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Ethno-racial subjects in classification systems: a comparative survey

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how major bibliographic classification systems represent ethnic-racial subjects, comparing their conceptual foundations and their capacity to describe interdisciplinary themes. A qualitative, exploratory approach was employed, using bibliographic review, content analysis, and domain analysis. The schedules of DDC, UDC, BC2 and CC were examined to identify how they represent ethnic-racial categories. The results show that disciplinary systems, such as DDC and UDC, depend on rigid classificatory schemes that merge racial and ethnic categories. In contrast, faceted systems such as BC2, CC, and ILC offer more flexible mechanisms for representing ethnic groups. Our findings highlight the need for adaptable, phenomenon-based approaches such as ILC to improve the accuracy and inclusiveness of ethnic-racial knowledge organization.

1.0 Introduction

This study is part of the research conducted within the framework of a Sandwich Doctorate funded by CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel), established in 1951. It focuses on the analysis of four general bibliographic classification systems in categorizing terms related to ethnic-racial groups, aiming to examine the classificatory structures attributed to these groups. The analyzed classification systems include the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC), the Bliss Bibliographic Classification, 2nd edition (BC2), and the Colon Classification (CC); finally, we consider how ethnic groups can be expressed in the Integrative Levels Classification.

Ethnic-racial subjects are currently studied through interdisciplinary efforts, where different areas of knowledge, such as education, history, geography, linguistics, social

sciences, among others (Gomes 2012), focus on investigating cultural differences, the consequences of social marginalization, impacts of racism and ways to overcome identified difficulties. The emergence of this field can be interpreted as an achievement of the black and indigenous movement, which, through a variety of demands, carved out a presence within academia and science. This allowed for the articulation of its unique perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and socio-political analyses, while also bringing attention to the historical exclusion of black and indigenous communities from contributing to scientific knowledge development (Gomes 2012).

When the aim is to foster interdisciplinary interactions, disciplinary classification systems may hinder the retrieval of relevant items, leading to information dispersion and weak connections between various disciplines or academic fields (Huang et al. 2022; Szostak et al. 2016). In fact, ethnic-racial knowledge, due to its interdisciplinary nature, may encounter challenges when confronted with the rigid disciplinary structures of classification systems. Furthermore, sensitive domains such as ethnic-racial studies are at risk of being inadequately represented in traditional classification systems, as is the case with African-based religions in the DDC (Miranda 2009).

Ethnic-racial issues permeate cultural, religious, political, social, and other domains, making interdisciplinarity one of their fundamental characteristics. For instance, matters that explore the implications of racism in curriculum development span from basic education to higher education and postgraduate studies, proving relevant to numerous fields of knowledge such as linguistics, history, geography, law, and more. Each of these fields has specific research topics regarding ethnic-racial issues.

This study investigates in a non-exhaustive way how different classification systems organize ethnic-racial groups, examining the classificatory structures and possibilities they offer for representing this interdisciplinary domain. Furthermore, the present survey seeks to support a future proposal for guidelines on the classification of ethnic-racial topics, aiming to represent their interdisciplinary nature and facilitate access for individuals and researchers from diverse social and academic contexts.

2.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to problem analysis and follows an exploratory method regarding research objectives. The study utilizes bibliographic review, content analysis, and the comparative method as technical procedures. Bibliographic review was conducted on ethnic-racial studies literature in order to identify key concepts, categories, and terminologies commonly used to describe and represent ethno-racial groups, informing the subsequent analysis of classification system schedules. The bibliographic research was conducted using Google Scholar and the SciELO database, in English and Portuguese, covering the period from 2000 to 2025. Selected materials included articles from peer-reviewed journals, theses, dissertations, books, and book chapters discussing the representation of ethnic-racial themes in classification systems or the underlying theories of these systems. Duplicate articles, technical reports, non-peer-

reviewed materials, and documents without full-text access were excluded. Keywords such as “ethnic-racial” combined with “classification systems”, “Dewey Decimal Classification”, “DDC”, “Universal Decimal Classification”, “UDC”, “Colon Classification”, and “Bliss Classification” were used for the search. The pearl growing strategy (Hadfield 2020) was used to select foundational works in the ethnic-racial field.

