

Title: Hushing-up: A Social Epistemic Practice for Overcoming Partisan Ignorance¹

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Abstract: Much feminist social epistemology shares the basic assumption that ignorance generated by silencing (and related phenomena) is undesirable (Dotson 2011, 2012, 2014; Dotson & Gilbert, 2014; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2011, 2012, 2023; Pohlhaus, 2012). While true in the contexts those theorists consider, I depart from that consensus, introducing and offering a philosophical account of a social epistemic practice that I term ‘hushing-up.’ This practice has emerged organically in response and in resistance to sectarian bigotry in Northern Ireland (NI), and contributes to post-conflict transitions away from social and political polarisation and its derivative harms to individuals and collectives. In spaces where hushing-up is deployed, ignorance of peoples’ community background is intentionally cultivated as a strategy in opposition to bigotry, while bigoted or sectarian displays incur social costs. Positioning hushing-up against existing accounts of political ignorance, including those by Williams (2021), Brennan (2016), and Somin (2013, 2015), and contributing to Mills’ (1997) idea of an epistemology of ignorance, I distinguish between *performative partisanship* (involving ignorance driven by social rewards for showing group allegiance) and *pressured partisanship* (involving ignorance driven by the avoidance of social sanctions for displaying indicators of disloyalty to a group). On the account I defend, shifts in social norms are central to addressing some forms of harmful ignorance. I argue that hushing-up succeeds in doing this in two ways: first, by reducing the rationality of pressured partisanship by providing alternative social support to that provided in polarised social spaces such that the cost of dissent is lowered; and secondly, by disincentivising performative partisanship through increasing the difficulty of identifying targets and ensuring that bigoted displays are met with disapproval in spaces where that norm is in force.

¹ I am grateful to Quill Kukla, Mark Lance, Will Fleisher, Joel de Lara, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on this paper at various stages. I also owe thanks for questions and comments from participants in Quill Kukla’s and John Greco’s respective *Epistemology of Ignorance* and *Collective Epistemology* graduate seminars at Georgetown University, as well as participants at the COGITO Epistemology Research Centre’s *Epistemology of Ignorance* Conference at the University of Glasgow.

Introduction

Kristie Dotson once influentially offered an account of practices of silencing that result from forms of socially patterned “reliable ignorance” such that harms are visited on individuals and groups because of that ignorance.² More broadly, the literature on forms of silencing and the generation of ignorance has shared the basic assumption that these and related phenomena are undesirable.³ While this is doubtlessly true in the specific non-ideal contexts these theorists consider, in this paper I present the philosophical refinement of a practice of generating forms of reliable ignorance through a silencing-adjacent phenomenon that can be shown to help address collective harms and contribute to beneficial social outcomes through the marginalisation of bigoted actions and speech. This practice has emerged organically in a non-ideal context in response and in resistance to sectarian bigotry in Northern Ireland (NI) and has contributed to post-conflict transitions away from social and political polarisation and its derivative harms to individuals and collectives more broadly. In spaces where this practice is deployed, a great deal of ignorance of peoples’ community background is intentionally cultivated as a strategy in opposition to bigotry, while bigoted or sectarian displays incur social costs. I term this ‘hushing-up.’

² Dotson, K., (2011). “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing” in *Hypatia*, 26(2), 236-257, 236.

³ For central texts see Dotson, K., (2012). “A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression” in *Frontiers* 33(1), 24-47; Dotson, K., (2014). “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression” in *Social Epistemology* 28(2), 115-38; Dotson, K. & Gilbert M., (2014). “Curious Disappearances: Affectability Imbalances and Process-based Invisibility” in *Hypatia* 29(4), 873-888. The negative valence is also the focus of related accounts of epistemic oppression which lead to harmful forms of ignorance, as in Fricker, M., (2007). “*Epistemic Injustice*” Oxford: Oxford University Press; Medina, J., (2011). “The Relevance of Credibility Excess in a Proportional View of Epistemic Injustice: Differential Epistemic Authority and the Social Imaginary” in *Social Epistemology* 25(1): 15-35; Medina, J., (2012). “The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations,” Oxford: Oxford University Press; Medina, J., (2023), “*The Epistemology of Protest: Silencing, Epistemic Activism, and the Communicative Life of Resistance*,” Oxford: Oxford University Press; Pohlhaus, G., (2012). “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance” in *Hypatia* 27(4): 715-35.

The philosophical development of hushing-up, I will argue, may offer strategies for handling political polarisation in other societal contexts. I begin by briefly describing the social context in NI in which hushing-up emerged, before turning to recent philosophical work on how ignorance can be created and maintained such that serious collective harms can result. Positioning my account of partisan ignorance against those offered by Daniel Williams, Jason Brennan and Ilya Somin, and presenting my account as a contribution to the development of what Charles Mills called an “epistemology of ignorance,” I argue that the relevant forms of patterned ignorance depend on extant social norms with their concomitant rewards and sanctions.⁴ Partisan ignorance can therefore be addressed, in part, by changing those norms. I continue by setting out a form of hushing-up which I defend as justified in contexts of social division and partisanship which border on social conflict. Towards the end of the paper, I defend my position against the objection that hushing-up is a form of epistemic violence.⁵

Social and Political Polarisation in Northern Ireland

NI is often viewed as a success story in conflict resolution, yet daily life continues to be marked by social and political polarisation, being “shaped by division along ethno-religious lines.”⁶ That sectarian polarisation stems from the “opposed nationalisms” of the two main communities, the Protestant community and the Catholic community.⁷ Harry Feeney, in an autobiographical account, describes

⁴ Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.” In *Synthese*, 198: 7807-7827; Somin, I., (2015). *Rational Ignorance*; Somin, I., (2013). *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter*. Stanford: Stanford Law Books; Brennan, J., (2016). *Against Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Mills, C., (1997). *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 238

⁶ Blaylock, D., Hughes, J., Wolfer, R., and Donnelly, C., (2018). “Integrating Northern Ireland: Cross-group friendships in integrated and mixed schools.” *British Educational Research Journal* 44(4): 643-662 643.

⁷ Boal, F., (2002). “Belfast: Walls within.” in *Political Geography* 21(5): 687-694, 688. Various terms might be used to label the two communities, with the colloquial use of ‘Protestant’ serving also broadly to refer to the ‘British’/‘Unionist’/‘Loyalist’ community, and the use of ‘Catholic’ similarly to refer to the

navigating social spaces in NI during the period of conflict known colloquially as ‘The Troubles’ as follows:

The majority of people [...] are bigots. Knowing someone’s religion seems to be a definite preoccupation [...] The vast majority seems to develop a sense of know how, through a combination of accent, area, and the person’s name. You have the old fail-safe, too, of the school they went to. [...] On meeting someone for the first time a mental assessment takes place. It’s just built in.⁸

During The Troubles, being in a space dominated by members of the ‘opposed’ community could be a fraught affair, given the power wielded by sectarian bigots in each community. Common outcomes were receiving verbal or physical sectarian threats or abuse, which sometimes escalated to assault, and in extreme cases, to threatened or actual sectarian killings.⁹ Forced displacement from homes owing to the identification of a person or family as belonging to a particular community was common.¹⁰ Moreover, such harms effect not only the person directly targeted, but also have derivative impacts on those who share the same community membership in that knowledge of the harm within that community raises the saliency of the threat in daily life. Though generally considered to be in a stage of post-conflict reconstruction, challenges remain in the transitions away from social division. Though the situation is much improved, many spaces, including pubs, workplaces, cultural spaces, and various leisure venues, remain contested along both physical and social dimensions, and research suggests that some spaces in NI continue to be perceived as “no go areas” for ‘the other’ community.¹¹ To

‘Irish’/‘Nationalist’/‘Republican’ community. Any such term will be reductive of a great deal of complexity, including overlapping identities and variations in political belief (including the author’s own). But I do not see how the phenomena I am interested in can be set out without some such reductive reference, much in the way that it seems a necessary feature of political polarisation in the US to discuss ‘Democrat’ and ‘Republican’, or perhaps ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative.’

