Chapter 12
Liberatory Epistemology and the Sharing of Knowledge: Querying the Norms

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Abstract Feminist epistemology is a form of liberatory epistemology, and as such is focused on the role of knowledge production in the generation and maintenance of oppression and the effects of oppression on the production of and possibilities for knowledge. I argue that as part of this project, feminists need to take up the question: with whom do we share knowledge, and with whom should we share knowledge? To answer this, we must examine how knowledge-sharing norms function, particularly in contexts of oppression. Knowledge-sharing norms capture the expectations within a community or relationship concerning what knowledge ought to be voiced and thus shared across particular parties, and what knowledge either ought not, or need not be shared. I argue that, surprisingly, from the perspective of a liberatory epistemology, we cannot assume that increased knowledge sharing is always a good thing, but rather must assess the function and value of knowledge sharing and particular knowledge-sharing norms within localized contexts. Nevertheless, criteria for such assessments can be outlined, in accordance with the goals of a liberatory epistemology.

Keywords Feminist epistemology • Knowledge sharing • Liberatory epistemology • Secrecy

12.1 The Circulation of Knowledge: A Feminist Issue

In many poor villages in Bangladesh, lack of telecommunications has left remote villagers at the mercy of corrupt middlemen who come to their villages and set exceptionally low prices for crops and products, contributing to a cycle of poverty for the locals. The Village Phone program, one of the very successful microcredit programs (programs that offer small loans to supply capital for a business opportunity) makes

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cell phones available to poor village women, allowing them to operate small village businesses of cell phone use where there was no phone at all before.[1] With cell phone access, villagers can now protect themselves from exploitive buyers by calling to check current market prices for their products prior to a sale. The ability to access this type of information has brought significant economic benefits to the villagers.

This example offers a case where access to a certain kind of information or knowledge can make a significant difference to one's livelihood. It illustrates one of the key reasons feminists have been interested in the circulation and distribution of knowledge: they have recognized the importance of access to knowledge for one's quality of life. If access to important forms of knowledge is difficult for members of marginalized groups, life will in turn be more difficult for these groups. Patterns of differential access to knowledge that form along the lines of gender and race (to give just two examples) can disadvantage such groups, and they constitute a symptom of and contributor to oppression. This is also why literacy is such an important benchmark for the well-being of marginalized groups. Literacy is a crucial tool in knowledge accessibility.[2]

But the interest of many feminist epistemologists in the circulation of knowledge also runs deeper than the material and socio-political implications of access to knowledge. Quite obviously, questions of knowledge circulation, distribution and use are all *epistemic* in nature, simply in the sense that they are questions directly concerned with knowledge. But for feminists who have developed social approaches to epistemology, questions about the circulation and distribution of knowledge are also deeply *epistemological*, in a traditional philosophical sense, because these questions direct our attention to how we know and in some cases reveal whether or not we know. For example, Helen Longino's critical contextual empiricism sets out critical exchange as necessary for justification and consequently the production of knowledge, while theorists such as Lorraine Code (1991, 1995) and Miranda Fricker (2007) have focused on the diminishment of women's epistemic agency that results when women lack access to certain forms of knowledge about themselves in situations of oppression and marginalization. Within a socially-framed epistemology that recognizes our epistemic dependence on others, including the importance of testimony as a source of knowledge, questions concerning the circulation, distribution and use of knowledge are all central, bearing on analyses of how and what we know, both communally and individually.

Feminists have repeatedly argued for the centrality of the question 'knowledge for whom?' in epistemology (Code 1991; Harding 1991). In this paper I argue that feminists also need to attend to a different, but related question: 'with whom do we share knowledge, and with whom *should* we share knowledge?' Norms of knowledge sharing form an important feature of epistemic communities and their practices,

[1] One of the major sponsors of such microcredit programs has been the Grameen bank. http://www.grameen-info.org/grameen/gtelecom/.

[2] By noting the importance of literacy for knowledge accessibility, I do not mean to deny that there are also important forms of knowing which do not require literacy.

yet they have thus far received scant attention. Whether or not particular forms of knowledge are easy or difficult to access from others, and whether such knowledge is shared freely, makes a difference to what other kinds of knowledge can be generated in a community as well as what social goals can be achieved. For example, union building is difficult in a workplace where the cultural norm is for no one to share salary information.[3] Under such circumstances, salary discrepancies cannot be identified, knowledge of the injustices captured by such discrepancies cannot be generated, and such knowledge cannot then be used to motivate workers to work together for a common cause of improving the situation. Identifying such cultural norms of knowledge sharing and withholding is crucial to understanding some of the many obstacles to overcoming oppression, including the difficulties of generating specific kinds of knowledge necessary to overcome oppression. If norms of knowledge sharing make a difference to what other kinds of knowledge can be generated in a community, then feminists' concerns about access to knowledge, the mechanisms through which it circulates, and the social forces that construct knowers' credibility when viewed within a socially-framed epistemology, will not be simply ethical questions. Rather, to understand how knowledge is produced, and how we should engage to know well, we will need to understand these circulatory functions of knowledge. Examining how knowledge sharing norms function and change will be an important part of a liberatory epistemology, that is an epistemology interested in generating forms of knowledge that explain the how oppression operates, and envision possibilities for social change. However, I also argue that surprisingly, from the perspective of a liberatory epistemology, we cannot assume that increased knowledge sharing is always a good thing, but rather must assess the function and value of knowledge sharing and particular knowledge-sharing norms within localized contexts. Nevertheless, criteria for such assessments can be outlined, in accordance with the goals of a liberatory epistemology.

12.2 Feminist Epistemology as Liberatory Epistemology

As noted by Alcoff and Potter as early as 1993, feminist epistemology can no longer be conceived as primarily about women. Rather, developments in feminist epistemology have emphasized the need to understand gender as 'a component of complex interrelationships with other systems of identification and hierarchy' such as class, race, sexuality, culture and age (Alcoff and Potter 1993, 3). As they note,

[3] Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act grants employees the right 'to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection'(*Basic Guide to the National Labor Relations Act* 1997). This right prevents an employer from banning the sharing of salary information amongst workers. I thank Dave Saldana for drawing my attention to these connections with and details of the Act.