Content analysis was used to establish analytical categories and to process results obtained from examining classification system structures and the classes designed for ethno-racial theme representation. To analyze how these classification systems represent such groups, categories were derived from the conceptual distinctions between race and ethnicity found in the literature. This resulted in two categories: 1) Representation of race and racial groups; and 2) Representation of ethnicity and ethnic groups.

Following Bardin’s (2011) framework, the pre-analysis stage involved floating reading and selection of material, while the exploration stage consisted of applying the aforementioned categories based on the differentiation between race and ethnicity. These categories formed the basis for the analysis of the classification systems used, which was carried out using the comparative method, seeking to identify similarities and differences between the use of the two concepts in the structure of the classification systems.

In addition, to analyze how the classification systems incorporate these concepts into their structures, four technical parameters were applied: 1) The classificatory structure and the hierarchical location of the concept; 2) The representation mechanisms; 3) Combinatorial capacity and flexibility; and 4) The conceptual foundation expressed in the manuals of each system, as in scope notes. The articulation between the conceptual categories and the systemic parameters allowed, through the comparative method, the identification of similarities and differences in how each system represents and structures ethno-racial groups.

Classification system schedules were accessed through a paid subscription to WebDewey (https://dewey.org/webdewey/), the online Universal Decimal Classification Summary (https://udcsummary.info/php/index.php), the Bliss Bibliographic Classification 2nd edition, and a printed copy of Colon Classification 6th edition, because it is the most widely used version in the world, and by information published or available online. The investigation focuses on identifying and analyzing the facets commonly attributed to ethno-racial classification, with the additional aim of proposing a set of facets for use in the Integrative Levels Classification.

3.0 Ethnic-racial field

Cultural differences have historically been used as markers of difference between human groups. According to Seyferth (2002), even before the use of concepts such as race or ethnicity, phenotypic or cultural differences were used as a tool for social hierarchization, overlapping power and subalternation. The concept of race has historically been used to classify and hierarchize human groups based on phenotypic characteristics (Munanga 2003). Originally borrowed from Zoology and Botany, it was applied to human diversity as

early as the 17th century and has since been linked to the legitimization of domination between social groups (Munanga 2003).

The concept of ethnicity gained ground in the 20th century, in the 1950s, reinforced with UNESCO's decision to propose the replacement of the concept of race (already widely understood as a non-scientific concept to identify differences between human beings). The latter evokes a set of characteristics common to a certain group of people, who share common aspects of social life, such as culture, religion, language, ancestry, etc. According to Gonçalves (2016, 66) ethnicity "provides the perception of the social role of individuals within their own group and outside it".

An ethnic group, according to Munanga (2003, 12), would be "a set of individuals who, historically or mythologically, have a common ancestor, have a common language, the same religion or worldview, the same culture and live geographically in the same territory". Although the concept of ethnicity has gained space, the concept of race continues to be present among researchers in the field. Its use is not linked to a biological reality, but rather to explain and denounce racism and its consequences in social reality (Munanga 2003).

It can thus be concluded that while ethnicity refers to groups of individuals who share cultural particularities and worldviews, race is used as a social construction derived from the interpretation of visible phenotypic characteristics among human beings, linked to the effects of power dynamics and economic structures in each context (Munanga 2003).

Concerning the use of the concepts of race or ethnicity, Munanga (2003) explains that the use of either of the two does not change the reality of racism: the concept of ethnicity, for example, does not destroy or minimize the hierarchical relationship between different cultures in current society. This author also denounces that, although the concept of race is no longer used in a scientific sense, the ideological scheme created from its implementation, which supports the domination of certain groups of people over others, remains intact, "today's victims are the same as yesterday and the races of yesterday are the ethnicities of today" (Munanga 2003, 13).

Classification systems, as instruments designed to represent and classify knowledge through its items such as documents, books, objects, etc. are socially related to the status of social thought in force at the time of its elaboration (Hodge 2000; Soergel 1999; Guimarães et al. 2019; Tran 2018). In other words, knowledge classification instruments tend to reflect current social thinking in their classificatory structure. With this in mind, four different classification systems are analyzed below with the aim of investigating the way in which the notion of ethnic-racial groups or ethnic groups or racial groups is represented in each of them.

