Categories we live by:
How we classify everyone and everything

This book is written by a Professor Emeritus of Psychology at New York University Gregory L. Murphy, not by a library and information science researcher or practitioner. Though his approach sets the book apart from traditional library works on classification, it holds great appeal for many, particularly those involved in teaching or researching knowledge organization. After all, instructors in this field often draw upon concepts from other disciplines – philosophy, psychology, linguistics – to illuminate the nature of classification, the role of language, and the underlying human capacity to categorize our world. This book stands out as a particularly well-suited resource for this very purpose.

The author of the book tackles the complex challenges of creating categories in a way that is both approachable and engaging, one can use the word 'popular' in the most positive sense of this word. First, the book is written in a form of informal but highly informative and serious conversation with a reader bringing out the inconsequentials and contradictions of the philosophical, scientific, psychological, cultural and other approaches to explanations of categorising the world and our experiences. Second, it is organised in a way that allows a reader to accept and understand the nature of the phenomena and problems attached to its investigation as a whole without being overwhelmed by diverse explanations and many attempts to make sense of what is going in our heads and how it is affected by the natural and social worlds we live in. In addition, there is an issue of the impact of our categories on both of these worlds. The whole first part of the book with an introduction and three chapters is devoted to these general issues and their explanations using a variety of perspectives.

Particularly captivating is the third chapter, which delves into the relationship between categories created in different cultures through language. It offers one of the best explanations I've encountered concerning the interplay between universal and culture-specific categories within human culture. Furthermore, it is meticulously supported by empirical evidence drawn from research with, at times, rather intricate designs.

The second part of the book, equally voluminous as the first, delves into seven specific cases across various fields. These chapters explore how categories are created and utilized in areas like legal systems, psychological diagnosis and treatment, social power dynamics, the natural world, daily life, racial relations, and even the definitions of death.

This case-study approach (focusing on what I would call 'tension points') effectively demonstrates the conditional nature of categorization. Categories are rooted in our current understanding of the world, even though some categories hold some level of universality. The true power of categories lies not just in their labels or definitions, but in the actions they trigger. These decisions and actions, which ultimately shape human and non-human lives, are themselves products of a specific time and place.

The dynamism of change and the existence of parallel categorizations are inherent to our experience. This fluidity stems not only from evolving understanding but also from underlying conditions, diverse interests, and conflicting goals. Categories that benefit some can disadvantage

others and may even be inadequate in different contexts. This raises a crucial question: How do we navigate this inherent ambiguity and 'fuzziness' in our own systems of categorization?

As librarians, we understand inherently that categories and classifications are not only unavoidable but also crucial. They are an intrinsic part of our cognitive processes and serve as a powerful tool for navigating the world around us, be it spatial, social, creative, or any other domain. These systems are fundamental to efficiency, productivity, and ultimately, our very survival as individuals and as a species.

The author ultimately suggests that while we cannot escape the inherent tensions and contradictions within categorization, we must strive to be aware of them. Since abandoning these systems isn't an option, the key lies in using them responsibly and strategically, selecting the most appropriate ones for any given situation.

While the core conclusion may be familiar to experienced teachers of classification, this book offers a valuable refresher. It provides an opportunity to explore a more flexible approach through interesting examples and perspectives, making it a great resource for classroom use. Students, I'm sure, will find this book attractive and thought-provoking due to its exploration of complex questions without easy solutions. This lack of clear-cut answers is a testament to the author's depth of knowledge and understanding that true answers often lie in the exploration, not in simple pronouncements.

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May, 2024