⁸ Feeney, H., (2017). *14th November (Revised Edition): The Day Time Stood Still*. Amazon KDP. 50.

⁹ Gilmartin, N., (2021). “Trauma, Denial and Acknowledgement: the Legacy of Protestant Displacement in Londonderry/Derry During the Troubles” *Glencree Journal 2021* 114-125, 115-116.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Taggart, S., Roulston, S, McAuley, C., (2021). “From Virtual Peace with Virtual Reality: Exploring the Contested Narratives of Spaces and Places in Northern Ireland” *Glencree Journal 2021*, 220-227, 221. See also Cunningham, N., and Gregory, I., (2014). “Hard to miss, easy to blame? Peacelines, interfaces and political deaths in Belfast during the Troubles.” *Political Geography* (40), 64-78.

understand how the problem persists, as well as how it is being addressed, it is important to first understand recent philosophical and social scientific work on motivated ignorance.

Socially Motivated Ignorance

In the social sciences the study of ignorance is well-established. In the disciplines of political science and economics, and especially in their intersection in public choice theory, the explanations of ignorance tend to be presented within methodologically individualist framings: scholars in these fields tend to present accounts of how it can be instrumentally rational for individuals to not acquire additional knowledge (I follow Williams in terming this “acquisitional ignorance”) when the individual benefits of gaining that knowledge are outweighed by the costs to that individual of doing so, which is to say they involve a form of cost/benefit analysis.¹² Following Downs, it is common to appeal to this kind of individualist rational ignorance in explaining the levels of political ignorance found amongst voters in modern democracies.¹³ Briefly, the idea is that since a single vote is likely to have a negligible impact on political decision-making, a voter has a very limited expected value when casting their vote. Since the costs of being well-informed about important political issues will almost always outweigh that limited value, it is usually individually rational for voters to be ignorant about these issues.¹⁴ That this sort of ignorance can lead to serious collective harms is generally supposed within these fields.¹⁵

¹² Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.” 7814.

¹³ Downs, A., (1957). “*An economic theory of democracy*.” New York: Harper & Row. See also Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.” 7808.

¹⁴ Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.” 7809.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7808, 2823. But for controversy, see also Somin, I, (2015). “Rational Ignorance” in Gross, M., and McGoe, L., (eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*. New York: Routledge. 274-281, 279.

Though retaining the methodologically individualist framing, Williams notes that theories of acquisitional ignorance are inadequate to explain why people are misinformed and not merely lacking information.¹⁶ He applies instrumental rationality to the costs and benefits of knowledge possession rather than acquisition, terming this “motivational ignorance.”¹⁷ Motivational ignorance, on Williams’ view, inevitably arises from motivated reasoning.¹⁸ Motivated reasoners, importantly, “conform information processing to some goal collateral to accuracy” in order to reach those conclusions they want to reach; motivated ignorance is “symbiotic” with this in that the individual seeks to avoid coming to know anything that is in tension with what they want to conclude.¹⁹ Notably, on Williams’ account, the motivated ignorance of individuals; need not relate to specific conclusions; can be related to the avoidance of unpleasant psychological states; can involve a series of complex interrelated processes including physical movement and avoidance, selective recall, rationalisation and biases in evidence selection; and can be subconscious and/or beyond explicit reasoning.²⁰ Moreover, Williams’ account is consistent with not just propositional ignorance but also ignorance of know-how and/or phenomenal ignorance (that is, knowledge of what it is like to have particular situated experiences).²¹

Continuing with the individualist approach, Williams also sets out what he terms “socially motivated ignorance” which is as above but occurs when an individual’s having knowledge would incur a cost to them owing to expected changes in social relationships with others.²² As Williams develops the account, he sets out the sorts of cost in question, “as with religious and ideological communities more

¹⁶ Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.” 7819.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7809.

¹⁸ Ibid., 7809-7810.

¹⁹ Ibid. 7810

²⁰ Ibid., 7810-7811

²¹ I am grateful to Quill Kukla for drawing my attention to this point.

²² Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.” 7811.

generally,” as stemming from an individuals’ prospective dissent from “group dogmas and sacred propositions.”²³ His explicit idea is that the possession of certain beliefs can become identity markers of political coalitional membership in a society. Such beliefs are accordingly, on Williams’ view, “cherished” because “socially rewarded.”²⁴ Symbiotically, coming to know something that would contradict those beliefs can risk social ostracism and threaten access to community support networks: presumably the same might be said of relevant know-how or phenomenal knowledge.²⁵ Importantly for my purposes in this paper, Williams makes a passing remark that socially motivated ignorance can be thought of in two ways; I suggest we can make more of this than Williams does, by developing a sub-division of two types of partisan motivated ignorance, which I label as *performative partisanship* and *pressured partisanship*:²⁶

- (i) *Performative partisanship* involves information processing as collateral to accuracy owing to the social benefits an individual receives for publicly expressive performances of their group allegiances.

One might think here, classically, of a political party member whose investment in that party and its community leads to highly visible expressions of their community-endorsed beliefs—say, appearances at conferences and rallies, condemnation of those who dissent from the party line, or vocal sharing of their own recent actions that accord with that line or which aid party goals—with concomitant social rewards. As such, they have strong incentives to avoid coming across any information that might result

²³ Ibid., 7820.

²⁴ Ibid., 7821.

²⁵ Williams discusses some of the ways in which the avoidance of knowledge can be sustained, including “downgrading the [presumptive] epistemic authority of agents who assert identity inconsistent views,” reasoning to creative rationalisations of the desired conclusions, and the physical avoidance of identity-conflicting information. See Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

in a challenge, or a change, to socially rewarded beliefs, know how, and/or actions. This type of partisanship is already seemingly well-known in the literature. In summarising the public choice literature on political ignorance, Somin and Brennan use sporting metaphors, referencing the performativity of “political fans” and “hooligans” respectively, to label voters who are ignorant of important political facts in virtue of biases in processing political information.²⁷ In contrast:

- (ii) *Pressured partisanship* involves information processing as collateral to accuracy owing to the evasion of the costs of social sanctions or condemnation for deviation from their group allegiances.

Here we might think of someone who has grown-up in a family that has a long, intergenerational tradition of close and extended family members serving in various low-level political offices for the same political party. At university, that person comes across information, say in an introductory political science or philosophy class, that challenges some of the platform items of that political party. However, there are likely costs for dissent; being mocked at family gatherings, labelled as disloyal, being ruled out from being suggested for office themselves, and so on. Owing to these expected costs, this person will be incentivised to avoid reading further into the subject, avoid taking further political science or philosophy classes, or avoid discussing the matter further with others. Notably, neither Somin nor Brennan seem to recognise that pressured partisanship exists. Or if they do, they do so quietly and certainly overemphasise performative partisanship to the exclusion of pressured partisanship. In any case, the suggestion is that there are crucially important differences between

²⁷ Somin, I, (2015). “Rational Ignorance,” 277; Somin, I., (2013). *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter*. 78-79; Brennan, J., (2016). *Against Democracy*. 204-230.

“showing off” and “actively signalling one’s loyalty” on one hand, and between “fitting in” and “avoiding any sign of disloyalty” on the other.²⁸

Williams’ account of socially motivated ignorance and its relation to political coalitions is a valuable intervention in the literature surrounding the collective harms caused by forms of ignorance. Moreover, the typology of partisan ignorance derived from Williams’ account of forms of socially motivated ignorance is an important one, and in my view is a necessary precursor to addressing harmful forms of ignorance. In what follows, however, I argue that Williams’ framing of the problem, while valuable in explaining motivated ignorance in terms of costs and benefits to the individual, obscures the relationship between those costs and the broader social context in which people are embedded.