'because gender as an abstract universal is not a useful analytical category and because research has revealed a plethora of oppressions at work in productions of knowledge, feminist epistemology is emerging as a research program with multiple dimensions. And feminist epistemology should not be taken as involving a commitment to gender as the primary axis of oppression, in any sense of "primary," or positing that gender is a theoretical variable separable from other axes of oppression and susceptible to a unique analysis' (Alcoff and Potter 1993, 3–4).

As these excerpts from Alcoff and Potter reveal, a constant concern with oppression and its epistemological dimensions is visible throughout the many historical shifts in feminist epistemology. Feminist epistemology is perhaps best described as a *liberatory epistemology* (Scheman 2001, 26; Tuana 2001, 18). I define a liberatory epistemology as an epistemology that seeks to understand the connections between oppression and knowledge, including the connections between liberatory social change and knowledge. More specifically, a liberatory epistemology focuses on the role of knowledge production in the generation and maintenance of oppression as well as the effects of oppression on the production of and possibilities for knowledge. A liberatory epistemology seeks to develop epistemological tools – concepts, theories, and understandings of knowledge – that will help generate the kind of knowledge required to bring about positive (liberatory) social change.[4]

As such, a liberatory epistemology will focus on contexts of oppression and have a particular interest in analyzing the kinds of knowledge and knowledge production practices directly implicated in both the maintenance of and resistance to oppression. A liberatory epistemology will direct its energies toward certain forms of knowledge and particular circumstances of knowledge production pertinent to conditions of oppression. At the same time, a liberatory epistemology will likely carry ramifications for how we understand various areas of knowing beyond contexts of oppression as well. It is unlikely to serve as simply a limited add-on to standard epistemological accounts. This is because a liberatory epistemology will demand that any adequate epistemological theorizing, whatever its focus, must at least be conceptually capable of making visible the epistemological dimensions of oppression. Liberatory epistemology need not claim that every realm of knowledge has connections with oppression (perhaps the knowledge I have that I am currently sitting on a chair does not), but it will challenge the adequacy of any epistemology that is incapable of making such relations visible when and where they exist.[5]

[4] My use of the term liberatory epistemology should not be understood as having any connection to the liberation theology movement. Nor should it be understood in any sense of one group working to secure the liberation of another. Rather, many feminist epistemologists, including myself, have adopted the term 'liberatory epistemology' simply to make clear first that feminist epistemologies are concerned with oppression in *all* its guises (not only those pertaining to 'women') and its links to knowledge, and second that these epistemologies aim towards positive social change.

[5] In a different context, Helen Longino makes a similar point regarding how feminists ought to select from amongst theoretical virtues guiding inquiry. She claims that a bottom line requirement for feminist theoretical virtues is that they be capable of revealing gender. The choice of feminist theoretical virtues means that 'inquiry guided by these virtues is more likely to reveal it [gender] or less likely to preserve its invisibility than the traditional virtues' (1997, 50).

Numerous feminist epistemologists have critiqued the adequacy of mainstream approaches to epistemology that set out *general* conditions of knowing without specifically addressing contexts of oppression on exactly such grounds of their conceptual inability to make visible the epistemological dimensions of oppression (Code 1991; Harding 1991; Potter 1993).

In this paper I focus on just one element of knowledge production and distribution that I take to be important within a liberatory epistemology: knowledge-sharing norms. Not only is it important to identify and understand the functioning of knowledge-sharing norms if we are to fully understand the relations between oppression, knowledge and social change, but within particular contexts we can assess the knowledge-sharing norms in operation according to the goals of a liberatory epistemology. I argue that surprisingly, feminists should not assume that more knowledge sharing always serves liberatory goals. Rather a more nuanced and contextual assessment of knowledge sharing and its norms is required, especially for a liberatory epistemology. Before such an argument can be made, however, a clearer explication of what knowledge-sharing norms are and how they function is needed.

12.3 Knowledge-Sharing Norms (KSNs): Definition and Function

Knowledge-sharing norms (KSNs) are those expectations within a community or relationship concerning what knowledge ought to be voiced and thus shared across particular parties, and what knowledge either ought not, or need not be shared. They describe how and to what extent we hold each other *accountable* for both sharing and withholding knowledge.

For any piece of knowledge I have, relative to a given audience and context, it can be placed on a continuum with the one pole representing knowledge that definitely ought not be shared with this particular audience, and the other pole representing knowledge that definitely ought be shared with this audience. Police need to read one's Miranda rights to a person when arresting them, and doctors must (in general) not reveal the content of conversations with their patients to outside parties. Somewhere in the middle, we place knowledge that can be shared or withheld, with no sense of obligation either way. I am free to tell my employer what I did on my day off, but I am under no obligation to do so. Understanding the particular norms of knowledge sharing of a community helps us identify where on this continuum the knowledge in question lies in any particular set of circumstances. Though I have termed them knowledge-*sharing* norms, it is important to note that KSNs include the norms of appropriate withholding of knowledge. They capture the scope and degree of expectations of knowledge sharing and withholding.

A caveat is also required. Throughout my discussions I refer to knowledge sharing, but more accurately, I mean to capture the norms of sharing and withholding that which *we think we know*. The appropriateness of the norms of knowledge sharing cannot turn on whether or not we are mistaken in what we take to be our knowledge.

There will, of course, be times when we are mistaken: we take something to be the case and later realize that it isn't so – we had held what turns out to have been a false belief. Once we recognize our error, another set of norms will come into play: norms of spreading or not spreading (known) falsehoods, and norms of actively correcting falsehoods in the public realm.[6] But as long as we have reason to think we have knowledge, the issues at hand will be whether or not that 'knowledge' ought or ought not to be shared.[7]

KSNs are part of the everyday functioning of our social epistemic lives. They are sometimes formalized, but more are often not. Formalized knowledge-sharing norms include laws of disclosure, such as laws requiring that a house seller reveal to the buyer known problems with the property, or controversial HIV/AIDS disclosure laws. Of course, because KSNs include norms concerning the withholding of knowledge, they also include formalized laws related to privacy issues for individuals as well as the rights of employers to maintain corporate or government secrecy. Many formalized KSNs lack legal status but are formalized at the policy level, such as corporate gag orders against speaking with the press, or the demands of health insurance companies that medical information be revealed to them prior to offering coverage. Such policies and the KSNs underwriting them are enforced by actions such as employment dismissals and insurance coverage denials.