4.0 Classification systems

Classification systems play a key role in the organization and retrieval of knowledge (Kwasnik 1999). They enable the representation of entities and relationships in structures that reflect knowledge of the domain being classified (Szostak et al. 2016). The construction

of these systems is based on theoretical and methodological principles, allowing for the representation of complex concepts and adaptation to different fields of study. The following subsections are dedicated to the treatment of ethnic-racial groups in each of the four classification systems that were analyzed in the present study.

4.1 Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)

The DDC was first conceived in 1873 and published in 1876 (Mitra 2009; Satija and Kyrios 2023). The DDC has as its first classes some general disciplines representing broad areas of knowledge. There are ten main classes, represented by three-digit decimal numbers; for example, 300 represents Social sciences. These classes are progressively subdivided, seeking to achieve a greater degree of specificity of the initial class.

Ethnic-racial groups are commonly represented in class *305.8*. Therefore, the explicit classificatory structure in this classification is as follows. Class *300* is intended for Social Sciences. Specifically, classes *301 to 309* relate to Social Sciences, sociology and anthropology. Classes *302* to *307* are intended for specific subjects in sociology and anthropology, and among these, class 305 is dedicated to groups of people, where we find different subclasses: *305.2* groups by age, *305.3* people by gender or sex, *305.4* women, *305.5* people by social or economic level, *305.6* religious groups, *305.7* linguistic groups and *305.8* ethnic and national groups and *305.9* people with disabilities, illnesses or gifted. So ethnic groups are treated as one among the possible ways to identify groups of people within sociology, and there is no mention of racial or ethno-racial groups, but rather of ethnic groups. Although class *305.8* is a common choice for ethnic-racial subjects, the notion of ethnic groups is also present in Table 1 (T1) as the suffix *-089* for ethnic and national groups: this common subdivision can in principle be appended to any disciplinary class, e.g. *200.89* ethnic and national groups in religion; *270.089* ethnic and national groups in Christianity; *370.89* ethnic and national groups in education.

The DDC has a specific auxiliary table (T5) for ethnic and national groups, as well as an auxiliary table (T6) for languages. Both are based on the traditional language sequence, presented in classes 420/490. The existence of two tables, according to the DDC manual, refers to the impossibility of matching language and nationality in some cases: for example, there is no Canadian language, there is a Yiddish language, but there is no Yiddish ethnicity. In the ethnic and national groups table, instructions recommend a preference for ethnic groups rather than nationality in citation order. The DDC has specificities for minority groups, where the priority of ethnic and national affiliation appears more emphatically, while for majority groups the same notation as the national population is used. Thus, it can be inferred that the national population is, to some extent, understood as being defined in reference to the majority group, while the diversity of other groups receives specific notations that differentiate or separate them from the national population as a whole.

4.2 Universal Decimal Classification (UDC)

The UDC was initially published in French, developed at the beginning of the 20th century by Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine, who used the DDC as a basis. Like the DDC, the UDC is one of the best-known classification systems worldwide. It is also organized by disciplines and uses a similar initial division of main classes and successive subdivisions of each into ten, increasingly specifying the initial subject (McIlwaine 2010). Unlike the DDC, the UDC uses only one digit to represent the first ten classes, like *3* Social Sciences and class 4 is vacant for possible expansion of the classification system.

The representation of ethnic-racial groups in the UDC is mainly by the auxiliary tables, although in its main hierarchy in class *316.34* it is possible to find in class *316.35* "Social groups. Social organizations"; in class *323.1* "Nationalist, popular, ethnic movements and problems. National and ethnic minorities"; in class *325* "Opening up of territories. Colonization. Colonialism"; and in class *326* "Slavery. Involuntary, unfree labor". We also find related topics in class *39*, titled "Cultural anthropology. Ethnography. Customs. Manners. Traditions. Way of life".

