Towards Epistemic Justice in the Archives: The Implications of Miranda Fricker's Philosophy for Archival Reference

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Abstract

Miranda Fricker's (2007) book, Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing, outlines how social practices of knowledge-making can cause unjust harms to people in their capacity as knowers. These harms are epistemic injustices. From the literature detailing archival collections documenting human rights abuses, it is clear that archives have the potential to transmit and perpetuate epistemic injustices that were committed in the past. Because of this, archivists have a responsibility to attempt to mitigate epistemic injustice. Activist approaches to reference services can help in this regard.

Keywords: archives; reference; social justice; ethics; epistemology

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Introduction

Archivists face unique ethical challenges when they deal with documentation of human rights abuses and mistreatment of marginalized communities. In addition to containing sensitive subject matter, these materials have unique potential uses that can embroil archivists in ethically charged situations. For example, such records are often used to seek redress from governments for past injustices, and documentation of biased and racist governments are far from the neutral materials that many hope for them to be. By misunderstanding the biases in these materials, researchers can perpetuate them, and marginalized people can be dissuaded from using archives to connect with their own history. Therefore, it is important to consider what archivists should do in these situations, and whether or not it is enough to merely stand back, point users in the right direction, and let the materials speak for themselves.

Miranda Fricker's (2007) book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, outlines how social practices of knowledge-making can cause unjust harms to people in their capacity as knowers. While Fricker's work has been applied to a diverse array of disciplines, it has not yet been addressed in archival or information science. This, I believe, is an oversight. There are unique ways in which those who work in institutions like archives are involved in social knowledge practices that can cause unjust harms to marginalized people, and there are also unique opportunities for archivists to help remedy such injustices. For this reason, I argue that archivists and others in the information field are responsible for actively taking on cases of epistemic injustice. Traditional assumptions about the archivist's role should be cast aside, and an activist approach should be applied to reference services.

In this paper, I argue that archives have the potential to transmit epistemic injustices committed in the past, and that because of their involvement in and potential perpetuation of these injustices, archivists have a duty to work toward epistemic justice. This paper begins with a review of the literature concerning ethics and social justice in archives, focusing particularly on work that looks at the relationship between archives, past injustices, and silenced voices. The next section explains the concept of epistemic injustice as theorized by Fricker. From there, I argue that the framework of epistemic injustice is a useful tool to understand ethical challenges in archives. Finally, I contend that archivists have a duty to address these harms in reference situations and, in so doing, work toward epistemic justice.

Literature on Injustice within Archival Materials

It is important to acknowledge that archivists are in the business of keeping ethically charged materials. These may take the form of records of unethical actions and have the potential to reproduce the harms that they record. In many cases, such records are essential to understanding human rights violations. However, it is often the case that the documentation of these abuses is couched in the conceptual framework of the perpetrators, and the archives have the potential to forward that narrative. Examples of this abound in the scholarly literature.

In “An Exploratory Analysis of *Time on the Cross* and its Archival Implications,” Gibbs (2010) explains the history of the controversial book *Time on the Cross*, which argues that American slavery was economically beneficial for both enslaved people and their “owners.” Published in 1974, the book sparked a heated ethical debate, although Gibbs notes that archivists largely stayed out of it. Written by Robert Fogel and Stanley

Engerman (1974), *Time on the Cross* was notable for its quantitative and, on the surface, objective methods. Controversially, the authors argued that

the belief that slave-breeding, sexual exploitation, and promiscuity destroyed the black family is a myth....It was to the economic interest of planters to encourage the stability of slave families and most of them did so....the material (not psychological) conditions of the lives of slaves compared favorably with those of free industrial workers....slaves were exploited in the sense that part of the income which they produced was expropriated by their owners. However, the rate of expropriation was much lower than has generally been presumed. Over the course of his lifetime, the typical slave field hand received about 90 percent of the income he produced. (Fogel & Engerman, 1974, pp. 6-7)

The authors analyzed available archival data using valid statistical methods to reach their conclusions. While Fogel and Engerman (1974) mention gaps in the archival information available and acknowledge the limits of the questions that this data could answer, they took the existing data as objective and did not seriously consider the extent of bias in the material. In this way, the unexamined assumption that archival records are neutral led to the reproduction of biases within them.