Structural Motivated Ignorance

Williams’ preferred application of his idea is to climate change, in which forming true beliefs about the subject might “constitute heresies in the ideological community that one inhabits and values” in some societies.²⁹ Obviously, what knowledge claims serve to identify someone as a member of a political coalition will be a culturally contingent matter. For present purposes, I suggest that Feeney’s discussion of navigating social spaces during the conflict in NI is more clearly illustrative of the importance of the phenomenon of Williams’ socially motivated ignorance.

²⁸ Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.” 7821.

²⁹ Ibid.

Feeney describes working, at the age of sixteen, behind a bar in a predominantly Protestant area, after some patrons become aware that he was from the Catholic community. As Feeney collects glasses from one room while pretending not to be intimidated, he experiences the consequences of sectarian beliefs and behaviour: “Some tried to trip me or bump me, snickering and muttering [a sectarian slur].”³⁰ On multiple occasions he experiences one patron “pointing his hand at [Feeney] shaped like a gun” which “at first” was drawn “from the hip” as though “in the cowboy films” and which “to the average bystander [...] probably looked like we were having a bit of banter[.]”³¹ Yet as Feeney notes, “[i]t was definitely sectarian,” and on subsequent visits the patron began imitating gun motions with arms straight and outstretched.³² The harassment and intimidation escalates with “some moderate people of his [the patron’s] own [Protestant] persuasion” recognising the intimidation, warning Feeney, and frequently offering to “have a word” with that patron, but ultimately they did not intervene to do so: Feeney suggests they likely “didn’t want to get involved or to be seen supporting a Catholic[.]”³³ The outcome in this case is that Feeney is later attacked walking home from work, beaten with the handle of a gun, and is later able to identify the patron who made the gun motions as one of the attackers.³⁴

In the sorts of spaces where identity-related performative partisan (in this case, sectarian) intimidation and acts of violence are enacted, there will also be social rewards accompanying performative partisan expressions of beliefs or know-how in demonstration of allegiance to group identity. Indeed, one would have to be obtuse to deny that there is a close connection between the two. Yet note those ‘moderate people,’ bystanders who witness the intimidation and quietly offer verbal support to Feeney,

³⁰ Feeney, H., (2017). *14th November (Revised Edition): The Day Time Stood Still*. 65.

³¹ Ibid., 64-65.

³² Ibid., 64.

³³ Ibid., 65.

³⁴ Ibid., 66-67.

who fail to intervene despite themselves suggesting that they ought to do so. We can view them as potentially morally culpable for failing to intervene, at least depending on the severity of the risk to themselves for intervening. But we can also think of various other bystanders—other patrons—who will have exhibited socially motivated ignorance with respect to the patron’s actions in making gun motions at Feeney: just as some will have been aware of and not intervened with the intimidation owing to the costs to them, so too will others have been motivated to avoid coming to view the patron’s actions as a problem, to avoid reasoning to them as intimidation or as threat, or to avoid perceiving them as escalating.³⁵ And it seems reasonable here to characterise these bystanders, accordingly, as engaged in pressured partisanship insofar as they are motivated to avoid knowing what is happening. Moreover, this is important for understanding the harms that accrued to Feeney in virtue of his community membership. I turn to Williams’ own discussion of bystanders, below.

Williams takes his view to be, in part, providing an explanation of “the most influential case study of motivated ignorance within contemporary philosophy,” which involves the ways in which members of dominant groups avoid coming to know about the “lives of oppressed or marginal groups and the nature of society more generally.”³⁶ Yet that his account captures this ‘case study’ seems doubtful. To see this, consider that he cites Charles Mills’ work as one of the foremost proponents of the view.

³⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising the objection that it is implausible that anyone could be ignorant of the threat that Feeney would be under, after people in the area become aware he is a member of the Catholic community. This will doubtless have been true in a general sense, given that it was known it was dangerous to be in an area which was predominantly controlled by members of another community. But what is less clear is that this particular set of interactions ought to have been perceived as a clear threat by all bystanders. As we have seen, in Feeney’s account of his experience, to “the average bystander it probably looked like we [Feeney and his attacker] were all just having a bit of banter” (see *ibid.*, 65). Others will range between more oblivious (we can imagine bystanders ignoring the interaction and having their own conversations, for instance) and those fully cognisant of the threat (e.g., those close to the attacker who are aware of previous sectarian violence on their part). The conceptual possibility of socially motivated ignorance should suffice to get my account off the ground. And we can easily imagine other sorts of cases, say, about sexual harassment in the workplace, or about sustaining racist actions from police, where someone can be aware of the general facts about those sorts of cases yet still engage in socially motivated ignorance about whether in *this* incident, *this* boss sexually harassed, or *this* cop was racist.

³⁶ Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.” 7823.

Mills, in discussion of racial ignorance on the part of white people, does set out the need for an “inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance” to explain “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)” such that the ignorance benefits white people.³⁷ A sufficient account of motivated ignorance will need to explain both psychological and social functioning, as well as be adaptable to local and global contexts.

Yet when Williams does turn to discussing socially motivated ignorance as contributing to large-scale, structural cognitive dysfunctions, his framing leads him to neglect offering an account of the broader social context in which motivated ignorance occurs. This is most stark in his discussion of the ignorance of “bystanders throughout the Holocaust” who “sought to remain ignorant of the atrocities being committed in their communities.”³⁸ For Williams, the key issue is distinguishing whether the form of motivated ignorance they adopt is social or individual, of “avoiding potential accountability” or “protecting their own consciences,” “or both?”, before concluding “[w]e will likely never know.”³⁹ Yet it seems to me the key issue is understanding how the costs and benefits to individuals of engaging in motivated ignorance are structured.

Structural Motivated Ignorance and Social Norms

Accordingly, understanding the motivated ignorance of bystanders to the Holocaust requires attending to the deeply disturbing social context, for it is this context that shapes the costs and benefits which underlie both forms of Williams’ motivated ignorance. Harald Welzer describes how the German people witnessed a “normative ‘shifting baseline’” in which the Holocaust, “unthinkable in 1933” was

³⁷ Mills, C., (1997). “The Racial Contract,” 18.

³⁸ Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.” 7812.

³⁹ Ibid., 7812.

“the end result of an immensely accelerated eight-year process of social transformation.”⁴⁰ That shifting baseline involved changing social norms: most obviously, legal and juridical norms, but also informal social norms.⁴¹ It became “increasingly normal that different standards of human interaction” applied, such that “Jews and other human groups were radically excluded from the binding social norms of justice, empathy, or love of one’s neighbour[.]”⁴² By 1941, even “deportation” by train “to places about which nothing was known appeared part of normality.”⁴³ Importantly for present purposes, these disturbing shifts in social norms fundamentally altered the costs and benefits faced by individuals. As Welzer emphasises, analyses of the injustice and arbitrariness of the Nazi regime often overlook that those who were not targets of the injustice, “members of the Volksgemeinschaft,” did not incur costs but generally “continued as before to enjoy legal security and state protection[.]”⁴⁴ Indeed, they often benefited individually, thinking it “perfectly normal to run businesses or live in homes,” or to receive personal belongings and furniture, which “had been confiscated from their Jewish owners.”⁴⁵ So too did many benefit in terms of career opportunities from the earlier systematic exclusion of Jewish people from the civil service, universities, medical system, and other professions.⁴⁶ The key point for present purposes is that the shifts in social norms, engineered by the Nazi regime, plainly benefited some, accordingly altering those individuals’ analyses of the costs and benefits of engaging in motivated ignorance. There is no reason to think that many of the existing social norms of our societies do not also incentivise forms of motivated ignorance, especially where some members of some groups, communities, or political coalitions benefit while others incur costs. It is this sort of

⁴⁰ Welzer, H., (2012). *Climate Wars: Why People Will be Killed in the Twenty First Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 145.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 146.

