

# **That Isn't Me: Self Identity and Keyword Choice**

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**Abstract:** The majority of reference librarians at colleges and universities in the United States identify as White. However, the numbers of students in higher education who do not identify as White is steadily increasing. This study compares the vocabulary used by librarians to that used by students for three components of self-identity: race, ethnicity, and nationality, and explores possible implications for the effectiveness of research help and information literacy if college and university librarians are framing self-identity in a way that does not mirror the experiences of student researchers.

## **Introduction**

As a librarian in an academic institution with a diverse student population, I began to notice that students seeking help for research related to self-identity and who do not identify as White were resistant to using terms to describe their racial, ethnic, and national identity that did not match their perception of themselves. I began to question if there might be implications for the effectiveness of research and information literacy if research librarians and students seeking information have very different ideas about the vocabulary for self-identity.

According to demographic information gathered by the American Library Association, 87.1% of its membership identify as White (ALA Demographic Studies, 2014). The numbers of students in higher education who identify as something other than White or Caucasian has been steadily increasing (Krogstad and Fry, 2014). Recognizing the importance of diversity in the academic library environment, both academic and public libraries have actively worked to recruit a diverse workforce. However, the proportion of librarians who do not identify as White remains low (Chang, 2013).

## **Literature Review**

The American Library Association codifies the belief held among academic librarians that it is necessary and important that librarians provide “accurate, unbiased and courteous responses to all requests,” and not allow “personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resource” (Code of Ethics of the

American Library Association, Articles I and VII). Despite the ideal, there is ample documentation that bias exists in both the practice and the language of research in higher education and in academic libraries. Berman (1971) systematically raked through a wide range of subject headings which he considered to be offensive, inaccurate, and perpetuating biased attitudes. Although many of the headings deemed offensive by Berman are no longer in use, some can still be found in library catalogs. One example of this is the subject heading, INDIANS OF NORTH AMERICA, CIVILIZATION OF. In Berman's words, "If there were a competition among LC heads for sheer wrong-headedness, stupidity, distortion, and Anglo-Saxon myopia, this form would be among the top contenders. It fully embodies the 'Tonto myth,' accepts the preposterous 'wandering savages' thesis, and culturally emasculates a varied, remarkable people whose attainments in many fields are legion and universally valuable" (p. 76).

The development of subject cataloging and naming conventions is examined by Olson (2001) in relationship to silenced groups. "Like other language, LCSH is socially constructed and reflects such biases, usually unintentionally" (p. 656). Drabinski (2013) charges that "library knowledge organization systems of all kinds fail to accurately and respectfully organize library materials about social groups and identities that lack social and political power..." (p. 97). As a result, librarians utilizing classification systems to direct student research end up reinforcing the biases built into the systems. "As users interact with these structures to browse and retrieve materials, they inevitably learn negative stereotypes about race, gender, class, and other social identities" (p. 97).

Bias in classification systems is only one way in which librarians and researchers may unconsciously accept and promote bias. Shachaf and Horowitz (2006) found that there was a pattern of discrimination evident in librarian answers to virtual reference queries where the names of the students represented ethnicities and race not perceived as Caucasian, Christian, or Jewish (p. 518).

The study of racial micro-aggressions brings forward an additional aspect of racial bias structures in academia. Alabi (2014) found that academic librarians of color reported that they are treated differently from their White peers and experienced or noted racial micro-aggressions directed at non-White colleagues. Non-minority librarians do not report experiences of micro-aggression.

Color blindness, a contemporary anti-racist strategy often employed by whites who claim not to see race, overlooks the experiences of people who are not White and thus allows domination of White culture to continue uninterrupted (Sullivan, 2014). Exploring academic research dealing with colorblind racism, Choi (2008) relates her experience of it and the attitudes and knowledge about color blind ideology of the students in her education classes. White pre-service teachers show a "lack of interest or disengagement from racial discourse" (p. 60). White students consistently fail to acknowledge institutional and social realities, preserving White privilege and

the view of non-White as the Other. Speaking to the notion of color blindness claimed by Whites and its relationship to White supremacy, Simpson (2008) reviews the extensive literature documenting how language is used to perpetuate what she identifies as the socially dominant position of Whiteness.

O'Hara (2013) and her research team, who all identify as middle class and White, asked study participants, "What term would you use to describe your race?" Unexpectedly, participants gave over 30 different terms to describe race (p. 307). O'Hara and her team found that they became very uncomfortable trying to discuss racial identity and "just wanted the interview to be over because, like so many well-educated, middle-class color-blind White women, I had never learned to talk about race in a situation like this" (p. 316).

## **Methodology**

To compare how self-identity is expressed by students and by librarians, surveys were sent to both groups asking them to identify terms to describe their race, ethnicity, and nationality. Study participants were also asked to identify terms they found offensive or inaccurate in these categories. Students were asked if they would use offensive or inaccurate terms for research and librarians were asked if they would recommend these offensive or inaccurate terms to students for research purposes. Additionally, students were asked to identify keyword terms for a research project related to their racial, ethnic, or national identity.