The records, of course, were created by a system with vested interests in slavery. Since enslaved people did not have citizenship, very few records were kept of the details of their lives (Gibbs, 2010, p. 101). Their voices and suffering were largely excluded from the archival record, while the government's interests were magnified. In this way, an "objective" analysis of biased records can perpetuate those same biases. Gibbs argues that the archivists involved in Fogel and Engerman's research had a

responsibility to stop this sort of misunderstanding (or abuse) of the records. The “fallacy of archival impotence” holds that archivists are not an integral part of the research process (Gibbs, 2010, p. 107); they merely point researchers toward the materials. Against this, Gibbs argues that archivists are entwined in the research process and bear the responsibility for the impact of the archives. Thus, he suggests that archivists engage in active reference that impresses the biases of the records on researchers.

In “‘Peace, Order and Good Government’: Archives in Society,” Wilson (2012) describes the value of archives in supporting Indigenous claims of mistreatment. Although archives are not the only factor in addressing past wrongs, Wilson argues that a strong archival record is essential in addressing past abuses like those that occurred in residential schools. He notes that governments will often try to suppress the archival record in the case of human rights abuses. Also, archives may alienate those from marginalized and mistreated groups; the preservation of racist terminology and its use in description can make users “subjects” and “captives” of the archives, and the official and scholarly connotations of archives can drive them away (Wilson, 2012). Thus, Wilson recommends that archivists form partnerships with local public librarians, who may be perceived as more approachable and can help direct users to the archives.

In “‘No Longer a Silent Victim of History:’ Repurposing the Documents of Japanese American Internment,” Hastings (2011) outlines the use of archives in procuring financial restitution for victims of the post-WWII internment of Japanese Americans. She argues that records once created for social control can be repurposed for social justice. The American government justified the internment on the grounds that

it was necessary for national security, yet the archival record shows this to be a lie. Intelligence agencies deemed a mass incarceration unnecessary and uncovered evidence of illegal sharing of census data used to target individuals for internment (Hastings, 2011). A final “smoking gun” came in the form of a pre-edited government report (slated for destruction, but somehow overlooked) that made explicit the racist motivations for the policy. Using these records, activists were able to procure \$20,000 for each of the surviving victims of the internment. However, the \$37 million spent on reparations fell far short of the estimate that the internment cost its victims at least \$77 million. The shortfall was due to gaps in the records (Hastings, 2011). Many potentially valuable records, from personal papers and belongings to tax records and government documents, were destroyed. Moreover, the records of the internment are not neutral, as they were created to protect the government from charges of misconduct. Although they were eventually used as tools to enact social justice, the gaps ensured that reparations severely minimized the losses that the survivors suffered.

As Valderhaug (2011) writes in “Memory, Justice and the Public Record,” archival records have similarly been of great interest to the war children of postwar Norway. During the Nazi occupation, some women fraternized with Nazis and had children. This was viewed as a major crime, and the offending women were stripped of their citizenship. The children were sometimes deported and given false names, and they did not realize their true parentage until much later. The war children were also refused the family allowance that was distributed to other citizens. Valderhaug notes that part of the justification for this was eugenic: the women who fraternized with the

enemy showed moral flaws that government officials suspected were genetically transferred. The war children would likely show the same flaws, they argued.

