important for younger people and people of colour (Suen et al., 2020; Zosky & Alberts, 2016).
- **Acknowledge that identity characteristics are not fixed in time**—when designing data collection tools, ensure that respondents can update their information on an as-and-when basis (Westbrook & Saperstein, 2015). For example, rather than only being able to disclose diversity monitoring data when someone registers as a new library user, make it possible for people to manually update information in their user portal.
- **Question if you *really* need to collect data about gender, sex and sexuality**—review current data collection practices and the use of data after its collection and analysis. If you identify data that is not used for actions that improve the provision of services for LGBTQ library users, do not collect the data. Data collection activities are time and resource-intensive; utilise any extra time for initiatives that meaningfully improve equality and justice for LGBTQ people in the library.
- **Embrace people’s refusal to participate in data collection exercises**—information professionals should not assume that individuals wish to share data about their gender, sex or sexuality. Libraries should not penalise or provide substandard service to users that, for whatever reason, choose not to share their data (Benjamin, 2016). To help ensure this is the case, make all diversity monitoring questions voluntary and provide a

‘Prefer not to say’ response option so that those who do not wish to provide data are also counted in the exercise.

The collection of data about gender, sex and sexuality is a rapidly evolving field, contextually specific and shaped by emergent technologies such as machine learning (that can predict how you will identify, based on past behaviour) and biometric recognition (that uses facial recognition, for example, to identify someone’s gender, sex and sexuality). For these reasons, I have not provided specific guidance on recommended question stems or response options. Rather, my six considerations offer a broad-brush account of what information professionals need to keep in mind when engaged in data collection practices.

Discussion

My account of what we learn when we view the categorisation of library collections and the capture of data about library users side-by-side has highlighted how categorisation practices can exclude LGBTQ people. Rather than interpret this conclusion as an insurmountable block to progress, those engaged in equality, diversity and inclusion should instead question the efficacy of approaches that uncritically champion passive notions of tolerance, diversity or inclusion.⁷ For example, with the goal that libraries are spaces open to all, Fisher et al. (2019) ask ‘How do we move from mere visibility and acknowledgement of identities to meaningful justice and equity?’ (p. 84).

In the space where data practices and identity characteristics intersect, information professionals can gain insights from critical scholarship on diversity and inclusion work, particularly as it pertains to race and gender justice (see Ahmed, 2007; Benjamin, 2019; Hoffmann, 2020; Spade, 2015; Walcott, 2019). For example, Walcott (2019) observes how ‘Diversity interrupts and delays more radical calls for human transformation’ (p. 405), while Hoffmann (2020) notes ‘inclusion represents an ethics of social change that does not upset the social order’ (p. 20). My aim is not to simply bash information professionals engaged in diversity and inclusion work, nor call for an end to all *non-queer* initiatives that seek to improve the experiences of LGBTQ library users. As highlighted in my list of good practice considerations, there exists a path forward that acknowledges the exclusionary tendencies of categorisation practices *and* embeds critical thinking in the design of data collection tools. Looking inwards—among those who genuinely wish to challenge homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in the library—we must acknowledge that well-intentioned activities can naturalise and entrench practices that cause harm to the most marginalised among LGBTQ people. Recuperative projects, which place faith in the capability of information professionals to ‘fix’ broken systems, can ultimately buttress rather than challenge the status quo. When presented by libraries as evidence of action to improve diversity and inclusion, initiatives that fail to have a positive impact can postpone the opportunity of meaningful, structural change.

These concerns are not about (further) politicising the library nor simply a case of doing the right thing; an interrogation and overhaul of categorisation practices are central to the survival of libraries. The seriousness of the situation is reflected in the work of the International Federation of Libraries and Archives (IFLA), which has committed to provide all information professionals, regardless of the country where they are based, with support to help meet the needs of LGBTQ library users (Wexelbaum, 2019). When LGBTQ people struggle to find their lives reflected in a collection or feel excluded from the provision of library services, they will cease to engage. Vincent (2017) describes how ‘The starting point for work on social justice is that we know that

the cultural sector tends to be under-used by people who are socially excluded' and that 'work must therefore involve assessing who is not using our services and finding ways of meeting them to make some sort of "offer"' (p. 5). Libraries have improved the lives of LGBTQ people in many ways throughout history and in the present day, and data has a key role to play in future work. Therefore, information professionals cannot overlook the dangers posed by categorisation practices for LGBTQ library users and need to ensure that any expansion of diversity monitoring in the library acknowledges the exclusionary tendencies of categorisation and ensures that data collected is used to meaningfully improve the provision of services for LGBTQ people.

