

Opposing Epistemicide as First Principle: Redeeming Social Epistemology in LIS Education

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ABSTRACT

Social epistemology is a theory of knowledge that recognizes the social dimension of knowledge creation. In the LIS context it also serves as an enduring theory of how and why LIS professionals organize collective knowledge of the world. There is a growing awareness among LIS researchers that epistemic and cognitive injustices, and systematic attempts at epistemicide are widespread. Any theory of social epistemology that is meant to guide LIS practice must take into account the moral dimension of harms caused by allowing epistemic injustices to proliferate in information systems. Pivoting to the idea that opposing epistemicide and other injustices is central to the purpose of the LIS profession warrants a reconsideration of how educators discuss the core values in foundations courses.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

information ethics; information rights; pedagogy.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

epistemic injustice; epistemicide; social epistemology.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Egan and Jesse Shera's theory of social epistemology is, historically speaking, one of the most significant attempts at producing a unifying theory of Library and Information Science (LIS) practice (Fallis, 2006, p. 478). Epistemology is the philosophical field of inquiry into what constitutes justified true belief, or when one should consider information factual or trustworthy. Possessing a mature understanding of the foundations of epistemology is a pivotal, if somewhat abstract, asset in the campaign against the proliferation of disinformation. Social epistemology is branch of this theory of knowledge that recognizes the social dimension to the

creation of truth, meaning, and significance. Social epistemologists, for example, may consider questions about how cultural or historical precedent shapes the questions posed in order to make sense of our environment, and prime us to be more or less receptive to types of evidence or predisposed to consider a person reputable. This idea is most famously developed for scientific inquiry in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 2012). In the LIS context it also serves as an enduring theory of how and why LIS professionals need a mature theory of knowledge and awareness of the history of ideas in order to effectively steward the world's collective knowledge. While inconsistent as a coherent philosophical proposition (Budd, 2002, p. 437), Shera's social epistemology provides an enduring starting point about why LIS professionals should be concerned, at conceptual and practical levels, with what knowledge is and how it works on a social rather than individual scale (Egan & Shera, 1952; Shera, 1972, 1973). This essay revisits the historical role that social epistemology was meant to play as framework for LIS theory while seeking to explicitly modernize the theory and its role by welcoming the voices of philosophically minded critics from topics such as epistemicide, epistemic injustice, and cognitive justice into the formulation. With that accomplished it will be useful to consider how an expanded understanding of the social dimensions of epistemic injustice and justice may be integrated into the LIS curriculum, particularly in programs focused on professional practices related to libraries, community archives, and other civic institutions.

Serious consideration of the philosophical concepts of epistemicide, epistemic injustice, and cognitive justice in LIS education and research circles are growing, as are efforts to ground these concepts in LIS practice (Oliphant, 2021; Patin et al., 2020; Patin, Oliphant, et al., 2021; Patin, Sebastian, et al., 2021). Epistemicide is the systematic destruction of a way of knowing, often tied to the eradication of a language and along with it that language's means of structuring reality (de Sousa Santos, 2014). Epistemic injustice is the recognition that different knowers are afforded varying degrees of respect for their testimonial and interpretive expertise on the basis of prejudicial and discriminatory criteria which collectively reinforce barriers to full and fair participation in society (Fricker, 2013). Cognitive justice is a movement within educational and research practices that seeks to undo colonialist legacies in defining natural ontology and the resulting infrastructures of knowledge which marginalize indigenous ways of knowing (Hoppers, 2007; Visvanathan, 2009). Collectively, this epistemic triplet of moral concepts clearly makes a case for the harm that results when veritistic rights, the freedoms needed to participate in the just and unfettered application of truth, are denied.

Where a harm exists, so too does a moral obligation to consider one's role in perpetuating that harm. The greater the harm, the greater the resulting obligation. It is beneficial to continue the work of Patin and colleagues in identifying information practices within the domain of LIS responsibility which need rehabilitation given a desire to mitigate these harms. However, there are other ways to contribute to this larger project, and this current essay instead focuses on identifying points of connection between the need to reduce veritistic harm and the explicit disciplinary responsibility for organizing society's knowledge that Shera places on the LIS profession. If this connection can be made persuasively, the implication would be that not only do LIS professionals have an obligation to revise specific harmful practices but an obligation to revise the entire social epistemological imperative behind the LIS profession's responsibility to organize the knowledge of societies as a whole. In particular, it would emphasize the need to organize, provide access to, and prioritize knowledge in ways that recognize that reflect the

reality that societies are non-homogenous, representing the cultural and intellectual positionality of many distinct groups of knowers. To do otherwise would be perpetuate in the erasure of living epistemic traditions, the integrity of knowers prejudicially excluded from discourse, and entire infrastructures of education and research. The main theoretical shift which would have to occur would be to continue the work of Budd and establish definitively the degree to which reliabilism and veritism are key elements in LIS-style social epistemologies (Budd, 2004).

METHODS

The proposed essay uses humanistic methods to analyze the underlying claims of LIS professional and disciplinary responsibility with respect to social epistemology. Moral reasoning techniques are then applied to these claims in order to establish a warrant for revision of those responsibilities in light of new evidence from the theories of epistemicide, epistemic injustice, and cognitive justice. This new warrant is likely to involve a refiguring of the concept of social epistemology in the LIS context. The resulting synthesis between original and emerging concepts of social epistemology will yield new insights into corresponding ways to revise education for curricular modules that discuss collective core values such as democracy, social responsibility, the public good, and professionalism.

CONCLUSIONS

Given expanding awareness of the harms caused by the denial of veritistic freedoms, it is important to build on historical foundations of LIS theory as a means of creating more inclusive notions of key professional responsibilities. This essay seeks to articulate an updated formulation of social epistemology as a way of clarifying what are the obligations of LIS practitioners in this matter and what LIS educators can do to prepare practitioners to meet those obligations. The term obligation in this context relates specifically to ideas previously identified as guiding principles, such as those specified in professional codes of ethics and related documents. Too often volitional professional ethics rely only on the constitutive agreement of members of the profession for a source of authority. Other times principles are based on perpetuating some normative ideal, contingent in its effectiveness on agreement of the universal appeal of that norm. What if, instead, LIS professional obligations rested on the fulfillment of an underlying purpose? Put another way, what if the regular, everyday business of managing a library or archive was itself an ethical act, outside of moments of crisis?

Re-envisioning social epistemology as something that does more than articulate a duty to make knowledge available systematically, but articulates a duty to the people to constitute that society to present knowledge in such a way as to protect their veritistic freedom accomplishes just that. Put another way, what if the LIS profession made opposing epistemicide as central to professional practice as it does preserving privacy, access to information, or intellectual freedom? Constitutive ethical documents may serve a normative purpose but primarily create a sense of shared identity based on common values. These values may reflect aspirational, collective moral goals rather than practical ethical guidance for resolving dilemmas. What is

needed is capturing a theory not of professional ethics but of fundamental practice, one that brings together awareness of professional responsibilities with social responsibilities, occupational duties with moral aspirations. Bringing these understandings together creates an explicit connection between *how* and *why* to be an LIS professional. While in an educational context, such a change could be seen most clearly in foundations courses, where pivoting to morally informed *why*-based thinking could occur at any point in the curriculum when the purpose of a knowledge practice is discussed.

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