But in spite of the ease with which one can generate examples of formalized KSNs, far more common are the wealth of unformalized KSNs with which we engage in our day to day interactions. Good social skills require an implicit understanding of the norms in operation in localized contexts, so that one doesn't develop a reputation as a gossip by detailing the goings-on of one's neighbors on one's daily stop at the local post-office, or be considered ungenerous for being unwilling to share a recipe with one's guests. As social norms, KSNs form part of highly localized cultures.

For the significant portion of our KSNs that are unformalized, it is much more difficult to identify them and we often recognize these norms only when we notice a breach, or when it becomes clear that a particular norm is failing to serve our purposes well (epistemic or otherwise). Where there is no identifiable problem, we simply go on practicing with these norms, mostly unaware of them.

When one recognizes a breach in these norms, one senses an affront, a certain kind of offense. Consider Anne, who is going through relationship difficulties and both confides in her friend Karen and turns to Karen to try to work out what needs to be done to resolve the issues in Anne's primary relationship. Karen takes their

[6]Recognizing the falsehood of a claim isn't the only way we might be led to reject a claim of 'knowledge.' We might take a belief to be well supported, at least well enough to call it knowledge, and then later be faced with countervailing evidence that also needs to be accounted for. Faced with such countervailing evidence, our confidence in the original belief and its overall support may be shaken, and we may no longer be willing to call it knowledge or claim 'I know this', even if we still maintain some doxastic commitment to the claim and haven't quite given it up.

[7]There will also be additional norms of responsible knowing that come into play: how sure do we expect people to be when they claim knowledge?

friendship seriously and is committed to putting in the time and effort to help Anne sort through her difficulties. After a significant period of time, however, Karen discovers that Anne has been engaged in an affair leading up to and throughout these difficult times, but in spite of turning to her friend Karen for help in sorting through her long-term relationship with her partner, has not revealed the affair to Karen. Karen feels an affront, as though Anne has mistreated her. One interpretation of Karen's sense of affront is simply her disappointment over the fact that her friendship with Anne is not what Karen thought it was: she expected Anne would share such knowledge with her. But I take it that there is more to Karen's sense of an affront than this. At least part of the affront is grounded in Karen's sense that she has committed time and energy to what she took to be a joint epistemic project – trying to figure out the challenges and solutions to Anne's difficulties in her relationship with her partner. Karen takes Anne's ongoing affair to be a significant piece of information, crucially relevant to the conversations they are engaged in, and Anne's secret (from Karen) has stymied those efforts.

Anne's breach may well affect their ongoing friendship and its epistemic dimensions. Karen may continue to engage with Anne as a friend, but may not trust her to the same degree. She may recognize that at least on certain personal matters, Anne may be an untrustworthy knower – that is, untrustworthy in her ability to recognize what knowledge is significant enough to the joint epistemic project that it ought to be shared with her friend. Or, if we suppose that Anne did recognize the significance of the fact of her affair to her discussions with Karen, we might interpret her as untrustworthy in her character – lacking the strength of will to share this potential embarrassing information with her friend.[8] In either case, she has proved herself to be an untrustworthy partner in this particular context of knowledge-seeking, and this affects Karen's potential for succeeding in joint knowing projects with her. Anne may be able to offer her friend explanations for her behavior and reasons which dissipate the affront; perhaps she had an agreement with her partner that should one of them ever have an affair, they would tell each other first, or perhaps she felt the need to protect the person with whom she was having the affair.[9] But such explanations would be required in order to alleviate the affront, and a certain amount of healing and repair to the friendship may still be required, even in the presence of such explanations.

The case of Karen and Anne draws attention to the implications of such breaches of knowledge-sharing norms within close relationships. But breaches of knowledge-sharing norms also occur in more public settings, and within larger communities. Again, such breaches enable us to see these norms clearly when perhaps we had been oblivious to them before. For example, in cases of whistleblowing, someone from within an organization or institution calls public attention to some wrongdoing occurring within that organization, believing the revelation of the wrongdoing to be in the public interest. In many cases, the wrongdoing revealed involves the

[8] See Daukas (this volume) for further discussion of trustworthy knowers in joint epistemic projects.

[9] I thank Ann Garry and Carla Fehr for offering these plausible explanations.

organization (or key members of the organization) failing to share knowledge that the whistleblower believes ought to have been shared or communicated to those outside the organization (either a larger community with an interest in the organization's knowledge, or the public at large). The knowledge-sharing whistleblower makes public knowledge that someone has failed to share – knowledge that has been hidden from either the public or a relevant stakeholder (Grasswick 2010). So for example, in the early 1990s, Jeffray Wigand, a former chief executive in the tobacco industry made headlines when on the television show *60 Minutes* he claimed that big tobacco knew (that is, had scientific results to show) that cigarettes were addictive (Johnson 2003).[10] In another case that Lorraine Code (2006) discusses extensively, Dr. Nancy Olivieri, a medical researcher at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children became concerned about the risks of a therapeutic drug she was researching and, in violation of her confidentiality agreement with the drug company sponsors of the research, published her findings and insisted on revising the consent forms for the patients involved in the drug trials.

Moments of attention granted to whistleblowers constitute moments for public assessment with respect to knowledge-sharing norms: does the public accept the whistleblower's claim that such a piece of knowledge ought to have been shared? Does the public accept that the whistleblower was correct in their judgment that the knowledge needed to be shared? Whistleblowers are rarely successful, and they are not always received (by the public) in a positive light. But when knowledge-sharing whistleblowers are successful, it is because it is recognized that a violation of the norms of knowledge sharing has occurred.[11] Their actions offer moments of recognition of some of these important norms of knowledge sharing.