The auxiliary tables in the UDC use, in addition to numbers, symbols to form the notation, such as = and *( )*, and also enable the specification of subjects related to ethnic-racial matters. These auxiliaries do not constitute main subjects on their own, rather, they function as modifiers that may be combined with any UDC class number to indicate the ethnic or national dimension of a given topic. The 1f Table of the UDC is devoted to the common auxiliaries of human ancestry, ethnic grouping, and nationality.

In Table 1f, the scope note associated with notation *(=01)* states: "Human ancestry groups, previously simplified to the concept of race, are difficult to define because of the population migration and shared ancestry". The subdivision of this class includes: *(=011)* European Continental Ancestry Group; *(=012)* Asian Continental Ancestry Group; *(=013)* African Continental Ancestry Group; *(=014)* Oceanic Ancestry Group and *(=017)* American Native Continental Ancestry Group. In each of these classes, we find a scope note that indicates which racialized human group the category represents, for example: *(=11)* "Class here so-called Caucasian population."

Thus, the structure of the UDC reveals a classificatory legacy originating in the early twentieth century. Although the introductory text of Table 1f explicitly acknowledges the scientific inadequacy of the concept of race, the proposed organization maintains a grouping logic based on the notion of "continental ancestry." In practice, this approach brings together under a single label highly diverse human populations, without adequately accounting for their cultural, historical, or ethnic differences. This results in the homogenization of distinct groups, as if the continent constituted a valid ethnic unit, often conflating notions of ethnicity and race.

We also find in the auxiliary Table 1k topics that involve people according to ethnic characteristics in: *-54* Persons according to ethnic characteristics, nationality, citizenship, etc.; among others auxiliaries of persons and personal characteristics

The auxiliary tables in the UDC are freely combined with the subject notations provided by the main classes. Compared to DDC, UDC offers greater possibilities for representing the

specificities of ethnic-racial groups, allowing different aspects among them to be expressed, whereas DDC restricts such representation primarily to language and geographic location. However, by referencing race and drawing on categories derived from eighteenth-century racial classifications, UDC ends up conflating the concepts of ethnicity and race. It also fails to make it explicit, for instance, that race in the biological sense is no longer accepted within scientific knowledge and is now mobilized as a social construct, functioning as a social marker for the analysis of historically contextualized social and economic relations and inequalities.

4.3 Bliss Bibliographic Classification 2nd edition (BC2)

BC2 is a faceted classification system, where the main classes can be combined with the facets, which help to specify the subject to be represented. The BC was originally published in four volumes, in the United States, between 1940 and 1953 (Thomas 1993; Bliss Classification Association n.d.).

When the Bliss Classification Association was formed in 1967, it was suggested that a new updated version of the system should be made available, thus BC2 was created, being known as a completely new system, using only the bases initially offered by Bliss (Bliss Classification Association n.d.). BC2 uses letters and numbers to form class notations. In the auxiliary tables in BC2 we also find possibilities to specify ethnic-racial aspects.

The table dedicated to Ethnic-racial groups (3A) provides specifications for groups of people using the concept of ethnic characteristics. As the concept of ethnic characteristics is complex, the instructions state that four facets are addressed to the subject. They are: 4.1 culture, which specifies a common lifestyle for the group, which according to the instructions has a strong relationship with the language used by the group, and for this, the combined language table could be used; 4.2 place of residence other than the present (or last place of residence): being commonly used for matters relating to immigration, in this case, when more than one place is involved, care must be taken in using the language table or the location table, depending on the specificity of the group involved; 4.3 the state or place in which the cultural group is presently located, and 4.4 physical characteristics of the cultural group, where the instructions specify that, due to its proximity to the notion of race, it should only be used when the other facets do not cover the relevant specification. Table *3A* shows classification by physical characteristics and another by language.

Overall, BC2 thus adopts a more articulated notion of ethnicity than DDC, as ethnicity can be related to languages, original places, current places, or physical characteristics. Through Table 3A, it offers a faceted structure that enables a more precise representation of ethnic and racialized groups by combining cultural origin, historical and current location, and, when necessary, physical characteristics. This is significant for the representation not only of ethnic groups but also of racialized groups, since racialization occurs primarily through phenotypic criteria. This approach greatly expands the ability to describe complex and dynamic identities, surpassing models that reduce such groups to fixed or exclusively geographical categories.