⁴³ Ibid., 148

⁴⁴ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 147-148

analysis, I suggest, that is needed to explain the patterns of psychological and social dysfunction which Mills has in mind.

Further, it is worth noting that Williams' neglect of the social context not only leads to difficulty framing collective problems, but also severely constrains the scope of possible solutions. I noted above that Williams takes it that socially motivated ignorance greatly contributes to the problems addressing climate change. It is in this discussion that Williams comes closest to recognising the impact of structural features of the social context, when he suggests that to "address the root of the problem" we must tackle "the practical considerations that make knowledge costly for individuals."⁴⁷ Yet his proposed solution fails to address the problem he rightly identifies. He suggests that a top-down public information campaign could be implemented which would aim to inform people about the problems posed by anthropogenic climate change, without proposing any solution, whether partisan or otherwise. But this seems clearly to be a case of providing more information to people already rationally motivated to ignore it, and so is rejectable by Williams' own lights.⁴⁸ He also suggests "encouraging influential in-group members to adopt a dissenting view" but it is unclear how such individuals would be encouraged on Williams' view, given that they are already behaving rationally: to adopt a dissenting view would be to risk the costs of social ostracism and censure such that the individual might no longer be considered a member of the group at all.⁴⁹

One can readily imagine the analogous inadequacy of such approaches in discussing the Feeney case. The sectarian beliefs, testimony, and behaviour apparent in Feeney's workplace were unlikely to be addressed by the provision of new information about people from a different community background.

⁴⁷ Williams, D., (2021), "Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics." 7824

⁴⁸ Ibid., 7824

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7824

What was ultimately effective, however, in transitioning from a conflict to post-conflict society, was an organic change in the broader social context. Most notably for present purposes, this involved the broader community adopting changes to social norms such that the cost/benefit architecture shifted against sectarian speech and behaviour. And this is just what we would expect, for Feeney's account of sectarian bigotry is far from an outlier. Rather, it is indicative of the sorts of epistemic and moral phenomena regularly encountered by people in various social spaces during The Troubles, the pervasiveness of which, I contend, can only be explained by the prevalence of sectarian, bigoted social norms.

Changing Social Norms

The relevance of social norms to epistemic practices has been the focus of recent work by John Greco. While Greco is primarily concerned with the transmission of testimonial knowledge rather than normative change, his account of how social norms structure epistemic practices will be useful for present purposes, including understanding the epistemic impact of changing sectarian, bigoted social norms. Drawing on Philip Pettit's work on social norms in rational choice theory, as well as Peter Graham's application of that work in social epistemology, Greco suggests we ought to understand social norms as being generally regulative of peoples' behaviour, prescriptive in having normative force, descriptive at least in part owing to this prescriptiveness, and as being widely internalised amongst the community.⁵⁰ Further, we should note that this account applies both to epistemic norms, and to other social norms (including moral norms) which may also have epistemic importance.⁵¹ As

⁵⁰ Greco, J., (2020). *The Transmission of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 72-73. See also Pettit, P., (1990). "Virtus Normativa: Rational Choice Perspectives" in *Ethics*, 100(4): 725-755; and Graham, P., (2015). "Epistemic Normativity and Social Norms" in Henderson, D. and Greco, J. (eds.) *Epistemic Evaluation: Purposeful Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁵¹ Greco, J., *The Transmission of Knowledge* 74-75.

Pettit emphasises, “norms will be resilient if [...] circumstances are such that it is in people’s individual interest, economic or social, to honor them,” that is, if the “benefit exceeds the cost.”⁵² As an example of the application of this account to an everyday case of motivated ignorance, consider the social norms which structure our epistemic practices concerning privacy. We already largely share a series of internalised behavioural practices in which we uphold shared privacy norms that regulate, for instance, when we ought to be motivated to avoid soliciting information about (or otherwise coming to know) someone’s health or disability status, address, or some other personal detail (at least until we know them well enough). In order to uphold the norm, we react with social censure to those who violate our privacy, while we respect those who appropriately keep our confidences. Accordingly, the costs and benefits of violating or upholding privacy norms respectively are derivative of the social function of those norms. Moreover, our exaction of these costs, or means of benefiting people who uphold those norms, serve to reinforce that norm in local contexts.

Notably, while Greco does not pursue the idea of changing epistemically relevant social norms, Pettit takes his underlying account to provide not only a “basis for identifying resilient norms” but also “for explaining the rise and fall of norms that have appeared[.]”⁵³ Following Pettit, and attending to the epistemic dimensions of social norms in the way Greco outlines, will allow us to understand how the new social norms I discuss below can come to supplant bigoted social norms and address serious collective harms. Moreover, it allows for this within the same rational choice framework with which Williams has developed his important account of socially motivated ignorance.

Hushing-up

⁵² Pettit, P., “Virtus Normativa.” 726.

⁵³ Ibid., 749.

In post-conflict NI, the key social norms that have emerged for tackling collective harms serve to restructure the social costs and benefits for oppressive sectarian behaviour, speech and displays. Accordingly, in an increasing number of spaces sectarianism incurs costs, while not engaging in it is rewarded: the cultivation of a social norm of intentional ignorance of peoples' community backgrounds is an important aspect of this shift in the cost/benefit architecture. I call this shifted set of social norms 'hushing-up' and discuss its constitutive norms, strategies and tactics below.

Recall Feeney's description of a "built-in" "know how" possessed by many people in which they are "preoccupied" with being able to come to know peoples' community background.⁵⁴ As Feeney outlines it, there is a myriad of potential indicators of community membership, some stronger than others, including: nuances of accent; the area someone is from or lives in, given community divides in housing; someone's name, where many Irish or some British Royal Family names are strong indicators; or their school, "the old fail-safe," given the influence of religious schooling.⁵⁵ To this, we can add some additional markers that Feeney misses (though surely there are still more). These include various forms of know how; knowing songs, how to play certain instruments, the rules of some sports. It can also include forms of clothing, most notably related to local sports teams, and the celebration or participation in certain holidays. But importantly, it also includes the obvious: discussions of religion or controversial political beliefs associated with one community or the other.

To engage in targeted sectarian speech or behaviour, a bigot needs be able to identify a member of a different community as a target. And to be sure, the list above gives plenty of opportunities. Yet the

⁵⁴ Feeney, H., (2017). *14th November (Revised Edition): The Day Time Stood Still*. 50.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

intentional ignorance strand of hushing-up seeks, so far as is possible, to increase the difficulty—the cost—of coming to learn someone’s community background until you know them well. And the strategies for doing so are as diverse as the ways community membership can be identified. So in physical and social spaces where the norm is in force, the norm involves everyone participating avoiding verbally divulging strong indicators of one’s own community background, insofar as is possible. This can involve oddities, as when an especially indicative name leads to nicknames, middle names, or made-up names; indeed, parents often choose names with knowledge of indicators of community background in mind (with my mother, for instance, choosing for me the neutral-in-the-context name ‘Aaron’).⁵⁶ It also militates against wearing local sports tops in casual settings, and indeed many of these are viewed as indicating bigotry on the part of the wearer. Conversely, it also involves the imposition of costs on asking questions about these same identity markers, at least until trust has been established and concerns about bigotry have been reduced.