12.4 Variation in Knowledge-Sharing Norms

Knowledge-sharing norms vary immensely across communities and contexts. This is to be expected, since a particular set of epistemic goals embraced by a particular community will in part define the appropriateness of particular knowledge-sharing norms. For example, in the context of take-home exams, where norms of knowledge sharing will be formalized, students are expected not to share answers with each other or discuss the contents of the exam. Yet in another context, students may be given explicit instructions to work together on practice problems or other assignments, freely discussing and sharing their understandings of the material. Quite different pedagogical purposes drive these two exercises, and though they potentially occur within the same educational community, they are localized according to the goals of the particular epistemic project at hand.

[10] Wigand's story was popularized in the 1999 movie *The Insider*.

[11] I discuss cases of whistleblowers and their role in revealing breaches of trust between scientific and lay communities extensively in 'Scientific and Lay Communities: Earning Epistemic Trust through Knowledge Sharing' (Grasswick 2010).

Additionally, many of our knowledge-seeking activities are deeply intertwined in our other social practices and activities, and non-epistemic goals are mixed with epistemic goals in the development and maintenance of particular KSNs. For example, in a professional setting, it may be considered more acceptable to keep knowledge of one's personal life private, whereas in a social setting one might be expected to be more forthcoming in light of certain social goals of the activities. Cultural features of particular communities may help shape such norms. In some cases the non-epistemic reasons for the norms may bear more weight than the epistemic. When I first started teaching at a small residential liberal arts college in a rural area, it was made clear to me that I was *expected* to share my home phone number with my students so that they would have a means of contacting me anytime. Colleagues at larger institutions were shocked when I described this culture of faculty accessibility. At their large urban institutions, the norm was not to share such information. As many at large institutions viewed the situation, it was not just an issue of privacy, but also an issue of security (particularly for female faculty), where easy access to faculty might lead to harassment. The culture of my institution suggested that security was a lower risk in the context of our small community, and that it was reasonable to trade off that small risk for the positive effects of faculty accessibility – of fostering a close parenting-type relationship with our students, *regardless* of whether they ever did call us at home. The student-teacher relationship was taken to be in some part shaped by their understanding that they *could* reach us at home. (In fact, I rarely received phone calls at home except in emergencies). Here, although the result was a form of greater knowledge sharing than at institutions with more restrictions on the sharing of personal information such as phone numbers, it was motivated less by an epistemic goal (that of increasing the students' knowledge of their professors' lives) and more by a social goal of fostering a particular kind of institutional culture and faculty-student relationship.[12]

12.5 Assessing Knowledge-Sharing Norms: Knowledge Sharing as an Intrinsic Good

Anita Allen reflects

> The web of accountability relationships is both flexible and sticky. …The web is sticky in the sense that socially determined and reinforced expectations impel us. Expectations impel us, for example, to tell our mothers certain things, to explain certain things to our friends, and to justify much to our employers. The web is flexible in the sense that we have a good deal of freedom to stretch and mold these connections to suit individual taste (Allen 2003, 197–198).

[12] Of course, because it is an educational setting, there are further epistemic implications of fostering this particular institutional culture. Presumably one argument for developing an institutional culture of close faculty-student relations is that the students will learn better within such a community.

Allen notes the flexibility within given accountability relationships at an individual level. The social norms of knowledge sharing are also flexible and can change. For example, positive public reaction to knowledge-sharing whistleblowers can sometimes lead to increased expectations of knowledge sharing from corporations. Though I have described knowledge-sharing norms as features of the social practices of knowing that have pull on us, ranging widely across different contexts and communities, we can reflect on these norms, and evaluate them according to how well they serve our epistemic and our related practical needs. Some will work well, and others will not. Such assessment will be the first step in our ability to envision knowledge-sharing norms embedded in social practices that are both epistemically fruitful and liberatory.

Thus far, I have described KSNs as *sociological* norms, core components of our social practices. We identify, understand and describe them by observing what people do and what people expect of each other. But a critical assessment of such sociological norms engages us in normative evaluation (not just description), considering how well they function in serving our goals. As part of a liberatory epistemology, I suggest that such an evaluation of KSNs should attend to both the epistemic and ethico-political outcomes of their functioning, noting that these won't always or even commonly be separable. In what follows, I focus on the epistemic ramifications of KSNs – that is, the knowledge produced or hindered as a result of KSNs – considering them in relation to the epistemological goals of liberatory epistemology. Do particular knowledge-sharing norms operating in specific contexts help or hinder liberatory goals through the knowledge they produce? Can the fostering of certain KSNs aid some of our anti-oppressive strategies by producing important knowledge?

As a first attempt at evaluating KSNs, it might seem reasonable to adopt a very simple principle that increased knowledge sharing has value in itself, and in an ideal world we would maximize our knowledge sharing. From this principle, we could surmise that KSNs that are more demanding with respect to the sharing of knowledge would be *prima facie* preferable. At least two different arguments can be given for this principle of increased knowledge sharing. The first argument is not specific to a liberatory epistemology, though the second is. First, one might be tempted to think that because knowledge is a good in itself (a position common amongst epistemologists), sharing knowledge is also a good in itself. After all, the point of seeking knowledge is to *have* it (and perhaps then use it) and assuming knowledge is a good, sharing knowledge increases the number of people who have the good. According to this general principle, KSNs that capture high expectations of sharing knowledge amongst people and thus foster a high level of knowledge sharing would be judged better than more restrictive KSNs. On such a view, perhaps time pressures and non-epistemic or practical goals limit our abilities to share all of our knowledge with each other in particular cases, but in an ideal world, we would share everything, giving us the most knowledge to work with in our respective epistemic endeavors. In cases where time is not a limiting factor, and specific practical goals do not intervene, we should work toward evolving cultures that increase knowledge sharing amongst us.