Conclusion

Categorisation practices, which are used to make sense of a library's collection, provide insights into the use of diversity monitoring exercises and the capture of data about the identity characteristics of library users. Building on Drabinski's queer account of categorisation practices, this article has problematised the relationship between 'being counted' and improving the experiences of LGBTQ library users. Practices that collect data about an individual's identity characteristics are intended to construct a legible subject (for example, an ideal LGBTQ library user) that informs the design and future delivery of services. Knowledge of your audience is key, however the distillation of messy, mutable, overlapping, and intersecting characteristics into something that is comprehensible risks erasing individuals in most need of help. Even with increased attention to improving the experiences of LGBTQ library users, categorisation practices regularly default to a library user who is cis, white, non-disabled, educated, and middle class. With the expansion of data collected about the lives and experiences of LGBTQ people in the U.K., it seems likely that libraries will also enhance data collection practices to more clearly establish who uses their services, who does not use their services, and what can they do to address this gap. Information professionals will play a key role in these future data developments. An interrogation of the potential benefits and harms of categorisation practices when applied to LGBTQ library users is therefore a necessary step to ensure that good intentions do not perpetuate exclusionary practices in the library.

Endnotes

¹ LGBTQ is used as an umbrella term that recognises a diversity of gender, sex and sexual identities, and is inclusive of those who identify in ways that fall outside the acronym such as asexual, gender fluid, pansexual and polysexual. When citing work undertaken by other researchers, I deploy the terms used by the original author such as LGBO and LGBT. Academic libraries are understood as those situated in higher education institutions and national reference libraries such as the British Library and the National Library of Scotland. Whereas public libraries are based in communities and operate under the remit of local authorities.

² The UK Equality Act (2010) provides legal protections for the characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment (trans status), marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

³ Data on trans/gender identity is not collected in Northern Ireland's 2021 census.

⁴ The GEO noted that no robust measure of the trans population in the U.K. exists. The estimate is therefore based on studies from other countries that indicate between 0.35% and 1% of population are likely to identify as trans.

⁵ For example, Derrick Bell (1992) and Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. (1995) note how equating racism with overt racial hatred means that structural and institutional racism are often rendered invisible.

⁶ Guyan (2021) has explored how the design of response options for the sexual orientation question in Scotland's 2022 census further excluded some sexual minority groups.

⁷ This objective applies to the wider museums, galleries, and cultural organisations sector. For example, Leitch et al. (2016)'s LGBTQ Welcoming Guidelines for Museums: Developing a Resource for the Museum Field wished to produce a resource that outlined 'concrete action steps for any museum wanting to move beyond "tolerance" toward "inclusion"' (p. 139). Although the concept of 'inclusion' is also not without problems, as described in Hoffmann (2020), this indicates a step in the right direction.

References

- Advance HE. (2020). *Equality in higher education: Student statistical report*. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2020>
- Ahmed, S. (2007). 'You End up Doing the Document Rather than Doing the Doing': Diversity, race equality and the politics of documentation. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(4), 590-609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701356015>
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Benjamin, R. (2016). Informed refusal: Toward a justice-based bioethics. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 41(6), 967-990. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243916656059>
- Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new jim code*. polity.
- Bowker, G. C., & Star, S. L. (1999). *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*. MIT Press.
- Browne, K. (2010). Queer quantification or queer(y)ing quantification: Creating lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual citizens through governmental social research. In K. Browne & C. J. Nash (Eds.), *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research* (pp. 231-249). Ashgate.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). Data colonialism: Rethinking big data's relation to the contemporary subject. *Television & New Media*, 20(4), 336-349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418796632>
- Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N. T., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (1995). Introduction. In K. Crenshaw,

- N. T. Gotanda, G. Peller & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (pp. xiii–4). New Press.
- Darwin, H. (2020). Challenging the cisgender/transgender binary: Nonbinary people and the transgender label. *Gender & Society*, 34(3), 357-380.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243220912256>
- Dilley, P. (1999). Queer theory: Under construction. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 12(5), 457-472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095183999235890>
- Drabinski, E. (2013). Queering the catalog: Queer theory and the politics of correction. *The Library Quarterly*, 83(2), 94-111. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669547>
- Fisher, Z., Krueger, S., Malamud, R., & Patillo, E. (2019). What it means to be out: Queer, trans, and gender nonconforming identities in library work. In A. Baer, E. S. Cahoy & R. Schroeder (Eds.), *Libraries Promoting Reflective Dialogue in a Time of Political Polarization* (pp. 71-90). ACRL Publications.
- Gamson, J. (1995). Must identity movements self-destruct? A queer dilemma. *Social Problems*, 42(3), 390-407. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096854>
- Glick, J. L., Theall, K., Andrinopoulos, K., & Kendall, C. (2018). For data's sake: Dilemmas in the measurement of gender minorities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 20(12), 1362-1377.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2018.1437220>
- Government Equalities Office. (2018). LGBT action plan: Improving the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. London: Government Equalities Office.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lgbt-action-plan-2018-improving-the-lives-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people>
- Guyan, K. (2021). Constructing a queer population? Asking about sexual orientation in Scotland's 2022 census. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 1-11.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1866513>
- Hoffmann, A. L. (2020). Terms of inclusion: Data, discourse, violence. *New Media & Society*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820958725>
- Jacob, E. (2004). Classification and categorization: A difference that makes a difference. *Library Trends* 52(3), 515-40. <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/1686>
- Keilty, P. (2007). LGBT and information studies: The library and archive OUTreach symposium at UCLA; and in the footsteps of Barbara Gittings: An appreciation. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 3(1).
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9jm2b1sh>
- Keilty, P. (2009). Tabulating queer: Space, perversion, and belonging. *Knowledge Organization*, 36(4), 240-248. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2009-4-240>
- Law, J. (2009). Seeing like a survey. *Cultural Sociology*, 3(2), 239-256.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975509105533>