It is important to distinguish hushing-up from some conceptually related norms that generate intentional ignorance of identity markers. Above, I noted that Feeney’s difficulties occurred after certain patrons of the bar became aware of his community background. Prior to this, we can suppose, Feeney will have been aware—in a general sense—of threats to Catholics when spending time in a predominantly Protestant space. And we can suppose that, because of the possible costs imposed by these threats, Feeney might have tried to mask his community membership by hiding markers of his identity. Analogous cases occur in many contexts when some group sharing an identity characteristic is sufficiently threatened or discriminated against in spaces as to make the open sharing of a threatened identity risky, and where it is also plausible for ignorance to be created about the identity. Such cases

⁵⁶ Notably, the norm also encourages a feigned ignorance where one inadvertently comes to know community background. This pretence also contributes to maintaining ignorance in those who don’t already know another’s background.

ought to be perfectly familiar, encompassing (for instance) the intentional cultivation of others' ignorance about (say) one's sexuality, nationality, disability, or mental health status when encountering the relevant type of bigot in various spaces.

While in this paper I am focusing on informal social norms, one might consider something like the US military's past "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) policy a conceptually related phenomenon.⁵⁷ The legally formalised set of DADT norms combined sanctions that coercively motivated the stealthing of service members' queer sexualities—on penalty of career-ending discharge—alongside legal sanctions against harassing stealthed service members, including against outing them. These norms share with hushing-up an intentional ignorance strand which seeks to increase the difficulty of others coming to know a threatened identity characteristic to avert harms to those who share that characteristic. But, importantly, under these norms the burden of generating the relevant forms of intentional ignorance objectionably lies with those under threat within the relevant spaces.

Hushing-up, in contrast, shares that burden widely. As I have said of the NI case, hushing-up involves the collective intentional generation of ignorance on the part of everyone participating in the norm. Perhaps the point can be made clearer by considering a version of DADT conceptually analogous to hushing-up. Call this 'DADT*.' The set of norms constitutive of DADT* would, as with hushing-up, share the epistemic burdens widely insofar as it would require *all* service members—not only queer service members—to both intentionally cultivate, in others, ignorance of their own sexual orientation, while also collaborating with others in doing the same for them. In this case, that collaboration would

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, (1993). *Directive 1304.26: Qualification Standards for Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense. I am grateful to Quill Kukla and to an anonymous reviewer for drawing this analogy and pressing for clarification.

involve participating in sanctions for those who seek to find out, or divulge, information about others' sexuality, whatever that might be.⁵⁸

Importantly, while the norms of hushing-up are widespread, they are primarily suited for social spaces in which people one doesn't know well are present; various leisure venues, gyms, nights out, others' family events, and so on. The norms of hushing-up govern interactions between relative strangers in spaces shared by people from different communities in the absence of already-established social trust, and there is good reason to think that it is readily practicable in these and similar contexts.⁵⁹ Emphatically however, hushing-up is not utilised in all social spaces. Nor do I suggest it ought to be, nor even do I suggest that it could plausibly be achieved in all social settings. I outline below how it progressively weakens in friend groups in which social trust between individuals is higher. Various political fora also exist which appropriately allow for the discussion of controversial and partisan matters, and these are governed by different norms. Similarly, there is no reason to think that there ought not to be some spaces in which community identity is celebrated. Further, some spaces will, even still, be sufficiently like the bar in the Feeney case as to suppose that it would be impossible for hushing-up norms to gain traction, given the entrenched power of sectarian bigots in those spaces. I consider the impact of hushing-up norms on performative partisans below.

⁵⁸ It is of course difficult to imagine DADT* being practicable in any currently or previously extant US military contexts given prevalent heteronormative assumptions and power dynamics.

⁵⁹ An anonymous reviewer doubts that the ignorance generated by hushing-up is possible to maintain, given the gamut of identity markers available. They suggest, for instance, that hushing-up would require individuals to not exchange names with each other. But even the most stringent form of hushing-up would not require those without community-indicative names to avoid sharing names, requiring only the adoption of non-indicative variations of names, or nicknames, to maintain ignorance. It's not clear to me why one might think that this isn't achievable in the contexts I have in mind: I have friends and family who used to do just this, with success in maintaining the relevant forms of ignorance, on nights out. This is of course compatible with there being spaces where hushing-up is more difficult to maintain over time including, for instance, spaces that involve repeated interactions with the same people over medium to long term periods.

Nevertheless, there is nothing especially mysterious about understanding when, where, and how such norms come to be held, nor how they can cease to be so.⁶⁰ Pettit's account of social norms as dependent on the relevant cost/benefit analysis assists here, as does Graham and Greco's utilisations of that account in social epistemology.⁶¹ Consider the following case, which I will use as an illustrative example of hushing-up norm generation:

(Conspiracy Theory Uncle): Imagine you have an uncle who, at family gatherings, takes conversational opportunities to share some conspiracy theory, or other strange unevidenced claim. This tends to be an annoyance, though occasionally causes arguments that make family gatherings extremely awkward.

Owing to the behaviour of this uncle, other family members start to avoid the sorts of topics he is especially opinionated about. They avoid any mention of vaccines, or fluoride in the water, for instance, and moreover go silent or change the subject should this uncle bring these topics up. In effect, the family collectively maintains ignorance about what *any* of them think about vaccines or fluoride in the water, as a means of avoiding social tension. Owing to its success, this becomes the normal way of behaving at family gatherings. And such a norm can spread readily outside of those settings. It might follow this uncle, insofar as his children or partner advise or model to others how one might behave around him in other settings to avoid his uncomfortable conversational set pieces (to the benefit of all). Or those participating in the norm might recognise other instances in which they might try to apply this norm elsewhere, as when they meet new characters sufficiently like the uncle in the relevant respect. The point is simply that insofar as the cost/benefit analysis favours adoption of the norm—it costs everyone information about what each other thinks about, say, vaccines, but everyone benefits in having a birthday go much better—it will tend to gain traction once

⁶⁰ I am grateful to Elizabeth Fricker and an anonymous reviewer for querying the origination of norms in these contexts.

⁶¹ Pettit, P., "Virtus Normativa." 749.

tried. And it could also cease to be held should the cost/benefit analysis shift in a different direction (for instance, should this uncle stop regularly talking quite so much nonsense). As I discuss next, deployment of hushing-up norms in NI to generate ignorance of community identity indicators follows an analogous pattern, though with a notably different cost/benefit analysis, and wider scope, given the notably much higher stakes that can arise from pervasive sectarian bigotry.

Impact on Pressured and Performative Partisanship

As we have seen, pressured partisanship is incentivised by the desire to avoid incurring social costs from signalling disloyalty.⁶² And with respect to pressured partisanship, the existence of spaces in which hushing-up is in place – call these ‘hushing-up spaces’ – has three distinguishable effects on pressured partisanship. Firstly, hushing-up spaces provide individuals with opportunities to access various benefits in terms of social support (e.g., some forms of employment, leisure activities, social space and activities, etc.) which are independent of political coalitional membership. Secondly, in doing so, hushing-up spaces also effectively reduce the relative cost of dissent in providing an alternative, or a baseline, should one suffer social censure or even be ostracised by ones’ own community. By reducing the relative social costs of dissent, and by increasing the opportunities for social benefits independent of coalitional membership, pressured partisanship will be less rational. Thirdly, while the change in costs and benefits depends on there being hushing-up spaces, that change will persist outside those hushing-up spaces, and plausibly positively impact the rationality of individuals’ epistemic practices elsewhere.

⁶² Williams, D., (2021), “Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics.”

