

Authority and Universalism: Conventional Values in Descriptive Catalog Codes

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Every standard embodies a particular set of values. Some aspects are privileged while others are masked. Values embedded within knowledge organization standards have special import in that they are further perpetuated by the data they are used to generate. Within libraries, descriptive catalog codes serve as prominent knowledge organization standards, guiding the creation of resource representations. Though the historical and functional aspects of these standards have received significant attention, less focus has been placed on the values associated with such codes. In this study, a critical, historical analysis of ten Anglo-American descriptive catalog codes and surrounding discourse was conducted as an initial step towards uncovering key values associated with this lineage of standards. Two values in particular were found to be highly significant: authority and universalism. Authority is closely tied to notions of power and control, particularly over practice or belief. Increasing control over resources, identities, and viewpoints are all manifestations of the value of authority within descriptive codes. Universalism has guided the widening coverage of descriptive codes in regards to settings and materials, such as the extension of bibliographic standards to non-book resources. Together, authority and universalism represent conventional values focused on facilitating orderly social exchanges. A comparative lack of emphasis on values concerning human welfare and empowerment may be unsurprising, but raises questions concerning the role of human values in knowledge organization standards. Further attention to the values associated with descriptive codes and other knowledge organization standards is important as libraries and other institutions seek to share their resource representation data more widely.