The survey for librarians was distributed to 1,021 subscribers of LIBREF-L, a reference listserv. A second survey was distributed via the campus email list to approximately 7,700 undergraduate students at CSU Stanislaus, where the student body consists of diverse racial and ethnic groups.

All the survey questions were open-ended. Survey participants were not provided with any established terms used by academics or government agencies who gather data on race, ethnicity, and gender, because, as Bonilla-Silva points out, "surveys on racial attitudes have become like multiple-choice exams in which respondents work hard to choose the 'right' answers (i.e., those that fit public norms)" (Bonilla-Silva, p. 11).

## **Comparing the Results: Race**

Fifty-six librarians provided responses for racial identification. Forty-five identified as White or Caucasian, mirroring national statistics. Librarians also largely utilize the official terminology of the U.S. Census Bureau, which identifies five minimum categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. (<http://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>). Students also self-identify using official census terms and the percentages reflect the official statistics for racial categories posted on the CSU Stanislaus Fast Facts web page <https://www.csustan.edu/about/fast-facts>. Students also used many non-traditional terms, recorded as "Something Else." Examples of such terms are Ancient, Angle-

Saxon, Brown, Half Puerto Rican, Hard Working and Handsome, Egyptian, Mestizo, and Mediterranean (Appendix 2, Table 1).

### **Ethnicity**

Librarians utilize more diverse terms than do students when describing their ethnicity, although most identify in what are traditional White, European cultures. Students again display a wider variety of terms than librarians do (Appendix 2, Table 2). The plus sign next to terms in Table 2 indicates that the respondents included additional or multiple terms, such as Caucasian/Native American/Hispanic or Celtic/Gaelic/Scot/Irish. Many respondents from both groups utilize the same terms for ethnic identity that they used for racial identity. In the category of Something Else, students again display many non-traditional responses, such as Afghan, Cuban American, Dutch, First Generation, Low Income, Mutt, and Unique.

### **Nationality**

By a large majority, both groups identify their nationality as American. CSU Stanislaus is identified as a Hispanic serving institution, so it is not surprising that a large number of students represent their nationality as Mexican or Mexican American. Once again, many students display resistance to conventional terms by describing their nationality with terms such as Colorful, Extensive, Blaxican, Beautiful, Human, Euro Blend, and Extensive (Appendix 2, Table 3).

### **Take Offense, Please**

Librarians identified 35 terms they considered offensive with regard to their self-identity. Most of the terms identified by White Librarians were terms that I, as a White Librarian, consider fairly mild insults. The offensive terms identified by non-White librarians were terms frequently found in news and literature. Terms students identified as offensive or inaccurate were varied and mostly unprintable. To discover the great variety of ways people can insult each other, please refer to the *Racial Slur Database* or to the many pages and lists of slurs found in *Wikipedia*. Every term listed by students may be found in those lists.

Librarians were asked if they would recommend the use of research terms to students which the librarians themselves identified as offensive. Regardless of their own racial and ethnic identity, 80% said “yes.” Eighty-two percent of librarians also indicated that they would recommend terms to students even if they felt those terms did not accurately describe the students’ self-identity. However, 62% of students indicated that they would not use terms they identified as offensive, and 53% indicated they would not use terms for self-identity which they identified as inaccurate. When students were asked to list keywords for research relating to their identity, very few listed the tongue-in-cheek terms for identifying racial and ethnic identity. Nor did students list any of the offensive or inaccurate terms previously identified. Most were serious research

inquires. The survey allowed for each respondent to list three research terms (Appendix 2, Table 4).

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

When exploring racial and ethnic development of middle school students, Way, Hernández, Rogers, and Hughes (2013), found that “adolescents, particularly those of color, were consumed with avoiding, resisting, and *not wanting to be* a stereotype” (p. 418). Likewise, the students who responded to my survey resisted pre-selected terms and stereotypes which do not reflect who they are. Students do not want to be defined by generalizations of race, ethnicity, nationality, or by the wide range of other components which form identity; they make it clear that they have many terms to identify themselves outside the LCSH system. Conversely, the terms shown in Table 4, chosen for a serious research query, demonstrate that students are aware of how race, ethnicity, and nationality are coded in research language.

The demonstration that reference librarians will recommend search terms which they have identified as offensive can be viewed in two ways. One would be that librarians accept the terms as a way to access information in various research disciplines and attach little or no emotional baggage to those terms; they represent the language of research. The second way to view the recommendation of offensive terms for research is that librarians, particularly White librarians, are unaware that by promoting the language of research, they are promoting biased frameworks.

Drabinski (2013) concludes that there will always be controversy about classification structures and subject vocabularies. However, Olson (2001) states that “Individual libraries, as well as the institutions that govern our standards, must be held accountable for poor and biased access to information” (p. 663). Alternative classification methods are available. Folksonomies and crowdsourced-based tagging made possible in the digital environment can provide voice to the diverse ways people classify information (Lin, Tratner, Brusilovsky, & He, 2014; Pirmann, 2012).