But a second argument for the principle of increased knowledge sharing makes the case even stronger by taking up the question explicitly from the perspective of a liberatory epistemology. For those interested in overturning forces of oppression, it is important to note that hiding knowledge from others is often a sign of power as well as an effective use of power. For example, the privacy that comes with the privilege of wealth contributes to the ability of an abusive husband to hide the domestic violence in his household. The power of the Ted Turners and the Conrad Blacks of the world to wield influence over the media permits a very effective measure of public and political control, by shaping and limiting what knowledge reaches public forums. Knowledge sharing and the free exchange of ideas are understood to be both core features of democracy and important elements in the building of democracy. It is a small move from recognizing the important political implications of controlling access to knowledge to claiming that increasing the norms and expectations of sharing knowledge is hands-down a positive and liberatory move across the board. If knowledge brings power, then sharing knowledge is likely to result in a sharing of or wider dispersal of power. More specifically, if the oppressed and the marginalized need access to knowledge to undertake social change, and if it is harder to maintain oppression within open and transparent cultures of knowledge production, norms of knowledge sharing that demand a high level of transparency will score high according to a liberatory epistemology.

Both these arguments suggest that increased knowledge seeking is *prima facie* good and preferable, though of course this claim and the arguments for it are not incompatible with finding exceptions. Just as many epistemologists claim knowledge as a general good while acknowledging that in certain circumstances we may have an interest in not knowing something (to protect someone from psychological hurt for example by shielding them from painful knowledge), the claim that knowledge sharing is a *prima facie* good allows for extenuating circumstances to override that good. Similarly we could accept the argument that increased knowledge sharing is generally liberatory, while acknowledging that there may be particular sets of circumstances where this principle fails to hold.

12.6 Assessing Knowledge-Sharing Norms: Rejecting Knowledge Sharing as an Intrinsic Good

Clearly these arguments for the *prima facie* value of increased knowledge sharing, and overall knowledge sharing as an ideal, at first appear quite attractive for liberatory epistemologists. Taking them seriously would place the burden of proof on those who argue for the benefits of restricting knowledge sharing in particular cases. This would offer some degree of protection against justifications of oppressive practices that involve the withholding of knowledge. For example, given the principle of the *prima facie* value of knowledge sharing, we need to be convinced that confidentiality agreements in employment situations that keep knowledge from

the public are warranted, rather than accepting them without discussion. The burden of proof would lie on the side of restricting knowledge sharing.

Unfortunately, tempting as this view may be for liberatory epistemologists, as I show below, it burdens us with an unrealistic and confused view of the importance and role of knowledge sharing, carrying with it problematic ramifications for oppressive situations. I argue that liberatory epistemologists should not take knowledge sharing across the board to be the ideal, nor adopt a principle of the *prima facie* value of increased knowledge sharing, for several interrelated reasons.

First, although the principle of knowledge sharing as a *prima facie* good is not incompatible with finding exceptions, in order for the principle to stand up, the exceptions found must be infrequent enough to constitute genuine exceptions rather than the norm. If the exceptions are frequent, the principle will not be very useful as a guide to assessing knowledge-sharing norms. Further, the more exceptions there are, the more likely it is that the principle of the *prima facie* value of increased knowledge sharing is just plain wrong.[13] As I show below, it is in fact very easy to generate abundant examples of contexts where increased knowledge sharing is problematic, either given general epistemic goals, or the more specific goals of liberatory epistemology.

Key to recognizing the problem with asserting the *prima facie* value of knowledge sharing is that increased knowledge sharing can frequently inhibit the production of certain forms of knowledge. So there can be *epistemological* reasons for restricting knowledge sharing. It is not just practical and non-epistemic goals that intervene to override the value of knowledge sharing (though these will play an important role too). If this is the case, the original argument of moving from the good of knowledge to the (obvious) good of knowledge sharing, does not hold. Sometimes, knowledge sharing and the production of further knowledge will operate as *conflicting* values.

Double-blind studies are perhaps the quintessential example of a context where the withholding of knowledge (in this case, not revealing to subjects or researchers who belongs to the control group and who the test group) is fundamental to the production of a certain kind of scientific knowledge – determining the effectiveness of whatever is being tested. Knowledge of the effectiveness of the therapy cannot be ascertained, or cannot be ascertained as well, in the absence of double-blind studies. Thus, limiting access to some kinds of knowledge can actually *foster* the production of other kinds of knowledge. Similarly, the academic practice of anonymous review is designed to improve objective assessment of the quality of academic work, generating a kind of objective knowledge about that work, by withholding information about authors and reviewers. These practices are striking because they are employed in science, a pursuit which has long taken knowledge sharing and

[13] Although I do not discuss it here, my reasoning has similarities with naturalized approaches to epistemology, suggesting that epistemological principles need to be derived from our actual practices rather than put forth as abstract and ideal principles without concern for whether or not they can be instantiated in our practices.

the free exchange of ideas to be central to its success.[14] For example, the public accessibility of scientific results is an important requirement for the replicability of results, and replicability is well-recognized as a core feature of science (Harding 2000, 125). Yet even in science, there are common restrictions on the sharing of certain kinds of knowledge, specifically for the purpose of improving the production of certain other kinds of knowledge.

From the perspective of a liberatory epistemology, withholding knowledge can also often serve liberatory social and political goals directly, and norms of increased knowledge-seeking can easily work against liberatory goals. In the realm of science, the practices of anonymous review mentioned above that involve withholding information about the authors can be especially important for women and other underrepresented groups. For example, Virginia Valian argues that 'the gender schemas that we all share result in our overrating men and underrating women in professional settings' (Valian 2005, 198). Supported by empirical data, Valian's claims about the widespread and unintentional nature of these gender schemas suggest that practices such as anonymous review are absolutely necessary in order to ensure an unbiased reading of the quality of women's academic work and their ability to advance their careers by being given appropriate credit (through publication) in their fields.[15] Additionally, invoking norms of increased knowledge sharing generally decreases spheres of privacy, and this can work directly against liberatory social and political goals. In a country such as the United States with privatized health care, expectations and requirements of turning over information about pre-existing conditions to insurance providers can lead to further discrimination and poorer health care for those who are already challenged by medical conditions. In the post 9–11 age, laws introduced such as the Patriot Act giving the United States government greater access to wire-tapping and knowledge about the private lives of individuals threaten the well-being of many marginalized groups of people such as recent immigrants.[16] Taking increased knowledge sharing to be a *prima facie* good is an abstract principle that misses entirely any understanding of how sharing knowledge can make those most vulnerable in society even more vulnerable. The same premise that drove the liberatory argument for accepting the principle of increased knowledge sharing – that withholding knowledge from others can give one power – suggests that in the case of the oppressed, withholding knowledge from their oppressors might well either give them more power, or at least make them less vulnerable to the will and interests of those in power. Feminists and race theorists have frequently appealed to such reasoning in the justification of oppositional secrets, where marginalized or oppressed groups keep secrets from

[14] In the case of anonymous review, of course, the practice is employed across many academic disciplines, not just science.