Valderhaug (2011) draws attention to the fact that the archival documentation pertaining to the war children is very ethically charged. These records were first created by Nazi officials, who thought positively of the war children and possibly even encouraged officials to fraternize with local women. After the Nazis were expelled, this documentation was used to establish the war children as a distinct social class, which ultimately led to their unjust treatment. Later, war children were given compensation for their suffering—if they could prove it had happened. The documentation became a recourse for compensation, but this was itself problematic, since not all war children were documented by the Norwegian government. Furthermore, those seeking compensation were often not accustomed to archival research and could not easily understand the records or how to find them. Valderhaug (2011) argues that archivists have a special responsibility to help users like these navigate the archives.

Halilovich (2014) writes about the effect of lost and suppressed records on survivors of the Bosnian genocide and the refugee diaspora. In particular, he notes that women are underrepresented in the archives. While a majority of those killed were men, the many ways women were victims of violence—including forced migration and systematic rape—are almost invisible in the archival record. In many cases, widows were forced to “remarry” husbands who were killed in order to establish an official record of their union. Halilovich points to several reasons for this archival underrepresentation of women, including stigma and shame surrounding the heinous crimes as well as the popular narrative of male heroism. He suggests that online

communities are often a better record of memory than are traditional, physical archival materials.

As previously noted, the destruction of archival records is also an issue. In “In the Trenches: Archival Ethics, Law and the Case of the Destroyed CIA Tapes,” Cox (2013) outlines how the CIA relied on vague language in laws regarding the preservation of archival material to defend the destruction of evidence of human rights abuses. All government documents created by the CIA are, by law, available to archives for preservation. However, the destruction of “nonrecord materials” is permitted—a poorly defined concept that agencies exploited. Soon, Cox (2013) points out, huge volumes of material were deemed nonrecord materials. Notoriously, this included post-9/11 videos of advanced interrogations, which were consciously slated for destruction because they could have been used as evidence of human rights abuses. This demonstrates how records can be manipulated by powerful groups to obscure their crimes.

Other scholars have reflected on the relationship between archives and human rights more generally. For example, Harris (2014) argues that large scale attempts to archive and address human rights abuses often do less good than is commonly assumed. In examining the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission on apartheid, he finds that these types of organizations often play a problematic role in justifying and indemnifying the state. In particular, these organizations may disregard their origins in state power and misrepresent the role of memory in healing. Instead, Harris advocates for a more decentralized and community-based model of memory institutions.

Wood et al. (2014) argue that some of the most basic principles of archival science require rethinking if we are to take the role of archives in preserving human rights seriously. The authors challenge respect des fonds, as well as the related principles of original order and provenance, on the grounds that, “as traditionally conceived, original order forces archivists to maintain the logic and bureaucratic order of the repressive regime enacting further violence on its victims, survivors, and their families” (Wood et. al., 2014, p. 402). While the archival materials themselves are also ethically charged, the authors focus instead on how the theory underlying archival organization can cause harms and injustices. Wood et. al. examine the ethnographic photography of Dean C. Worcester, which was captured in the Philippines in the early 20th century on behalf of diverse agencies and often went unattributed. The provenance of these photographs is attributed to the institutions and private collectors who owned them, and despite Worcester’s role as their creator and the common subject matter, they are dispersed across many archives. This makes researching the specific circumstances in which the photos were taken difficult or impossible. These photographs, with the complicated history surrounding their creation and ownership, show how provenance can be reductionist with respect to the creation and history of archival materials, makes research exceedingly difficult, and even silences the subjects of materials like photographs.

Other scholars have also attempted to articulate a framework for more just archival work. Caswell (2014) synthesizes literature on community archives and human rights archives to develop a list of five core principles for survivor-centred human rights archives. She identifies the values of participation, shared stewardship with community,

multiplicity of viewpoints and formats, activism, and reflexivity as key trends in community archives literature. She also explains how these values should be applied to human rights archives.