- Leitch, C., Youngs, R., Gavigan, A., Lesperance, M., Burns, W. J., Cohen-Stratynier, B., Hammond, P., & Hansen, J. (2016). LGBTQ welcoming guidelines for museums: Developing a resource for the museum field. *Museums & Social Issues*, 11(2), 138-146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15596893.2016.1217460>
- Montague, R. A., & McKeever, L. (2017). Introduction. In R. A. Montague & L. McKeever (Eds.), *Queer library alliance: Global reflections and imaginings* (pp. xi–xxii). Library Juice Press.
- Nowak, K., & Mitchell, A. (2016). Classifying identity: Organizing an LGBT library. *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-Journal)*, 1452. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/1452>
- Nowakowski, A., Sumerau, J., & Mathers, L. (2016). None of the above: Strategies for inclusive teaching with ‘representative’ data. *Teaching Sociology*, 44(2), 96-105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X15622669>
- Olson, H. A. (2001). The power to name: Representation in library catalogs. *Signs*, 26(3), 639-668. <https://doi.org/10.1086/495624>
- Oltmann, S. M. (2016). “They Kind of Rely on the Library”: School librarians serving LGBT students. *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, 7(1), 1-21. http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Oltmann_They-Kind-of-Rely-on-the-Library.pdf
- Pascoe, C. (2018). What to do with actual people?: Thinking through a queer social science method. In D. Compton, T. Meadow, & K. Schilt (Eds.), *Other, Please Specify* (pp. 291-303). University of California Press.
- Robinson, A. (2020, February 20). *Silence in the library: Finding LGBT stories in the library catalogue*. Stonewall. <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/silence-library-finding-lgbt-stories-library-catalogue>
- Scottish Government. (2018). *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey*. <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-social-attitudes-survey/>
- Spade, D. (2015). *Normal life: Administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of law*. Duke University Press.
- Suen, L. W., Lunn, M. R., Katuzny, K., Finn, S., Duncan, L., Sevelius, J., Flentje, A., Capriotti, M. R., Lubensky, M. E., Hunt, C., Weber, S., Bibbins-Domingo, K., & Obedin-Maliver, J. (2020). What sexual and gender minority people want researchers to know about sexual orientation and gender identity questions: A qualitative study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49(7), 2301-2318. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01810-y>
- Vincent, J. (2015). Why do we need to bother? Public library services for LGBTQI people. *Library Trends*, 64(2), 285-298. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0050>
- Vincent, J. (2017). *LGBT people and the UK cultural sector: The response of libraries, museums, archives and heritage since 1950*. Routledge.

- Walcott, R. (2019). The end of diversity. *Public Culture*, 31(2), 393-408.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7286885>
- Westbrook, L., & Saperstein, A. (2015). New categories are not enough: Rethinking the measurement of sex and gender in social surveys. *Gender & Society*, 29(4), 534-560.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243215584758>
- Wexelbaum, R. (2019). The reading habits and preferences of LGBTIQ+ youth. *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion (IJIDI)*, 3(1).
<https://doi.org/10.33137/ijidi.v3i1.32270>
- Zosky, D. L., & Alberts, R. (2016). What's in a name? Exploring use of the word queer as a term of identification within the college-aged LGBT community. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 26(7-8), 597-607.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2016.1238803>

Kevin Guyan (kevin.guyan@glasgow.ac.uk) is a Research Fellow in the School of Culture and Creative Arts at the University of Glasgow, where his work explores the intersection of data and identity. Kevin is the author of the book *Queer Data: Using Gender, Sex and Sexuality Data for Action* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), which examines the collection, analysis and use of data, particularly as it relates to LGBTQ people in the UK. Outside of higher education, Kevin is a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Young Academy of Scotland and sits on the board of the LGBTI charity Equality Network.