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# **EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE IN LIBRARY WORK: A CASE STUDY OF PATRON-PERPETRATED SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

## **Abstract or Résumé:**

We draw on the concept of epistemic injustice to understand (1) how library workers are harmed in their capacity as knowers when their experiences of patron-perpetrated sexual harassment (PPSH) are not believed; and (2) how a lack of hermeneutical resources—the conceptual knowledge to name and identify PPSH as gender-based violence—makes it difficult for them to make sense of their experiences. Library workers are subject to epistemic injustice when their knowledge/truth claims about PPSH are dismissed, diminished, disbelieved or otherwise discounted by patrons and people in the library organization, often in favour of the perpetrator's account. Recognizing epistemic injustice within the context of PPSH can help the library workplace move towards justice.

## **1. Introduction**

Despite the uptake of the #MeToo movement across North America, patron-perpetrated sexual harassment (PPSH)—the workplace sexual harassment by library patrons towards library staff—has been largely ignored, dismissed, and discounted within the field of Library and Information Studies (LIS) and at many library organizations (Civitello & McLain, 2017). Outside of LIS, workplace sexual harassment is increasingly seen as a significant problem because of its deleterious effects on the workplace and the lived realities of workers including increased depression, absenteeism, trauma, and feeling unsafe at work (Good & Cooper, 2016). A recent Canadian survey of over 500 library workers indicates that only 7% of participants have never been sexually harassed at work. Yet, the same survey suggests that library workers rarely report sexual harassment because they feel that their experiences are not believed by their employers. In this paper we recognize the centrality of intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1991) in conceptualizing epistemic injustice and take a feminist approach to our analysis to examine why library workers' accounts of PPSH are minimized or not believed, and to understand more broadly how clashes in truth claims create and reproduce oppressions for specific equity-deserving populations in feminized workplaces such as the library.

Epistemic injustice occurs when people are not believed, given due consideration, or treated as having knowledge to share or to contribute to humanity's collective pool of knowledge (Fricker, 2007). When this happens, they are harmed in their capacity as knowers, communicators, and as epistemic agents. People of colour, racialized minorities, and particularly Black women have a long history of contending with, and resisting epistemic injustice. Indeed, in the 1860s Sojourner Truth pointed out how Black women were (are) denied full and equal participation in American society as *knowers* (Pohlhaus, 2017), as people with knowledge to impart or transmit due to unjustified and prejudicial credibility deficits that listeners hold.

According to Fricker, epistemic injustice comes in two forms: testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when someone is wronged in their capacity as a knower or transmitter of knowledge due to an unjustified prejudice or perceived credibility deficits that the listener holds against individuals, groups, and societies. A credibility deficit is when a knower, speaker, or communicator is not treated as knowledgeable, or believable, or given due consideration based upon their social identity. Conversely, some people are given excess credibility based on their social identity and their accounts are taken more seriously. For example, young women's accounts of sexual violence are often not treated as credible because of prejudicial credibility deficits that do not consider young women authoritative whereas male perpetrators are given excessive unjustified credibility because they are understood as being authoritative. Hermeneutical injustice often happens in oppressive situations where groups, by design, do not have access to resources such as concepts and language that help them to define, understand, or make sense of their own experiences or oppression. Fricker uses sexual harassment as example. The term "workplace sexual harassment" was introduced relatively recently (in the 1970s) but before the introduction of the concept, people experiencing harassment had a difficult time describing what was happening to them, let alone lodging a complaint about it.