When examining the ethical implications of archival materials and research, it is easy to forget the relationship of these records to the lived experience of people. Gilliland (2014) uses an ethnographic approach to explain the affective relationships of individuals to records. She discusses examples of materials dating from around the time of the Yugoslav Wars in modern Croatia, including passports and land records. She shows the importance of these documents, and contrasts the traditional archival understanding of their value to the capacity of such records to help individuals move forward, confront memories of past wrongs, demand justice, and simply survive. These affective dimensions are important to keep in mind when considering the treatment of materials documenting human rights violations.

Epistemic Injustice Defined

According to Fricker (2007), epistemic injustice occurs when individuals are harmed specifically in their capacity as knowers (p. 1). Fricker works in a tradition of feminist social epistemology, wherein knowledge is conceived of as a collective human activity, which therefore is affected by power and has ethical dimensions (Grasswick, 2018). This way of thinking about knowledge stands in stark contrast to traditional epistemology, which typically studies individual knowers in isolation (McKinnon, 2016). Fricker (2007) argues that it is because of this social dimension of knowledge that biases can impede people's ability to take part in the social processes of knowledge

(pp. 1-2). These epistemic activities are central to human life, so epistemic injustices are also moral injustices (McKinnon, 2016).

Fricker (2007) outlines two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice. Others have expanded on these types or proposed new types of epistemic injustices (Anderson 2012; Dotson 2012; Hookway, 2010; Mason, 2011; Pohlhaus, 2017; Wanderer, 2017), as outlined at the end of this section. While testimonial injustice has received the most attention by far, both types should be understood, and hermeneutic injustice has special applicability to archives, as will become apparent.

Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice leads a hearer to attribute less credibility to a speaker than they justly deserve (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). When a speaker is believed to be less credible due to prejudices and stereotypes, the loss of credibility is unjust. For example, the value of someone's testimony could be reduced merely because of their gender, race, culture, or sexual orientation. Fricker (2007) uses an example from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* to illustrate epistemic injustice (p. 23). When Tom Robinson is falsely accused of raping Mayella Ewell, the jury is unable to accept his testimony because he is black and she is white. As Fricker notes, by any fair standards, Tom's testimony is more credible than Mayella's, but he suffers an unfair credibility deficit because of his race.

Hermeneutical injustice is Fricker's (2007) second type of epistemic injustice. It occurs when a society's shared pool of epistemic resources blocks a group from understanding and communicating their experience (p. 1). It differs from testimonial injustice in scale, since it affects entire social groups. Fricker uses the metaphor of a

credibility economy (p. 30). Credibility is distributed like resources in a traditional economy, and, in much the same way, distribution is not always equitable or fair. In cases where this distribution is very inequitable, groups are hermeneutically marginalized: they lack the hermeneutical resources required for self-knowledge (Fricker, 2007, p. 1).

Hermeneutical resources are “concepts widely known and available for use in understanding oneself and communicating with others” (McKinnon, 2016, p. 441). We all use a system of concepts to make sense of the world and our experience in it, and this system is not socially neutral. Privileged people build these concepts, and marginalized people are expected to use the concepts created by others. Naturally, then, such conceptual constructions are better suited to describing some experiences than others.

Hermeneutical injustice occurs at the point when the lack of hermeneutical resources described above leads to a societal failure to understand a significant portion of the experience of a group. Rebecca Mason (2011) defines two subtypes of hermeneutical injustice based on who fails to understand this experience: ignorance can occur in either the marginalized or the privileged group. Fricker (2007) uses sexual harassment as an example of hermeneutical injustice. Although women suffered behaviours we would now identify as sexual harassment long before the 1970s, the concept of sexual harassment did not exist prior to that point. Without this concept, it was difficult to describe the array of inappropriate behaviours to which women were subjected. The concept of criminal harassment was too strong to apply to such behavior, and referring to it as harmless flirting failed to capture its harmful nature

(McKinnon, 2016). Since they could not describe it, victims faced difficulties in both making sense of their own experience and explaining it to others (Fricker, 2007, pp. 150-151).

