

Hegemonic knowledge structures in MeSH: implications for medical librarianship

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Agenda

1. What are the stakes in classification work?
2. Race and ethnicity in MeSH
3. Gender and sexuality in MeSH
4. Implications for practitioners



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The problem

Controlled vocabularies are necessary for clinical research and clinical practice. When medical librarians use the same language to describe the same phenomena, scientific knowledge advances and best practices can be developed. MeSH is never objective. These headings always reflect some ways of understanding the world and exclude others. This project attempts to understand how bias is embedded in the controlled terms that structure medical knowledge and implications for medical librarians.

Race and Ethnicity in MeSH

“The label signals to the world what is presumed to be inside and what is to be done with it. In a caste system, the label is frequently out of sync with the content, mistakenly put on the wrong shelf and this hurts people and institutions in ways we may not know.”
~ Wilkerson, 2020.



Race & Ethnicity in 2021 MeSH

Continental Population Groups: Groups of individuals whose putative ancestry is from native continental populations based on similarities in physical appearance.

Ethnic Groups: A group of people with a common cultural heritage that sets them apart from others in a variety of social relationships.



Race & Ethnicity in Health & Medical Research

American Indian or

Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African

American

Hispanic or Latino

Native Hawaiian or

Other Pacific Islander

White

Questioning Race & Ethnicity in Context

What is ancestry? ethnicity?

Ancestry, race, and ethnicity as proxies for...?

Genetic factors?

Effects of discrimination on health measures?

Does indexing by population indicate innate differences?

2022 MeSH: Race

Racial Groups < Continental Population Groups
(2003-2021) < Racial Stocks (1968-2003)

Whites*: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. (formerly European Continental Ancestry Group)

Blacks*: A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. Terms such as "Haitian" or "Negro" can be used in addition to "Black." (formerly African Continental Ancestry Groups)

*align with OMB categories



2022 MeSH: Health Disparity, Minority & Vulnerable Populations

Groups of persons ***whose special characteristics*** make them a minority, vulnerable, and frequently subjected to conditions with limited levels of access to health care and other opportunities.

Gender & Sexuality in MeSH

Gender and Sexuality in MeSH

“Gender and Sexual Minorities”

-->Sexual dissidents

Grouping of Gender and Sexuality together

“Vulnerable populations” how does this label take the focus off systemic deficiencies and place them on individuals or groups of people?

What is the “default”?



Gender and Sexuality in MeSH

Sexual and Gender Minorities MeSH Descriptor Data 2022

Details

Qualifiers

MeSH Tree Structures

Concepts

MeSH Heading Sexual and Gender Minorities

Tree Number(s) [M01.270.988](#)

Unique ID D000072339

RDF Unique Identifier <http://id.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/D000072339>

Scope Note Individuals including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, gender non-conforming people, and other populations whose sexual orientation or [GENDER IDENTITY](#) and reproductive development is considered outside cultural, societal, or physiological norms.

Entry Term(s)

- Bisexuals
- GLBT Persons
- GLBTQ Persons
- Gays
- Gender Minorities
- Homosexuals
- LBG Persons
- LGBT Persons
- LGBTQ Persons
- Lesbians
- Lesbigay Persons
- Men Who Have Sex With Men
- Non-Heterosexual Persons
- Non-Heterosexuals
- Queers
- Sexual Dissidents
- Sexual Minorities
- Women Who Have Sex With Women

Transgender Persons MeSH Descriptor Data 2021

Details

Qualifiers

MeSH Tree Structures

Concepts

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| MeSH Heading | Transgender Persons |
| Tree Number(s) | M01.777.500 |
| Unique ID | D063106 |
| RDF Unique Identifier | http://id.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/D063106 |
| Annotation | index both MALE and FEMALE check tags |
| Scope Note | Persons having a sense of persistent identification with, and expression of, gender-coded behaviors not typically associated with one's anatomical sex at birth, with or without a desire to undergo SEX REASSIGNMENT PROCEDURES . |
| Entry Term(s) | Transexuals Transgendered Persons Transgenders Transsexual Persons Two-Spirit Persons |
| Previous Indexing | Transsexualism (2001-2012) |
| See Also | Disorders of Sex Development Gender Identity Health Services for Transgender Persons Transsexualism |
| Public MeSH Note | 2016; see TRANSGENDERED PERSONS 2013-2015 |
| History Note | 2016 (2013) |
| Date Established | 2013/01/01 |
| Date of Entry | 2012/07/03 |
| Revision Date | 2019/05/10 |

Gender and Sexuality in MeSH

Is there ever a situation where we would refer to a straight person as non-homosexual or a cis person as non-trans?

Defining people in medical situations by what they are not sets practitioners up to treat a person like they are lacking.

Gender and Sexuality in MeSH

Gender Identity MeSH Descriptor Data 2022

Details

Qualifiers

MeSH Tree Structures

Concepts

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| MeSH Heading | Gender Identity |
| Tree Number(s) | F01.393.446.250 F01.752.747.385.200 F01.752.747.722.200 F02.739.794.793.200 |
| Unique ID | D005783 |
| RDF Unique Identifier | http://id.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/D005783 |
| Annotation | psychological; do not confuse with SEX CHARACTERISTICS (physiological); do not confuse with SEXUAL ORIENTATION see SEX BEHAVIOR : gender identity is knowing that one is male or female; sexual orientation is preferring heterosexual or homosexual behavior |
| Scope Note | A person's concept of self as being male and masculine or female and feminine, or ambivalent, based in part on physical characteristics, parental responses, and psychological and social pressures. It is the internal experience of gender role. |
| Entry Term(s) | Gender |
| Previous Indexing | Identification (Psychology) (1968-1975) Sex (1968-1975) |
| See Also | Transgender Persons |
| Public MeSH Note | 1991; see IDENTIFICATION (PSYCHOLOGY) 1976-1990; for GENDER see SEX 1991-2003 |
| History Note | 1991(1975); for GENDER use SEX 1991-2003 |
| Date Established | 1991/01/01 |
| Date of Entry | 1975/07/21 |
| Revision Date | 2020/06/18 |

What does this mean for librarianship?

Implications for Practitioners

- Search
- Research Support and Consultations
- Data Services
- Instruction
- Institution-Wide Discussions

This can be uncomfortable work!

What shelves do we need?



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Thank you

Questions?