

Week 4 Blog

The reading I felt most compelled to write about this week was “The Case of Race Classification and Reclassification under Apartheid” by Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan L. Star. This article made me think of a central idea of what the future could possibly look like, even after many years of progression.

In the Bowker and Star reading discussed Apartheid in South Africa, which was the 20th century, government imposed segregation of different racial groups. I was already familiar with the sociological perspective of Apartheid, the impact this segregation had on minorities. Something in the article caught my eye, however, and it was this quote: “Apart from the categories themselves, the technology associated with the reclassification process was crude.” The key word in this quote is reclassification and it pertains to our lives more than we might realize.

We like to think of ourselves as individuals. We know how unique our genetic makeup, daily thoughts, interests, and talents are. To others, however, we are seen as only a few things. We are described by key words or phrases, but not nearly everything we know to be true or even not true about ourselves. We are classified by others, positively and negatively. We could be known as a good or bad person, someone who is cheap or giving, etc. This is just human nature. What brings this to a level of concern is how big businesses capitalize on this classification and how technology has allowed this to happen.

One of the hottest buzzwords of recent years in terms of growing fields is data science. There has never been more available and comprehensible data in human history. Data not only

concerning our weather, economics, and sports, but about every person who owns a device that connects to networks. Corporations know this information is out there and they know there are ways to capitalize on it. Corporations currently seek hundreds of applicable data science employees to create statistical models that will help them classify people based on collected data. Some corporations even go so far as to use data to classify others with great repercussions. Companies like 23andMe contain tremendous amounts of data that insurance companies would die to get their hands in order to use medical classifications of people to make smarter insurance policy decisions. As much as we would like to believe that we have moved past the days of discrimination and segregation, we know a huge downfall of capitalism is greed and companies' willingness to put aside morals for money.

The realist in me knows there are companies out there (and the government too, just as Edward Snowden showed us) that are misusing and will misuse personal information for profit, without regard or dignity. The optimist in me also wants to say that we won't fall susceptible to an inhumane, new age classification we have seen in different points in history. We won't be able to end injustice, but I truly believe we can set systems in place to mitigate potential repeat scenarios of Apartheid because I also believe that data is and will be more powerful than we can imagine.

Works Cited:

Bowker, Geoffrey C, and Susan L. Star. *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999. Print.