Galvin (2015) contends that “Librarianship is paralyzed by whiteness” (p. 2). While there are many calls to increase racial and ethnic diversity in academic libraries, as Sullivan notes in her book, *Good White People* (2014), the humanist fantasy that diversity creates tolerance and fosters social justice is just that, a fantasy. Increasing the diversity among librarians is desirable, but it is really the recognition that White librarians who desire to provide the best research assistance to their diverse student populations should examine how the dominant culture and their own acceptance of it may control access to information with the classification of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. The community of research librarians must recognize and validate the experiences of all our students with regard to self-identity; that community must also challenge the accepted paradigms of how information is represented in an environment crafted by predominately White researchers.

## Appendix 1: Reference List

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## Appendix 2: Tables

**Table 1: Self-Selected Terms for Racial Identity**

<b>Librarians</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
African-American	1	1.78%	African-American	5	.99%
Arab	2	3.57%	Asian	18	3.58%
Asian American	1	1.78%	Black	12	2.39%
Black	2	3.57%	Brown	6	1.19%
Caucasian	5	8.9%	Caucasian	17	3.38%
European	1	1.78%	Filipino	7	1.39%
Human	1	1.78%	Hispanic	62	12.35%
Latino	1	1.78%	Hmong	5	.99%
Mixed	1	1.78%	Human	12	2.39%
Native American	1	1.78%	Latin/Latino/Latina	17	3.38%
White	40	71%	Mexican	70	13.94%
			Middle Eastern	5	.99%
			Mixed	10	1.99%
			Pacific Islander	3	.59%
			White	143	28.4%
			Something Else	66	13.14%
<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>56</b>		<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>502</b>	

*Note.* Something Else--Underrepresented/targeted, Ancient, Anglo-Saxon, Assyrian, Biological differences that people add social meaning to, Chicano/Chicana, Chinese/Asian, Dark skinned/brown, Drunks, Dutch/Swedish/Danish/English blend, Egyptian, European, Fun/ritual, Ghetto, Half Puerto Rican/half euro mix, Hardworking/handsome, I do not ascribe to "race," it is a detrimental social construct, I just mostly say black and Indian. I use my physical features. I think we are all one race, the human race, but we have different ethnicities. Indian, Irish, Italian or white, Korean and Mexican, Mediterranean, Mestizo, Pale, Punjabi. There is only one race and that is the human race. Stereotypical, THE BEST THERE EVER WAS. VIVA MEXICO. Trinidad, Unique

**Table 2: Self-selected term for ethnicity**

<b>Librarians</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Responses</b>
African American	1	African American	5
American	6	American	11
Arab	2	Anglo	3
Black	2	Arab	2
Caucasian	2	Asian	11
Chinese American	1	Assyrian	7
Danish	1	Black	5
Dutch	1	Californian	2
European +	7	Cambodian	3
		Caucasian	4
German +	6	Celtic+	2
Hispanic	1		
Irish+	6	English	8
Latino +	1	European +	28
Mixed	2	Filipino +	10
Native American	1	German +	10
None	1	Hispanic	43
Other	1	Hmong	13
PA Dutch +	1	Indian	4
Quaker	1	Irish +	9
Russian+	1	Mexican +	81
Scottish+	2	Middle Eastern	5
White	5	Mixed	9
White+	3	Multi-cultural	2
		Portuguese	14
		Scottish +	6
		Spanish	5
		Swedish	8
Something Else	0	Something Else	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>363</b>

*Note.* Something Else--Afghan, American Indian, ancient, Chicano, Cuban American, colorful, Dutch, cultural, Egyptian, Exotic White, First generation, Greek, hard working, Hawaiian, I don't know (2), I don't usually describe myself with an ethnic background, interesting, Jewish, Low income, Mestizo, mutt(2), none, Northern European, not sure, southeast Asian, Unique (2),

**Table 3: Self –Selected terms for Nationality**

Librarians	Responses	Students	Responses
American	43	African American	3
U.S. Citizen	3	American	218
Australian	1	American +	15
Canadian	1	Asian	9
Irish	2	Assyrian	5
Native American	1	Filipino	8
Polish/German	1	Hispanic	8
I don't	1	Hmong	6
White	1	Indian	4
Iraqi	1	Mexican	54
		Mexican American	45
		Portuguese	10
		U.S. Citizen	5
		Vietnamese	3
		White	16
		Something else	23
Total	54	Total	432

*Note.* Something Else--Blaxican, Brazilian and Ecuadoran, Canadian American, Caucasian, Chinese, Colorful, don't know, Dutch, euro blend, extensive, dominant, Beautiful (2), Greek, half Dutch, Hawaiian, heaven, human, Chicana, Italian, Latina, Russian, mixed, proud, Puerto Rican, Persian, Salvadoran, Ukrainian

**Table 4: Examples of student generated research terms for self-identity**

Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
European American	Norwegian	Caucasian
Filipino	Irish	White
Hispanic	Latino	Native American
Hispanic inequalities	Hispanic discrimination	Hispanic community
Mestizo	Latino	Hispanic
Latina	Chicana	Mexican
Race	Ethnicity	Culture
Mexicans from Texas	Tribes in Texas	Scottish History
White oppression	Racism against whites	White discrimination