Since Fricker published *Epistemic Injustice* in 2007, a thriving body of scholarship has extended this area of research. Testimonial injustice has been further subdivided into transactional (the paradigmatic case Fricker describes) and structural varieties (Anderson, 2012). Others have theorized testimonial betrayal, which involves breaches of much deeper kinds of trust (Wanderer, 2017). Hermeneutical injustice has been subdivided by the source of the injustice (agents or institutions), the dynamics of relationships present, the breadth of society affected, and the depth of the epistemic harm (Medina, 2017). Scholars such as Hookway (2010) have suggested epistemic injustice can arise from testimonial-adjacent behaviours, such as when prejudice leads to certain questions being dismissed. Dotson (2012) suggests a new type of epistemic injustice—contributory injustice—involving the use of epistemological resources unsuited to the participation of oppressed groups in epistemic activities, wherein their contributions are mistranslated and mistaken. Scholars have also made sense of epistemic injustice through the lenses of social contracts and emotional labour (Pohlhaus, 2017). This is only a sample of the interpretive work Fricker's book has opened up—that body of work is too substantial to be thoroughly examined here.

Epistemic Injustice in Archives

This brief exploration of epistemic injustice reveals that there are several ways in which archives can be involved in injustices. Archivists can be perpetrators, enablers, or opponents of epistemic injustice in their work. Oftentimes, they may find themselves

playing contradictory roles in matters concerning epistemic injustice. The case studies explored in the literature review shed light on how this can be the case.

Perhaps most obviously, epistemic injustice can occur in the form of testimonial injustice at the point of records creation. Government documents, especially those created during periods fraught with human rights abuses, often exclude the testimony of marginalized individuals. The documents are created to justify the government's actions, to ensure social control (Hastings, 2011), and to reflect the testimony of the beneficiaries of such policies rather than those marginalized by them. In the case studies above, examples abound of efforts by governments to remove differing viewpoints from their records, thereby cashing in on their credibility excess. Hastings (2011), for instance, shows how American government documents were cleaned up to hide racist internment policies. The purposive destruction of records of torture by the CIA is another example (Cox, 2013).

Testimonial injustice may also be present in government records in subtler ways. This can be best seen by contrasting past practices with the modern practice of seeking out the testimony of marginalized communities. Currently, through processes like truth and reconciliation commissions, governments may seek the testimonial of particular groups and document it in the creation of policy (Wilson, 2012). In the past, this practice was unheard of. Those making policies about marginalized groups rarely asked for input from the communities that were directly affected by the policies; their testimony was undervalued. In such cases, government documents can be a record of previous testimonial injustices, which problematizes the presumed neutrality of these documents.

Additionally, accession practices may constitute testimonial injustices. Archives often have a relative lack of personal papers documenting the lived experience of individuals affected by unjust policies, as discussed in Gibbs (2010). Even when archives do collect these materials, there may be a lack of initiative on the part of archivists to actively track them down. A more subtle form of testimonial injustice can occur when certain formats of materials are seen as less credible than others, as Valderhaug (2011) points out. Archives traditionally collect written documents, which are perceived as being more credible than alternative modes of transmission, like oral traditions. Oral traditions may be treated as less credible for reasons including their apparent impermanence and alterability, despite the fact that, as noted above, written documents are easily alterable. This has the consequence of marginalizing the testimony of groups who traditionally use oral mediums. In this way, accession practices that undermine the value of mediums favoured by certain groups can constitute a testimonial injustice against members of those groups.