4.4 Colon Classification (CC)

The CC is known as the first faceted scheme, created in 1933 by the Indian scholar Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan (Satija 2017). Its name was derived from colon (:) the symbol to separate facets, particularly energy facets (Satija 2017). CC became best known due to the use of fundamental categories implemented by Ranganathan to control the order in which the facets are cited to form the class number, known as PMEST – personality, matter, energy, space and time. In addition to facets, CC provides two ways to connect different main classes: devices and phase relationships (Ranganathan 1933; Bianchini 2017).

Although PMEST is designed as a general logical model, each main class has its own citation order, indicated at the beginning of the class and it is still possible that a class does not present all the five fundamental categories.

For ethnic groups, CC presents *Race as a social group* in class *Y7*, and a further subdivision based on Prehistoric groups *Y71*, Primitive groups *Y72*, and Ethnological or Territorial division, respectively *Y73* and *Y74-Y79*. The subject device is applied to Ethnological division to define the main cultural marker of an ethnic group, such as religion or language. So, it is possible to combine *Y73* with subclasses of *Q* religion, as in the case of Hindus *Y73(Q2)*, Jews *Y73(Q5)* and Muslims *Y73(Q7)* (where *Q2*, *Q5*, and *Q7* represent Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam), or with classes of language from the class *P Linguistics* and the Language Isolate, as in the case, for example, of groups speaking *Swedish Y73(P114), Sanskrit Y73(P15), Arabic Y73(P28),* and *Y73(P25) Hebrew*. So, for instance, *Y73(Q5)* and *Y73(P25)* are two different ethnic groups defined by a shared religion and the latter by a shared language respectively. It must be noted that in CC any shared cultural characteristic such as law - e.g. Roman or Germanic law in Medieval Europe - can form the basis of a new isolate for an ethnic group. Moreover, Territorial division can be used to form refined isolates too. People who live in Canada can be expressed by *Y772*, where *72* is taken from Space Isolate and represents Canada, and people living in Canada and speaking French can be expressed by *V772(P122)*. But Territorial division could also be applied to a place of residence other than the present (like in BC).

So, in CC ethnic groups can be specified by facets and devices, according to more than one aspect, similarly to BC2. By identifying race as social groups, the CC, although developed in 1933, succeeds in situating the concept within its contemporary understanding, wherein it is not associated with biological divisions of human beings. Through its faceted structure, the CC enables an articulation that identifies shared criteria for the formation of social groups, such as religion shared among different ethnic groups. This is an important aspect for the interdisciplinarity inherent to the ethnic-racial field.

It becomes evident from the analyzed systems that the distinction between the concepts of race and ethnicity is not straightforward for classification purposes, and that faceted structures offer a better possibility of representation for interdisciplinary contexts and for the representation of shared aspects.

In light of this, the ILC is a system developed based on ontological representation, employing integrative levels to create a structure that represents the phenomena under study, independent of disciplines. Through this configuration, it becomes more feasible to represent different phenomena without confusion between the concepts of race and ethnicity, while still utilizing the faceted structure to qualify phenomena, such as in part, process, agent, articulation with discipline, or theoretical framework employed

5.0 Analysis and conclusions

What we can identify so far is the strong presence of certain aspects to identify ethnic groups in the analyzed classification schemes, such as language, which seems to be the prevailing one, geographic location, ancestry, physical characteristics, historical period and the sharing of cultural aspects. Faceted classification systems such as BC2, CC and the ILC offer greater flexibility and adaptability to represent complex and interdisciplinary themes like ethnic-racial studies. In contrast, traditional systems like DDC and UDC, although widely used, may face challenges in accurately representing these themes due to their rigid disciplinary structures and to their semantic treatment, which fails to adequately distinguish race and ethnicity as distinct phenomena. It is worth mentioning that while CC and BC2 are also disciplinary systems, ILC is specifically designed in an interdisciplinary, phenomenon-based way (Gnoli et al. 2024), allowing for a more precise, flexible and semantically rich representation of complex phenomena.