[15] I thank Phyllis Rooney for making this connection to Valian's work.

[16] Regardless of the security interests of the United States' population which such laws may or may not serve, these conditions are certainly not conducive to many other liberatory goals of segments of the population who are affected by the laws.

their oppressors as acts of resistance and survival. Catherine Hundleby cites examples such as the Underground Railway, the location of women's shelters and lesbians passing as straight women as cases where survival can be directly tied to the keeping of oppositional secrets (Hundleby 2005).[17] From the perspective of the oppressed then, withholding knowledge is frequently an important strategy.

So far I have offered first, examples of epistemic reasons for restricting knowledge sharing in science that do not appeal specifically to a liberatory epistemology, and second, examples concerning the value of privacy that directly invoke liberatory social and political goals, without reference to epistemic goals. But there is also an argument to be made for the restriction of knowledge sharing specifically on epistemic grounds within the framework of a liberatory epistemology. Earlier, I stated that a liberatory epistemology is particularly interested in specific forms of knowledge: those necessary to understand and overcome oppression. According to a liberatory epistemology, more restrictive norms of knowledge sharing are likely preferable in cases where increases in knowledge sharing would work against the production of knowledge needed to understand or overcome oppression. In the context of oppression, such instances might be widespread. Alison Bailey discusses how the oppressed can use what she calls 'strategic ignorance' as 'a way of expediently working with a dominant group's tendency to see wrongly' (Bailey 2007, 88). For example, the oppressed might 'play dumb' (not sharing their knowledge) conforming to the dominant group's expectations, in order to gain more information which could be helpful to both survival and resistance. Consciousness raising, a key epistemological tool for feminists, offers another example. By coming together in consciousness-raising groups, and sharing with each other experiences of discrimination, sexism and marginalization, women have been able to come to understand those experiences as symptomatic of oppression, rather than as individual or personal problems. They come to realize both the systematic nature of the oppression, and its injustice. But importantly, it is a mistake to interpret the value of consciousness raising as wholeheartedly endorsing the sharing of knowledge. While the sharing of experiences is the form of knowledge sharing indicative of the consciousness-raising process, it is also crucial that this sharing take place in a safe environment, by restricting the group to those who have had similar experiences. Consciousness-raising groups for women would hardly be very successful if men were present in the room, particularly those viewed as perpetrators of women's oppression. While women often come to proclaim publicly their understandings of oppression later, to actually produce the understanding in the first place requires a trusting environment and thus a limited audience or community.[18] The same reasoning applies to caucus groups,

[17] Hundleby acknowledges the direct political value of such oppositional secrets, though what she is interested in exploring is the epistemological justification for holding them.

[18] As a result of new insights derived from consciousness-raising groups, 'speak-outs' were often organized by feminists to publicly break the silence surrounding the oppression of women. Such stories are recounted in Susan Brownmiller's *In Our Time*: *Memoir of a Revolution* (1990), as cited in Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* (2007, 150).

such as women of color caucuses within feminist groups, and junior faculty meetings as distinct from all-faculty meetings.

Consciousness-raising and caucus groups reveal a second reason for a rejection of the principle of increased knowledge sharing as a *prima facie* good. Not only are the exceptions to the principle quite frequent when we start looking, but cases of consciousness-raising and caucus groups remind us that knowledge sharing always occurs within a particular context, and is directed at a *particular* audience. Part of the value of the knowledge sharing comes in the choices we make concerning with whom and when we share. This explains in part why the exceptions to the principle of increased knowledge sharing are so frequent: we never share knowledge of everything with everyone, and it would be an odd idea to think of doing so. When there is a good to be had through knowledge sharing, it is through knowledge sharing with a particular individual or group of people. We build social and epistemic relations by sharing with some people and forming and maintaining epistemic communities through that knowledge sharing. As Cynthia Townley notes, 'We count an epistemic colleague as one who will generally be trustworthy and discreet, who roughly shares our norms of disclosure and revelation, or whose deviations can be challenged and reviewed' (Townley 2003, 109).[19] If the value of knowledge sharing comes from the development of specific epistemic relations in which we are counting on our partners in epistemic pursuits to be discreet with others, then a principle of the *prima facie* good of increased knowledge sharing cannot be right.

A third reason to reject a general principle of the *prima facie* good of increased knowledge sharing comes from the recognition that limiting access to knowledge is frequently necessary in order to achieve our specific epistemic goals within a particular context. There is simply too much knowledge, and sharing it all can get in the way of not only our practical goals, but also our epistemic goals. This is in part a result of the limits and design of our cognitive capacities. A politician expects her staff to provide her with briefing notes, not the entire body of research they have uncovered on the topic on which she will be interviewed. In some cases, strategies of swamping people with information are used to make sound reflective understanding more difficult to achieve. For example, lawyers for a corporation engaged in a battle over an environmentally questionable development project may employ a strategy of swamping the courts with hundreds of pages of environmental impact assessments, not all of them high quality, with the intent of making it impossible to sift through and come to a reasonable judgment on the matter. When it comes to being on the receiving end of knowledge sharing, we constantly depend on others to operate as knowledge filtering systems in order to allow us to do a better job of the knowing tasks at hand. Many epistemologists have rejected the idea that the accumulation of knowledge (or truths) *per se* is appropriately thought of as the goal of knowledge seeking. Rather, they have recognized that it is really *significant* knowledge that we are after when we engage in

[19]I thank Phyllis Rooney for directing me to Townley's work and seeing the connections with the themes of this paper.

epistemic pursuits (Anderson 1995; Kitcher 2001). As Elizabeth Anderson explains 'Theoretical inquiry does not just seek any random truth. It seeks answers to questions. What counts as a significant truth is any truth that bears on the answer to the question being posed' (Anderson 1995, 39). Similarly in the case of knowledge sharing, its good derives not from random knowledge sharing, but the sharing of knowledge *significant* to the project at hand. The proposed principle of increased knowledge sharing as a *prima facie* good ignores our epistemic need to limit our knowledge intake to that which is significant for the project at hand. Returning to the case I discussed earlier of Anne and Karen, the breach of trust in this relationship occurred not because there existed a piece of knowledge that was not shared, but rather because the knowledge of the affair withheld was considered by one of the parties to be *significant* to the joint epistemic pursuit they were engaged in.