The concept of epistemic injustice has not been taken up widely in the field of LIS even though there are shared concerns about epistemology, knowledge and knowledge production, and social justice. Within LIS, epistemic injustice has been drawn upon to examine Shakespearean scholarship and information literacy (Dudley, 2020) and to examine how our perceptions of people as knowers shapes information interactions (Oliphant, 2021). Beth Patin and colleagues have significantly contributed to the use of epistemic injustice in LIS by developing a framework for understanding epistemicide (Patin, Sebastian, Yeon, & Bertolini, 2020; Patin, Sebastian, Yeon, Bertolini, & Grimm, 2021) and marginalised ways of knowing (Patin et al., 2021). In service of broadening epistemic injustice approaches within LIS, we apply the concept of epistemic injustice to a case study of PPSH to understand how and why library workers experience both testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper is part of a larger research project that takes an intersectional feminist anti violence approach to identify and document, understand, and resist PPSH in libraries (Oliphant, Allard, Lieu, & Mallach, 2021). We received 505 responses to a survey that was sent to library workers (including librarians, supervisors, library assistants, pages, etc.) across Canada that asked about their experiences with workplace PPSH. For this paper we analyzed participant responses to

open-ended questions about their experiences of workplace PPSH, including their interactions with patrons, co-workers, managers, and the institution itself, to better understand how epistemic injustice is present in participant experiences of PPSH. Participant responses illustrate how both hermeneutical and testimonial injustice are experienced by library workers as well as how these forms of epistemic injustice further perpetuate workplace PPSH.

### 3. Findings

Our findings demonstrate that library workers often suffer both hermeneutical and testimonial injustice as part of their workplace experiences of PPSH.

#### *Hermeneutical injustice*

PPSH is diminished in library workplaces because of hermeneutical injustice that normalizes “difficult” patron conduct and does not name PPSH or recognize it as a serious form of gender-based violence to which many library workers are regularly subjected as seen in the quotations below:

*The biggest barrier to me reporting was not actually thinking it was anything out of the ordinary. We've accepted this type of behaviour as a job hazard, and that needs to be acknowledged and changed.*

*Start asking us about it [sexual harassment]. We could tell many stories but nobody asks or cares. This is just something women shove down and take. We are accustomed to it.*

*I believe this is cultural and societal. . . but it needs to STOP being the norm.*

*hard [to address PPSH] when it's culture based in male privilege*

*even a definition of what constitutes it [sexual harassment] doesn't exist here, to my knowledge.*

Not only does heteropatriarchy underpin this form of hermeneutical injustice by minimizing the seriousness of “difficult”, violent, or sexually harassing behaviour of [male] patrons towards library staff and positioning this violence as “part of the job,” it also impedes the development of appropriate strategies and interventions to address PPSH (Oliphant, Allard, Lieu, & Mallach, 2021). At present librarianship largely lacks the shared collective hermeneutical resources across professional LIS organizations or library workplaces, such as language or policy that would allow library workers to understand some patron behaviours as sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Epistemic harm is created when library workers’ ability to understand their own experiences of PPSH as sexual harassment and therefore gender-based violence is undermined.

#### *Testimonial injustice*

Librarianship is a feminized profession where library workers are subject to testimonial injustice when people hold unjustified prejudices and prejudicial credibility deficits based on stereotypes about the library profession itself (e.g. the “sexy” librarian) and/or the social identity of individual library workers based on their gender identity, race, age, etc. In a common example of

this, cis gendered female library workers were often subject to testimonial injustice when their accounts of PPSH were dismissed or disbelieved because men's knowledge claims (whether patrons or co-workers) were afforded more credibility than women's. Indeed, heteropatriarchy confers prejudicial credibility to cisgender men over cisgender and transgender women and men and all non-binary and gender diverse folks:

*Luckily my boss is a man, so patrons have more respect for him. Gender is really a game changer in that situation.*

*Client refused to listen to my professional opinion or advice because I was a woman and insisted on talking to a male coworker instead. When a male archivist came out, he took their advice (it was the exact same) without hesitation.*

*We had patrons who were more likely to express violence towards female staff and the solution was always to ask for a male staff to come out. Management was mostly male and didn't see this as a real issue.*

As the quotations below demonstrate neoliberalism, feminized labour, and vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018) shape the library workplace by privileging a "customer" service orientation that prioritizes patron well-being over library workers .