This points to a third, related form of testimonial injustice that is relevant to archival work. Medina (2011) argues that an excess of credibility attributed to one party can lead to a credibility deficit for another. To return to the example from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Tom's testimony is undervalued in part because Mayella's is overvalued (Medina, 2011). Similarly, when certain forms of documentation are overvalued, this can lead to an unfair credibility deficit in cases where individual testimony conflicts with the established documentation. When governments try to verify the mistreatment of marginalized groups, this is often the case. For example, this explains why Hastings (2011) found that the reparations paid to Japanese Americans who were sent to

internment camps fell far short of the minimum amount of estimated damages. Although sound scholarly research found that a sum of at least \$77 million was due, only taxation documentation was deemed acceptable proof of losses, and this documentation had been destroyed (Hastings, 2011). Similarly, reparations to the war children of Norway were lacking because only official documentation was accepted as proof, but the documentation was often incomplete (Valderhaug, 2011). The agencies who created the documentation were not concerned if some individuals fell through the cracks. The overvaluation of this sort of official documentation stems from the myth of the neutrality of public records (Gibbs, 2010; Valderhaug, 2011). The uncritical assumption that these records offer an unbiased account of what happened can result in an unjust deficit of credibility for those excluded, or whose experiences are not reflected, in official documentation.

In cases of extreme testimonial injustice, the credibility economy can unjustly marginalize a group and cause hermeneutical injustice. This is best seen in the case of *Time on the Cross*. The archival evidence used was so biased that an apparently objective, quantitative methodology completely glossed over pertinent aspects of slavery (Gibbs, 2010). The conclusion of the book is not merely a result of personal biases held by the authors. As Gibbs (2010) argues convincingly, the fact that the authors were able to present a book that portrays slavery as an economic good as the result of objective research—and that some scholars bought their argument—shows the failure of the archival record. This was not merely due to the lack of individual testimony in the records or the over-valuation of biased official documentation. The records used were created in a period during which the dominant conceptual framework of public

discourse failed to articulate the injustices of slavery. This can be seen in the book's argument that enslaved people received a significant portion of the profits they generated, as well as in the frequent parallels drawn between slavery and the conditions of free workers (Fogel & Engerman, 1974).

I argue that enslaved people were victims of a gross hermeneutic injustice; they lived in a society whose fundamental conceptual tools were largely unable to articulate their experiences and the injustice of their positions. Furthermore, by drawing on original materials that reflect this conceptual framework, *Time on the Cross* perpetuates this hermeneutic injustice. The injustice was preserved in archival materials and transmitted via archivists' complacency. There is a widespread lack of testimony from marginalized individuals in historical records, and these records often reflect a society that lacked the conceptual framework to recognize and articulate major injustices. Because many marginalized communities have been subject to epistemic injustice for much of history, it would be no surprise to find that epistemic injustices are common in archives.

Responsibilities of Archivists

Archivists are not always directly responsible for the epistemic injustices outlined above. In some cases, it is the documents' creators who committed the unjust act. In other cases, the perpetrators are government bodies that set the standards of proof required to receive reparations for past wrongdoings. In cases of systematic injustice documented in old records, the injustice was embedded in the unjust society that gave rise to the records. But whatever the cause, archivists are implicated in these injustices insofar as they keep the records and make them available to researchers. They may

also uphold the myth that these materials are neutral. Archivists help researchers access historical documentation, they are part of the process that creates new scholarly works, and they are involved in processes of seeking reparations. Because of this involvement, archivists have a duty to help right epistemic injustices.

The most obvious answer to the problem of epistemic injustice in the archives may be the accession of more testimony from marginalized groups. This is a promising route that can offer a more balanced archive and implicitly gives credibility to these testimonies. However, this method also has its drawbacks. The testimony or materials needed to support them simply might not exist. In the cases of seeking reparations for survivors of Japanese American internment, for example, many pertinent documents were destroyed (Hastings, 2011). Additionally, even if such documents can be acquired, other official documents will still exhibit bias. They may be used to perpetuate that bias, as in the case of *Time on the Cross*. Official documents also may be given an excess of credibility, which means that collected testimonials will have little value for those who have been mistreated. Because of this, archivists cannot address the issue solely by collecting new material. Reference must be a part of addressing testimonial injustice.