Recognizing that the value of knowledge sharing really applies only to the *significant* knowledge in question for the project at hand, and is relative to the particular recipient or audience (in many times a participant in a joint epistemic project) helps explain why exceptions to any *prima facie* principle of increased knowledge sharing are so frequent. Surprisingly, in spite of its initial appeal, a principle of the *prima facie* good of increased knowledge sharing must be rejected. A liberatory epistemology must look to a more contextually-based assessment of the value of knowledge sharing, and relatedly, the appropriateness of particular knowledge-sharing norms.

12.7 Assessing Knowledge-Sharing Norms: Returning to the Goals of Liberatory Epistemology

With respect to the assessment of KSNs from within the framework of a liberatory epistemology, there are several lessons to be drawn from my discussions above. First, KSNs will in part need to be assessed according to traditionally conceived non-epistemic ethico-political goals such as the well-being of the oppressed and their opportunities to resist oppression. I have described several ways in which KSNs may directly aid or inhibit the goals of positive social change that are an important part of a liberatory epistemology. Insofar as liberatory epistemology has an interest in revealing the connections between knowledge seeking and the maintenance and resistance to oppression, it will be critical of those KSNs that contribute to the maintenance of oppression (such as a culture of acceptable far-reaching government and corporate secrecy), and it will be suggestive of KSNs that help foster resistance. In some contexts the ethico-political goals of liberatory epistemology will imply a need to widen the expectations of knowledge sharing, while in others it will imply narrowing the expectations of knowledge sharing.

The second lesson is that it is also appropriate to assess KSNs according to how well they contribute to the process of knowledge production. Future knowledge production is a key epistemic goal. Having argued against the view that the value of knowledge sharing lies only in the value of that knowledge itself, I have shown how in particular contexts, a certain degree of knowledge withholding can foster the

production of particular kinds of knowledge better than increased knowledge sharing. It is a question of determining the appropriate expectations of knowledge sharing and withholding that will best serve the epistemic interests of further knowledge production for a liberatory epistemology. We need not deny that there is epistemic merit to be found in sharing the (significant) knowledge previously generated, yet it is clear that this is not where our epistemic goals end. The extent to which KSNs can foster future knowledge production must also be taken into account.

The third lesson to be drawn is particularly significant in terms of reconceptualizing the value of knowledge sharing. My examples of the ramifications of KSNs for the production of knowledge focus on specific forms of knowledge. To assess the appropriateness of particular KSNs then, we will need to consider how well they contribute not just to the production of knowledge generally, but to the production of those forms of knowledge we are interested in generating (recall the case of double-blind studies). Given how I outlined a liberatory epistemology above, as being especially interested in particular forms of knowledge necessary for understanding and overcoming oppression, we can now see that a liberatory epistemology will be interested in fostering KSNs that specifically aid the development of our knowledge and understanding of oppression. As I noted early on in this paper, feminist epistemologists have focused on the question '*knowledge for whom*?' The answer to this question, and correspondingly the answer to the question '*what kind of knowledge do we want to produce?*' will be crucial to determining what kind of KSNs we deem appropriate according to a liberatory epistemology.

Miranda Fricker's discussion of the hermeneutical injustice characteristic of the experiences of the oppressed offers one of the clearest examples of how certain contexts of knowledge sharing are necessary to develop forms of knowledge important for the oppressed. According to Fricker, hermeneutical injustice describes the cognitive disadvantage that arises when one is unable to understand one's experience because of a 'gap in the collective hermeneutical resource' (Fricker 2007, 151).[20] Fricker draws on Susan Brownmiller's book *In Our Time*: *Memoir of a Revolution* (1990) to describe such cases of hermeneutical injustice and the way in which consciousness raising amongst women was used to generate the necessary hermeneutical tools. In particular, Fricker describes the story of Carmita Wood and the unwanted sexual advances she and others experienced in the workplace during a time when there was no concept of 'sexual harassment.' By telling their stories in a safe environment, the women came to see the commonality of their experiences, and came to identify it as 'sexual harassment,' a previously unknown phenomenon. As Fricker describes the process:

> If we look at the history of the women's movement, we see that the method of consciousness raising through 'speak-outs' and the sharing of scantly understood, barely articulate experiences was a direct response to the fact that so much of women's experience was obscure,

[20] Less germane to my discussion here but nevertheless important are the details of what makes it an *injustice*. Fricker specifies that although in a sense all suffer the cognitive disadvantage of the absence of these hermeneutical resources, the one whose experience is misunderstood is unduly burdened when the misunderstanding represents a significant area of their social experience (2007, 154).

> even unspeakable, for the isolated individuals, whereas the process of sharing these half-formed understandings awakened hitherto dormant resources for social meaning that brought clarity, cognitive confidence, and increased communicative facility…. Women were collectively able to overcome extant *routine* social interpretive habits and arrive at *exceptional* interpretations of some of their formerly occluded experiences; together they were able to realize resources for meaning that were as yet only implicit in the social interpretive practices of the time (Fricker 2007, 148).