In ILC, ethnic groups, peoples and nations can be expressed by class *ut*, which is a subclass of the phenomenon class *u* for “civil society; institutions; people”. This class has “parallel facets” that can take their foci from other classes, this allowing to specify social groups by religion: *ut96s* Jews, *ut96ud* Druze; or by language: *ut95ecmr* Romani, *ut95eio* Occitans; or by region of origin: *ut93ch* groups originating from Parana basin; or by present region: *ut92x* Brazilian people; or by skin colour: *ut77i* people with dark brown skin. Such specifications can be combined to give e.g. *ut96s2x* Brazilian Jews or *ut92x77i* Brazilians with dark brown skin. Traditional racial groupings, while not based on a scientific classification of peoples, can be expressed for representing their discussion in literature by deictic *U*, a special feature of ILC: e.g. *utUc* “Negroid peoples; Congoid; African; black”

While enumerative schemes like DDC only provide some common subdivisions (also termed common facets) for ethnic groups, faceted schemes may express different aspects of ethnic groups by different facets, that can in principle be combined. However, in most cases—perhaps with the exception of the CC—the facets employed still do not encompass central dimensions of the ethno-racial field, such as the mobilization of the concept of race as an epistemological object resulting from the visible phenotypic characteristics perceived among human beings, which structure social relations and assign specific social roles to racialized individuals. Most systems operate primarily with ethnic or national groups as classificatory referents, which are not conceptually equivalent to the use of race as an analytical category widely employed in the social sciences and in ethnic-racial studies. In this field, race is not reducible to an ethnic group, nor is it necessarily conflated with cultural or national affiliations; rather, it designates a specific construct, an

epistemological object extensively used in the field of ethnic-racial studies for the production of knowledge. To express this, ILC perspective facets could be useful, e.g. *ut01r* "peoples as studied in early 20th century" or *ut09o* "peoples as in social identity theory".

In general, as we have seen, different classifications may emphasize different characteristics to represent ethnic groups. This finding is reminiscent of Ørom's (2003) analysis, who compared the representation of visual arts in DDC, in UDC, in Library of Congress Classification (LCC) and in some art literature. Ørom found that different systems organize visual arts by different "paradigms", as they prioritize one characteristic above the others in subdividing the visual arts: the intrinsic and symbolic meaning of images, or style, or traditional subdivisions, or social functions or art. Ørom's paper is often cited by Hjørland (e.g., 2017) as a good example of domain analysis, as it shows how different systems reflect different assumptions in the study of the domain of arts. Our examination, focusing on some bibliographic classification systems, can suggest similar considerations for the domain of ethnic-racial studies: the organization and representation of ethnic and racial concepts reflect different ways of conceiving the complex concept of ethnicity.

While Ørom's analysis does not consider faceted systems (except from a brief discussion of the Art and Architecture Thesaurus), so that the characteristic which is prioritized in his examples appears to be the only way those systems subdivide the visual arts, our findings show faceted systems enable to divide the same domain by different topics. While many ethnic groups are identified by a common language, others can be identified by a common religion like Druze, or by a common origin as Jews, etc.

Some paradigms are still implicit in the sets of facets provided and in their prescribed citation order, in which the primary division has to be either by one characteristic or by another: for example in UDC the first position assigned to language implies that language is the standard way of identifying ethnic groups; however, provision of alternative subdivisions as in UDC, BC2 and CC allows to represent the domain in more flexible ways, better reflecting how they are treated in the indexed documents rather than imposing an additional superstructure on them: if a document deals with, say, ethnic groups as related to their place of origin, this can be reflected in the faceted class number assigned to it. This is even more so in freely faceted schemes such as the Integrative Levels Classification (ILC), where a class can be combined with any other class in the system, and the standard citation order of facets can be changed to reflect their relative relevance in the document on hand (Gnoli and Almeida 2025).

While domain analysis and facet analysis are usually seen as two alternative approaches to knowledge organization, these observations suggest that there are deeper connections between them, which need to be better studied in the development of our research.

Artificial intelligence tools were used exclusively for grammar refinement and language editing. No AI system was employed for content generation, data analysis, literature search, or any other research-related purpose.

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