Importantly, this mechanism also shows how hushing-up can generate its own support, or to borrow Pettit’s phrasing, how the new norms can become resilient.⁶³ To see this, consider that those who mostly engage in pressured partisanship now have access to spaces in which hushing-up norms militate against discussing partisan views at all, dissenting or otherwise. This greatly reduces those individuals’ risk of incurring social costs, giving them incentive not only to use those spaces, but also to avoid bystandering and to contribute to enforcing the hushing-up norm themselves. Similarly, the benefits they receive from the social space also incentivise maintaining its norms. Those same people might then deploy the norm in different settings in which they would also either benefit or avoid incurring costs from doing so. Further, this could plausibly account for the commonness of the norm in NI, in which pressured partisanship is likely to have been the dominant form of partisanship in a society recently characterised by acute social and political division in daily life. To illustrate, recall those ‘moderate’ individuals in the Feeney case who offered to intervene against intimidation but who ultimately failed to do so.⁶⁴ Reasonably, we can suppose that those individuals in spaces governed by the norms of hushing-up (rather than norms of sectarian bigotry) would be more likely emboldened to no longer be bystanders to sectarian moral wrongs, but rather to intervene. And this will especially be the case where hushing-up is well established as a norm in a space, and in which all parties are aware of this: because of the norm, an individual considering intervening can act to do so knowing that others will assist if necessary.⁶⁵

⁶³ Pettit, P., “Virtus Normativa” 749.

⁶⁴ Feeney, H., (2017). *14th November (Revised Edition): The Day Time Stood Still*. 64-65.

⁶⁵ Notably in social psychological accounts of the bystander effect, “pluralistic ignorance” (ignorance of what others believe), is a major disincentivising factor which contributes to bystandering. Knowledge that others share your view is an incentive towards intervention. See Fischer, P., Krueger, J., Greitemeyer, T., Vogrincic, C., Kastenmüller, C., Frey, D., Henne, M., Wicher, M., and Kainbacher, M., (2011). “The Bystander-Effect: A Meta-Analytic Review on Bystander Intervention in Dangerous and Non-Dangerous Emergencies” in *Psychological Bulletin* 137(4): 517-537, 518.

In turning to performative partisanship which, recall, involves ignorance motivated by the social rewards or benefits of displaying indicators of social or political coalitional membership, we should note that hushing-up impacts such partisanship differently. As we have seen, the cultivation of general ignorance of community indicators makes the sort of performative sectarian bigotry we saw in the Feeney case more costly, given the additional difficulty of identifying targets. But in spaces where hushing-up is in effect, performative partisanship, whether in displays of community background, beliefs, behaviour, or know-how, will not accrue social rewards (at least in those spaces): they will be met with disapproval, stony silence, disengagement, or verbal censure. These are common responses to strangers asking about Feeney's "old fail-safe," "what school did you go to?", for instance.⁶⁶ And this may well incentivise against performative partisanship, at least where the bigot is otherwise importantly invested in the social relationships from which the sanctions come. Obviously, in spaces where hushing-up is in effect, more severe social sanctions are reserved for more obviously performative partisan bigotries.⁶⁷ The upshot is that individuals engaged in performative partisanship are incentivised to not enter spaces in which hushing-up norms are established. Indeed, those engaging in obviously performative partisan bigotry will often be excluded from such spaces. It is not uncommon, for instance, to see bars, restaurants, and social clubs have signs (or door staff) denying entry to those wearing sports tops (given the association with indicators of community membership, bigotry, and increased risks of sectarian violence). And it is, of course, common for people not to invite a bigot they've encountered socially out to the next social event.

Addressing Possible Limitations of Hushing-up

⁶⁶ Feeney, H., (2017). *14th November (Revised Edition): The Day Time Stood Still*. 50.

⁶⁷ I am grateful for an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to further explain the impact of hushing-up on those who reject the norm.

As I mentioned briefly above, one limitation of hushing-up is that there will doubtless remain spaces in which the social power of performative partisans—in the NI case, sectarian bigots—is so entrenched that there is no prospect of the norms of hushing-up taking hold. Indeed, while hushing-up may enable pressured partisans to exit such spaces and cease to engage in socially motivated ignorance, the effect of exclusion on those engaged in recalcitrant performative partisanship may be to concentrate them in spaces where they can continue to reap the social rewards of performance amongst likeminded others. It is not as though an informal social norm can be imposed externally on a group, in all spaces where we might judge it valuable, in the absence of the willingness of those within the space to participate in it. Hushing-up is rightly understood as a social epistemic strategy which can contribute to overcoming partisan ignorance that can result in collective harms. But there is no reason to think that it would, alone, generally suffice to avert all collective harms caused by ignorance.⁶⁸

To see this, consider that some efforts at addressing collective harms may focus on preventing the harms directly, including through formal legal means. Again, the NI case is illustrative, as especially towards the end of The Troubles a significant amount of legislation was passed to legally sanction many forms of sectarian bigotry and discrimination. And an objection might be lodged that, in the non-ideal context I am primarily considering, I am overattributing causal power to informal hushing-up norms given such legislation.⁶⁹ One might think, for instance, that new legal sanctions against sectarian discrimination, threats, and physical attacks also contribute costs to those who might be

⁶⁸ Note that even acquisitional ignorance is addressed differently: by providing low-cost access to relevant information.

⁶⁹ Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this important point, and for direction to relevant legislation. Especially relevant in this context are; *The Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987*, S.I. 1987/463 (N.I. 7), <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1987/463>; *Northern Ireland Act 1998*, c. 47, § 75. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/75>; *Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011*, 2011 c. 24 (N.I.). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/niu/2011/24>.

tempted to engage in such behaviour, and it is at best unclear whether it is the informal enforcement of hushing-up norms, or the formal legal enforcement of anti-sectarian legislation, which explains behaviour change.

In response, note first that it would be implausible to suppose that the introduction of such legislation could be wholly explanatory of behavioural change. Discrimination, harassment, threats and physical attacks were already illegal throughout The Troubles, and the introduction of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 came at a time of heightened sectarian tensions, focusing primarily on regulating behaviour during organised parades and marches.⁷⁰ Though record-keeping of crime and policing incidents during The Troubles was notoriously unreliable, given that police services were certainly over-extended during the period (ostensibly the explanation for the additional deployment of the British Army), many other public order offences (e.g. insulting or abusive sectarian behaviour) were doubtlessly under-enforced. Secondly, given that the nature of the conflict involved a significant proportion of the population rejecting, or at least advocating against the legislative authority of the government, it is unclear why legislation by that government would be thought to be the decisive factor in, for instance, reducing sectarian discrimination, especially given that (at best) police were often reluctant to enter areas opposed to their presence barring especially serious offences, and at worst committed and facilitated serious offences of their own.⁷¹ Thirdly, especially serious sectarian incidents—attacks and killings—vary in ways that do not appear responsive to legislative change, and indeed the raft of anti-sectarian legislative changes that occurred immediately preceding and following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement coincided with a dramatic increase in Troubles-related civilian

⁷⁰ *The Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987*, S.I. 1987/463 (N.I. 7), <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1987/463>.

⁷¹ Murphy, J., (2024). “Policing and Peace in Northern Ireland: Change, Conflict, and Community Confidence” in McAtackney, L., Máirtín Ó Catháin (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Northern Ireland Conflict and Peace*. Routledge: New York, 324-335; McGovern, M., (2024). “Collusion” in McAtackney, L., Máirtín Ó Catháin (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Northern Ireland Conflict and Peace*, 65-76.

deaths that same year.⁷² Each of these three factors strongly suggest that changing social norms played at least a significant causal impact on changed behaviour.