By creating communities and safe spaces where the women could share such personal (and often painful) experiences with each other, they were able to generate knowledge of specific forms of their oppression. Importantly, as I noted in the last section, sharing such personal knowledge needed first to be done in women-only spaces (essentially forming a norm of withholding their experiential knowledge from men, yet being open with the women in the group) though once the knowledge of the systematic nature of the phenomenon was generated and 'sexual harassment' was named, speak-outs could be organized to break the public silence on the issue. But for the generation of the knowledge itself, communities needed to be formed with KSNs that fostered trust and knowledge sharing within. Of course, there need not be a direct correlation between stringent norms of knowledge sharing and the actual knowledge sharing that occurs. As I discuss below, high burdens of knowledge sharing that pressure individuals to share may fail to generate the atmosphere of trust necessary for productive knowledge sharing. In the case of consciousness raising, there is an expectation of sharing within the confines of the group, but if those expectations are set too high, the sense of safety and trust within the group that is necessary to encourage people to speak about their experiences may be jeopardized.

These three lessons all set out goals against which we can evaluate how well our knowledge-sharing norms are serving us. However, there is a fourth lesson of a different nature that is also crucial to understanding the value of knowledge sharing.

12.8 Positionality and Trust

A fourth and final lesson to be gleaned from my discussions is that *positionality* is an important variable in assessing KSNs. People do not come to the knowledge-sharing table from equal positions of power, and the impact of specific KSNs on a person will vary, depending on one's social situation. A liberatory epistemology needs to consider who is expected to share knowledge with whom. The relevance of positionality formed part of my argument against adopting a principle of the *prima facie* value of increased knowledge sharing: since knowledge sharing often increases vulnerability, the demands of KSNs can be particularly harmful to those already marginalized, either directly (through political actions changing the material conditions of the marginalized) or indirectly (through new knowledge generated

as a result of the sharing that then has political implications). We cannot assume anything like a principle of the *prima facie* value of increased knowledge sharing when the effects of increased knowledge sharing vary so widely across social position. Unlike the first three lessons, positionality does not offer us a specific goal according to which KSNs can be assessed. But it does provide a framework through which to understand those goals: rather than assuming that a particular set of KSNs will serve everyone equally well (whether by ethico-political standards or epistemic standards) a liberatory epistemology will consider again the feminist question of *knowledge for whom*, assessing how well a set of KSNs functions for those in particular social locations.

Taking the relevance of positionality seriously leads us to a clearer understanding of the difficulties of harnessing epistemic efforts across power differentials, something with which the feminist movement is familiar. Discussing the relationship between women of color and white women, María Lugones writes 'I keep secrets. Even though I am told over and over by white feminists that we must reveal ourselves, open ourselves, I keep secrets. Disclosing our secrets threatens our survival' (Lugones 2003, 11). Lugones here draws our attention to the vulnerability of feminists of color in relation to white feminists, even while committed to common feminist goals. Her description captures how the KSNs within feminist communities place pressure on women of color to share their understandings with white women. It is arguably too much to expect such disclosure on behalf of women of color, since disclosing knowledge about themselves can then be used against them. This could happen even without malicious intent if white women do not fully understand the position and vulnerabilities of women of color.[21] Indeed, Lugones's comments suggest that the very fact that white women are operating with these KSNs, expecting such knowledge sharing on behalf of women of color, reveals that they do not fully appreciate the situation of women of color. This is a case where the KSNs in place are not working well in producing an epistemically productive community, not simply because secrets are being kept which might be relevant to the epistemic project at hand, but because the presence of the KSNs themselves, taken to be inappropriate by women of color, is further damaging the relations of trust with potentially far-reaching implications.

As this case illustrates, KSNs do more than produce the phenomena of sharing and withholding knowledge. They also create social pressures for knowers to share or withhold, and as such they help shape the relations between knowers and levels of trust within a community and across social positions. Understanding how positionality plays into the creation of relations of trust within epistemic communities

[21] As Sarah Hoagland points out, good intentions on behalf of the relatively privileged aren't enough. Speaking of the position of the relatively privileged within the feminist community, she writes: 'even when we seek in friendship the openings and unexpected connections that situated knowledges make possible, we can be dangerous. To whom are we addressing ourselves, to whom are we offering information, and why?' (2001, 138).

reveals that there is no reason to assume that the best KSNs will be reciprocal across parties. Contexts can be envisioned where the goals of liberatory epistemology will best be served by adopting KSNs which apply to some positions but not all within the community. For example, given the situation Lugones describes, the best way to develop the trusting environment within the feminist community might well be to shift the relations of accountability, adopting KSNs where those who are more vulnerable due to social position are not held to the same expectations of knowledge sharing as those who are more privileged. There is of course much more to developing relations of trust than just establishing appropriate KSNs. However, recognizing the role of KSNs in developing the cultures of trust necessary for knowledge production helps us understand that the assessment of such norms is very complex, particularly in cases of power differentials where cultures of trust are more difficult to establish. We must take into account both the epistemic effects of the knowledge circulation itself as well as the social effects of the norms in developing epistemically productive cultures.

12.9 Conclusions

KSNs, particularly informal ones, are complex and difficult to identify. Yet they perform an important role in epistemic practices, guiding our knowledge sharing and knowledge withholding in ways that can foster or hinder epistemically productive and politically sound epistemic communities. As I have argued, the knowledge circulation enabled by KSNs has ethico-political effects as well as epistemic effects concerning future knowledge production, yet these effects differ according to social location. The complexity of these effects offer evidence against the plausibility of any general principle asserting the *prima facie* value of increased knowledge sharing, in spite of the potential appeal of such a principle for liberatory epistemologists. Instead, a liberatory epistemology must examine the specific contexts in which our KSNs are operating, and assess them according to both ethico-political and epistemic goals, with a sensitivity to the power differentials that predominate in contexts of oppression.

Though I have rejected any general principle asserting the *prima facie* value of increased knowledge sharing, it remains reasonable to expect that in a great many cases, norms that foster transparency within (and across) epistemic communities will be epistemically fruitful and liberatory. But when they are so, it will not be because there is any direct link between increased knowledge sharing and increased knowledge, or increased knowledge sharing and liberation. Rather, it will be because in the particular context assessed, the conditions are such that norms encouraging broad transparency increase rather than decrease the culture of trust necessary to generate liberatory knowledge. Finding the right level of knowledge-sharing norms can be difficult, particularly in contexts of oppression, and my discussion simply raises the bar for the kind of complex assessment required to understand how

particular knowledge-sharing norms can help us know well, particularly in our feminist liberatory pursuits.

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