Traditionally, archival ethics involves treating all users equally and ensuring they have adequate access (Wallace, 2011). Research has been seen as the researcher's business, and archivists have been viewed as the mere purveyors of access (Gibbs, 2010), although this position is now more contested. Against this view, it can be argued that archivists have a special duty to provide reference support in cases where epistemic injustice occurs.

Valderhaug (2011) argues that treating all archival users in the same way causes harms to users like the Norwegian war children. These types of users are different from typical archival users in several ways: for one, they are not trained historical researchers. They may not understand how to access material and how to make sense of it once they do. The documentation they need to make their case are likely not the sort of information they are used to reading. Second, the records pertaining to the war children and others who have endured injustices are frequently spotty and oblique. The information such archival users seek is hard to track down, even for seasoned researchers (Valderhaug, 2011). To this it should be added that their reason for researching is wronging a past injustice, so the stakes for reference are much higher than for a graduate student writing a paper. Valderhaug argues that in place of equal access, archival reference should ensure users have an equal ability to benefit from the archives (p. 21). This may require treating users differentially depending on their circumstances. One way to address epistemic injustices in archives is to actively support the users who are victims of these injustices by assisting them in their search for information and interpretation of the records available.

Gibbs (2010) also argues against traditional models of archival reference. The lack of response to *Time on the Cross* from archivists, he argues, comes from the traditional view that archivists are separate from the research process. To reiterate, according to this traditional view, research is the domain of the researcher; archivists just help them find the materials they need. Against this, Gibbs argues that archivists are an integral part of the research process and, in cases such as the research that culminated in *Time on the Cross*, should take responsibility for the research produced

by their archives. This is especially true, Gibbs writes, when the archives contain records of injustices. It is the archivist's responsibility to ensure the researcher understands the nature of a collection and its context. As the many examples above show, there are gaps in the historical record, and records have been created for certain purposes. It is the role of archivists to impress this context on researchers and help them understand what the archive can and cannot prove. In this sense, as Gibbs demonstrates, *Time on the Cross* was in part a failure of archivists to provide adequate reference support to the authors. Furthermore, the lack of archivist responses to the work amounted to a failure to take responsibility.

Finally, archivists' provision of reference should be informed by social justice values. Wallace (2011) gives suggestions on how to think of archives in a social justice context. This involves understanding that archives are, in important ways, about power. Archivists must be aware of the power dynamics inherent in their materials and the societies from which they originated. In addition, archivists should recognize the difficulty of separating the past and present. Interpretations of the past change over time, and the documentation of the past still has strong effects on the present. In this way, the actions of archivists have a significant impact on the present. By keeping these basic guidelines in mind, archivists can provide a more nuanced reference experience to better help users make sense of the context of archival materials. This is especially important when materials document or are otherwise related to the abuse of marginalized people.

Conclusion

Scholars have long noted the ethical issues that arise for archivists dealing with materials that detail the mistreatment of marginalized people. Such documentation can be an important means of gaining recognition of harms and reparations for victims, but it can also perpetuate the harms recorded therein if used unreflectively. In this essay, I have argued that Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice is a useful lens through which we can interpret these materials. Using this framework shows that historical records and the archives that hold them can contribute to the unjust harms that affect people in their capacities as knowers. Because archivists are implicated in these harms, they have a special responsibility to help address epistemic injustices. One way to do so is through adopting an activist approach to archival reference.

The concept of epistemic injustice does not tell the whole story of harms that involve archival records. There are many ways in which archives can be involved in harms that do not specifically affect people as knowers. However, in the information professions, it is important to understand how excluding individuals from social practices of knowledge-making can cause harms that are not reducible to physical harms. In this essay, I have explained how some cases described in the scholarly literature on archives can be understood as epistemic injustices, and there are certainly many more cases to which this framework could be applied. In addition, although I have focused on archival materials and reference within archives, epistemic injustice is an important concept for related disciplines. Librarians and other information professionals would do well to reflect on how their practices can combat or perpetuate epistemic injustices.

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