I assume this point also holds for other contexts with incomplete legal enforcement in which hushing-up might be thought potentially useful.⁷³ Note too that this suggests a further limitation, insofar as we can recognise that many of the most serious escalations of sectarian bigotry are unlikely to be preventable by the mere existence of hushing-up spaces. Indeed, many contemporary acts of sectarian violence or intimidation occur in the absence of bystanders, as with night attacks on homes and symbolic community buildings. Yet that hushing-up does not prevent such attacks is no more an objection to its usefulness as a set of norms for addressing forms of socially motivated ignorance that can lead to collective harms, than is the absence of a police presence during acts of violence or intimidation an objection to the usefulness of laws against, say, assault or property destruction.

Epistemic Violence and Non-ideal Contexts

It seems to me that the most serious objection to hushing-up relates to whether its constitutive norms lead to forms of epistemic violence, in Dotson's senses of testimonial silencing or testimonial

⁷² "CAIN: Northern Ireland Society - Security and Defence." Accessed 20 March 2025.
<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/ni/security.htm>.

⁷³ Note also that much of the relevant legislation appears also to involve aspects of legally formalised hushing-up. We can think here of the separation of equal opportunity monitoring forms (in which identity characteristics are specified by the applicant as part of the job application process) from the application itself; of disciplinary action for sectarian remarks in the workplace; or of financial sanctions for hiring practices that can be shown to be discriminatory. Much of this behaviour will be informally internalised by at least some of those subject to the legal norm, making the boundary between formal legal norms and informal social norms unclear in practice. Yet the legal enforcement of sanctions against bigoted behaviour, alongside the legal incentivisation of the generation of some forms of ignorance of community background, does not challenge my central positive argument. Certain sorts of social norms (of which legal norms are presumably a subset, when sufficiently widely internalised) incentivise ignorance of community background, and this can contribute to beneficial social outcomes.

smothering.⁷⁴ On Dotson's view, epistemic violence is "a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange" but which importantly occurs because of what Dotson terms "pernicious ignorance."⁷⁵ Pernicious ignorance is a term of art for Dotson and refers to any type of reliable ignorance which harms another person, or group of persons, within a given context. As Dotson sets out the concept of reliable ignorance she notes that while reliable ignorance is "consistent" and "follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources," it "need not be harmful."⁷⁶ For hushing-up to count as a form of epistemic violence in Dotson's sense, it must be shown not only to produce predictable epistemic gaps, which it does indeed do in the cultivation of specific forms of ignorance of political coalitional membership, but also be shown to be harmful to those targeted by it. And one could readily imagine a Dotson-like view which held that hushing-up objectionably does have both features.

To be sure, the implementation of hushing-up involves costs being imposed on some displays which are not intended to be partisan, but rather might be thought of as unobjectionable expressions of beliefs, behaviour, or know-how but which are nevertheless associated with partisan political coalition membership. A speaker on meeting someone, for instance, might in different contexts elsewhere quite reasonably ask about another person's neighbourhood or background. But, the objection runs, should they do so in spaces where hushing-up is normative, they will invite the harms of social censure for doing so.

⁷⁴ I am grateful to Quill Kukla, John Greco, Will Fleisher, and an anonymous reviewer for raising variations of this objection.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

In response, the first point to note is that for myself, as for Dotson, the harms involved in epistemic violence are highly contextually mediated. Dotson describes how a three-year-old child could be “reliably ignorant about the effects of fire” such that they “fail to communicatively reciprocate in an exchange about fire.”⁷⁷ But whether this counts as epistemic violence “depends upon the context.”⁷⁸ To illustrate, Dotson offers two variations of this same case within different contexts. In the first, the question concerns whether the child harms the adult by silencing them; Dotson is sceptical of the idea of a harm in this case since in the context the adult will view the behaviour as being “almost expected of children, which is why adults carefully monitor children around fire.”⁷⁹ In the second, the child goes on to set fire to something, such that “the property damage caused by the fire is where the harm is located” with the child accordingly enacting epistemic violence given the clear harm stemming from their reliable ignorance.⁸⁰ This sensitivity to context should also be applied to hushing-up.

Accordingly, we should note that those involved in maintaining the constitutive norms of hushing-up are not insensitive to exculpatory factors: tourists and children who enquire about indicative factors of partisanship, for instance, are rarely subjected to the same social censure (but may be advised of relevant aspects of the norms if appropriate).⁸¹ Of course, for those adults embedded within the social context, it can be assumed that the norm is well understood, and so norm breaches are accordingly both culpable and expected by those in hushing-up spaces. And in this context, it is important to see

⁷⁷ Dotson, K., (2011). “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing” 240.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Though note that such individuals may themselves be engaged in a form of epistemic violence. Certainly, they exhibit reliable ignorance, that is, reliable ignorance of the norms of hushing-up owing to their unfamiliarity with them. And whether this ignorance is harmful, as with Dotson’s examples, again depends on the social context. One can readily imagine the ignorant and harmful violation of hushing-up norms. A tourist speaker may, for instance, ask questions of a local interlocutor leading to the identification of that interlocutor by a bigoted third party as a member of a different community. And where this results in harms to the interlocutor, it seems the tourist would be engaged in epistemic violence.

that unlike the cases Dotson discusses, the most grievous individual and collective harms are those which result from bigots being able identify others as members of the ‘opposed’ community. As we have seen, these harms are not derivable from the forms of epistemically violent silencing which are Dotson’s focus, but rather from indicators of partisan identity being conveyed to bigots. And it is these individual and collective harms which hushing-up seeks to address.

Yet the objection might be pressed. Even in recognition of such harms, why suppose that enquiring into a strangers’ neighbourhood or background ought to meet with any social censure at all? Surely, it might be supposed, a norm which imposes social costs on asking such questions itself results in harms, and if this is correct then we ought not to impose costs on people for seeking to discuss such aspects of their lives or identities.

This objection seems firstly to ignore the importance placed on the non-ideal contextualisation of harms. Accordingly, the objection seems to rest on a misunderstanding about what is at stake in the context from a moral point of view. Hushing-up emerged in response to conflict in which there were few physical and social spaces in which members of different communities interacted, and in which identification of others as members of a different community could lead to the serious harms described above. And as I noted above, some physical and social spaces in NI continue to be perceived as hostile to members of ‘the other’ community, and so the creation and maintenance of genuinely shared spaces is an important good.⁸² Presumably, my judgement that this good outweighs being able to talk about identity indicators is widely shared, else the norm would not have taken hold in the first place: that many choose to forego those conversations does not obviously constitute a harm to them.

⁸² Taggart, S., Roulston, S, McAuley, C., (2021). “From Virtual Peace with Virtual Reality: Exploring the Contested Narratives of Spaces and Places in Northern Ireland,” 221.

None of what I have said denies that there are costs to be sustained by people in refraining from asking or sharing identity indicators. It is not uncommon for members of the Catholic community, for instance, to experience excitement, relief, and relaxation on leaving NI and crossing the border to the south (where hushing-up norms are not in force). For in the absence of the norms of hushing-up, they can justifiably and freely express some aspects of their identity to strangers which in NI they would not. This sense of the relaxation of constraints tracks with my own experiences of working and studying outside NI. In short, leaving NI often leads to noticing a range of affective changes of the sort discussed above, with individuals feeling less constrained in casual discussions of local politics, religion, culture, and so on. Yet importantly, on returning to NI the norms of hushing-up are once again willingly adopted, despite the costs to the individuals themselves, owing to the benefits both to themselves and to others of maintaining non-sectarian spaces.