*I feel like it's such a female dominated industry and more is needed to protect the workers. Everything seems like lip-service.*

*Sometimes I feel that my library is so concerned with the protection of patron's rights/concerns/feeling of being welcomed at the library that it is given higher priority than staff's level of comfort.*

*Between the subtlety of most acts of sexual harassment and a "the customer is always right" culture in the library, there's not much scope for challenging sexual harassment in the workplace.*

*Create a workplace culture that empowers staff to be able to respond to incidents rather than the current 'customer first' mentality.*

Indeed the very conceptualization of patrons as "customers" is a testimonial injustice because it confers on patrons (unearned) prejudicial credibility excess which may impede library workers from responding or acting upon PPSH to avoid upsetting the "customer" who holds a great deal of power over them.

#### *Moving towards epistemic justice*

In order to resist epistemic injustice and to avoid further epistemic harm, library workers overwhelmingly expressed the importance of being believed when dealing with PPSH. As one participant notes:

*Believe in our staff. Actually spend some time on the desk and see what assholes we deal with. Stop treating us like truculent, fibbing children. LISTEN.*

Epistemic injustice was also perpetrated by security, managers, CEOs, and library board members who also did not listen or believe library workers' accounts:

*Train our security staff to respect and listen to women, non-binary, trans, and queer employees. Our security staff are overwhelmingly white and male and are generally useless when it comes to supporting non white male staff members.*

*A more supportive, proactive stance from senior managers that didn't blame workers would be helpful.*

*The main barrier we face is lack of support from some library board members who do not take these issues seriously.*

*Not treat the staff as at fault for not speaking up in the moment. Take all concerns seriously and not just dismiss them as being 'sensitive'.*

Not believing or dismissing a knower's account based on one's prejudicial perception of their credibility is an act of epistemic injustice. Believing what a survivor of sexual violence tells you is a core tenet of feminist anti-violence praxis. It is essential that library workers' reports of PPSH are believed by all library stakeholders for the library workplace to move toward epistemic justice.

#### **4. Conclusion**

We apply the concept of epistemic injustice to a case study of PPSH to understand how and why library workers are *epistemically harmed* when truth claims are made sense of and resolved by the institution and patrons about PPSH that do not resolve in favour of library workers. Instead library workers' experiences are minimized, dismissed, not believed, and otherwise made irrelevant. Our findings indicate that library workers are subject to epistemic injustice because (1) perpetrators have unearned credibility excess due to social structures such as heteropatriarchy, and neoliberalism that serve to devalue feminized labour and gives "customers" power over library workers; (2) library workers are simultaneously silenced, shamed, blamed, and otherwise marginalized because of unjustified prejudice or perceived credibility deficits based on perceptions of their specific identities such as gender or race; and (3) not naming specific "difficult" patron behaviours as sexual harassment and gender-based violence means that library workers do not have access to collective hermeneutical resources to make sense of their experiences of PPSH. To resist and contest knowledge and truth claims that work in favour of patrons/perpetrators library workers emphasized the importance of being believed.

More broadly, epistemic injustice provides a framework to think about knowledge and knowledge claims, who is given the authority to speak/make knowledge claims, and who is believed. This case study demonstrates how competing truth claims are resolved at the library that epistemically *harm* library staff. Library workers experience a primary harm as knowers

when their knowledge claims about their own experiences or descriptions of PPSH are diminished or dismissed. They are also harmed in their humanity—as knowers with knowledge to contribute and to share. A secondary harm of epistemic injustice is that both the library organization and the perpetrator (as listeners) remain ignorant of PPSH and its consequences for library workers. The tertiary harm is that collective and social ways of knowing about PPSH and identifying it as gender-based violence are impeded. Recognizing epistemic injustice and the harms it creates can help library workers and workplaces to resist it and move towards justice.

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