Further, hushing-up is most justifiable before trust has been established between parties. At this point, each is concerned with others' possible bigotry. It should therefore not be surprising that in interpersonal relationships amongst social groups who have first come to trust each other under the norms of hushing-up, the incentive to enforce hushing-up accordingly weakens, allowing for increasing discussion of partisan beliefs, and disclosure of partisan indicators. The cost of waiting to share personal background details—one's interests in Irish sports, a family member inheriting a Lambeg drum, anecdotes about the odd behaviour of nuns at school, and so on—is a small one to pay when the benefits include building social trust between people in different political coalitions which were recently in conflict with one another. Moreover, notice that under such conditions, the early intentional generation of ignorance within a social group is "productive" in the sense set out by

Chris Mays.⁸³ On Mays’ account, although ignorance produces a distorted view of reality, it is also “substantially, a generative phenomenon that leads to new understandings about the world.”⁸⁴ Now, Mays focuses his account on especially troubling cases: climate change, conspiracy theories, and Trumpian “alternative facts,” in which these new understandings are, while internally coherent, akin to having “a virtual reality headset” on which novel “facts” and “explanations” are presented to shore up and secure an existing belief system.⁸⁵ But Mays’ account can also fruitfully be deployed here in relation to the sorts of (socially beneficial) ignorance generated by hushing-up norms. For what happens when people are denied access to information about identity indicators of political coalitional membership is that new understandings about others will be produced in ignorance of others’ community affiliation. The upshot is that it is too quick to suppose an epistemic harm has been sustained from hushing-up when the relevant generated form of ignorance also produces new ways of knowing, and of knowing how to relate to others. And this will include the production of further new norms governing those relations, norms in which indicators of community background need not play their previously epistemically outsized and morally unjustified role in structuring social relations.

Of course, all of this highlights how hushing-up seems to me to be best understood as a progressively transitional social norm in moving away from conflict in some domain: it serves to avoid social conflict in various everyday social situations at present, but the hope is that it may be dropped in future without negative outcomes as non-ideal conditions become less non-ideal in the relevant respects. An analogy with anti-fascist organising is perhaps appropriate. Anti-fascist actions seek to impose costs on far-right speech and activity, and some of their tactics share a conceptual similarity to hushing-up, as with de-platforming, protesting, and disrupting speakers’ talks, all of which involve deliberate efforts to

⁸³ Mays, C., (2021). “Ignorance as a Productive Response to Epistemic Perturbations.” *Synthese* 198(7): 6491–6507.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 6503.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 6503-6504.

both impose costs on bigots, and to signal the costs of bigotry to others.⁸⁶ As Mark Bray points out of anti-fascist organising, “a consistent pattern emerges [...] [w]hen local fascist organizing declines, so does anti-fascist organizing” such that “the lifespans of most antifa groups are determined by their fascist enemies.”⁸⁷ Similarly, while hushing-up functions as a broader interpersonal and structural set of norms, there is no reason to suppose that it would be maintained in the absence of widespread bigotry, and without the continued existence of spaces perceived as ‘no go areas’ for ‘the other’ community.⁸⁸

This analogy is important in another way too. For the charge that hushing-up results in epistemic violence seems clearest in considering its application to the performative partisanship of bigots. As I have already said, hushing-up does create a reliable ignorance such that exchanges of indicators of political coalitional membership incur social costs. Moreover, as we also saw above, more severe social censure is reserved for those who engage in more serious and obvious bigoted expressions. Insofar as those involved in partisan displays consciously reject the norms of hushing-up, and insofar as their bigoted testimony results in their exclusion from leisure venues, workplaces, gyms, nights out, and so on owing to their persistent violation of the norms, it seems reasonable to locate a harm to bigots in that exclusion. Accordingly, bigots are subject to a pernicious ignorance as Dotson specifies that phenomenon, incurring harms from the reliable ignorance cultivated by practices of hushing-up. Yet it seems unlikely that this is a problem for my account, rather than a problem for views which are committed to a rejection of the practice. For I am deeply untroubled by the exclusion of recalcitrant performative partisans from hushing-up spaces owing to their bigotry. If it turns out that some

⁸⁶ I am grateful to Mark Lance for discussion on this point.

⁸⁷ Bray, M., (2017). *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*. Brooklyn: Melville House. 157.

⁸⁸ Taggart, S., Roulston, S, McAuley, C., (2021). “From Virtual Peace with Virtual Reality: Exploring the Contested Narratives of Spaces and Places in Northern Ireland,” 221.

accounts of epistemic violence (or related phenomena) are necessarily committed to the defence or support of bigoted speech and displays, it seems to me that this is a challenge for those accounts to meet, rather than a challenge to my account as I have set it out here.

Conclusion

In setting out hushing-up, I drew on a set of social norms which have emerged organically from the society in which I grew up, a society which continues its slow transition away from post-conflict social and political polarisation. In presenting the philosophical refinement of these norms in their ethical and epistemic dimensions, I aimed to show how tackling a serious collective harm—sectarian conflict and violence—involves intervention across individual, interpersonal, and structural levels. Moreover, in justifying and defending the implementation of the social norms which constitute hushing-up, I argued that the imposition of costs on bigoted beliefs, speech, and behaviour, as well as the incentivisation of non-sectarianism, not only serves to avoid conflict and violence, but also leads to important social goods. These goods include the creation of shared spaces in which members of different communities can spend time together, the building of interpersonal trust across a social divide which continues to be construed as oppositional in many ways, and the development of new ways of knowing and of relating to others.

It will likely not have escaped attention that I have been relatively restrained about suggesting implementing hushing-up in new social contexts. This reticence is twofold. Primarily, by focusing on the social context in which the norms emerged and with which I am most personally familiar, I was most clearly able to philosophically develop the idea. But I also remember the end of The Troubles

and can recall both the extent of social division at that time, and the precarity of the peace. In those circumstances, hushing-up is readily justifiable. Whether it continues to be justifiable at this point, more than 27 years after the end of The Troubles, is a more complicated matter. The norms of hushing-up may, increasingly, be weakening in some spaces because of post-conflict efforts to disentangle community background from political beliefs and sectarian symbolism.⁸⁹ Take, for instance, the opening in 2021 of Scoil na Seolta, an integrated nursery and later primary school with all classes being taught in Irish, and the 2020 formation of the East Belfast Gaelic Athletic Association, both originating in the predominantly Protestant east Belfast.⁹⁰ Such developments indicate both an openness to displaying indicators still widely associated with one community, as well as a weakening of that association insofar as these indicators are being adopted by others. I am hopeful that this trend continues, and, as I have said above, take hushing-up to be a transitional set of norms useful in moving away from social conflict, and which can itself be generative of new forms of social relations. Though I would be delighted to be mistaken about this point, I do worry that a general, structural weakening of hushing-up is premature given the continued threat of sectarian bigotry and violence.⁹¹

Yet a strong intuition of what the threshold conditions for widely lifting hushing-up might be eludes me; nor do I have an account of the counterpart conditions for its implementation in societies marked by increasing polarisation and social conflict. This is something I hope to pursue in future work. However, as I showed above, the shifting of social norms can change social contexts for better, or for

⁸⁹ I am especially thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to comment on the relationship between my account and recent developments like these.

⁹⁰ Scoil na Seolta. “About Us”. Accessed 15 April 2025. <https://www.scoilnaseolta.org/about-us>; Cafolla, Anna. “I’ve Never Had so Much Craic’: Gaelic Games Come to Loyalist East Belfast.” *The Observer*, 18 October 2020, sec. UK news. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/oct/18/ive-never-had-so-much-craic-gaelic-games-come-to-loyalist-east-belfast>.

⁹¹ 2022, for instance, saw a man and his partner being forced to leave their home in the same area, following their identification as Catholic, despite his efforts to “discreetly” hide his religious background, seemingly solely due to his playing with a hurling stick in a nearby park. See “East Belfast: Couple Forced out of Home after Sectarian Attack.” 28 June 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-61974434>.

worse, in relatively short order. And it seems plausible that hushing-up, with suitable contextual modifications, could beneficially be implemented elsewhere should the risk of collective harms be sufficiently severe to justify doing so.

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