

Research Statement

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Research Areas

Areas of Specialization—Epistemology, Philosophy of Language, Wittgenstein
Areas of Competence—Logic, Metaethics, Social/Political Philosophy

Description of Past Work

Broadly, my previous scholarship has followed two trains of thought at the intersection of epistemology and social/political philosophy. First, I considered how social forces such as racial inequality and political polarization impact judgments about epistemic trust – i.e., credibility judgements. In spring 2024, I participated in a philosophy research group led by Professor Kevin Graham. We argued, in “Black Trust and White Allies: Insights from Slave Narratives”, that in order for white Americans to become ‘allies’ to Black Americans, they must display an awareness of the social context (especially power dynamics) that they share with those who would trust them (see Graham et al. 2023). That is, we argue that allies must demonstrate their knowledge of and proficiency with the facts of the trustor’s social status in a broader system of oppression. This was a unique addition to the literature since it was one of a few philosophical works that takes motivation from narratives written by formerly enslaved people. Another part of this work’s uniqueness was that it synthesized a distinct theoretical component of the concept of allyship – social awareness.

I have also argued, against the social scientific literature, that Black Americans displayed lower rates of COVID-19 vaccination during the initial roll out of vaccines not because of distrust of science, but because of distrust of public health institutions (see Larson 2025b). In an unpublished manuscript, I offer a philosophical evaluation of a social scientific question: Why was there significantly more hesitancy regarding the COVID-19 vaccine among Black Americans? After all, social scientists had repeatedly measured lower rates of vaccination and higher self-reported rates of hesitancy toward inoculation. Many social scientists had jumped to the conclusion that the motivating reason must be that Black Americans do not trust science, allow emotions to get in the way of trusting science, or some related reason. Instead, I suggest that the motivating reason could be distrust of formal public health institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other government-related offices and bureaus. I offer this suggestion in light of the political polarization prevalent at the time of the vaccine’s distribution. Further, I use empirical evidence to show that there are normative constraints present in Black communities which prevent or discourage trusting public institutions in certain ways. In full, then, I suggest that solutions to the vaccine hesitancy problem suggested by social scientists – such as educating Black people about vaccines – are wholly inadequate to address the problem.

In addition to the aforementioned, during the 2023-24 academic year, I contributed to Professor Anne Ozar’s sabbatical project on trust titled “Why Trust? Declining Trust and the Danger to Democracy”. We argue in “Epistemic Unbelonging: Civic Trust in a Post-Truth Democracy” that social and news media has changed journalistic practices in such a way that shared epistemic values of truthfulness and truth-aptness which in turn prevents a feeling epistemic belonging to a shared world (see Ozar, King, and Larson 2024). We show that journalistic processes like blending of expert sources with non-expert ones, sensationalization of world events, and targeting different media to different segments of society have resulted in concepts such as ‘alternative facts’, ‘fake news’, and misinformation. Each of these concepts

has been shown in extant literature to be lethal to norms of truth-aptness and truth-telling. From this confusion of fact-vs-fiction comes the loss of a sense that one occupies the same world as others. Thus, we added to literature by showing this epistemic unbelonging contributes to a lack of trust in public institutions.

The second strand that my work has followed analyzes the impact that social/political institutions have on our epistemic conduct – call this “institutional epistemology”. In my first publication, “Epistemic Vulnerability & Tolerance in Society”, I argue that when religious (informal institutions) are not accommodating to psychological processes of self-assessment for their members, new knowledge and ideas are unlikely to develop due to normative constraints innate to informal institutions (Larson 2024). To do this, I first show that social norms can bear on the concepts, ideas, and knowledge that we hold through behavioral constraints. Then I show that if an alignment of religious motives with state capacities for behavior constraint enforcement is pursued, it will force a path-dependence insofar as different concepts, ideas, and knowledge are not welcome. Thus, I present an epistemic argument in favor of church-state separation.

Finally, in my second publication, “Responsibility to Reflect: Reflection as Epistemic Responsibility in Democracy”, I argue that, as posed by ideal democratic theorists, responsible knowers in a democratic society are responsive to critical feedback that their reasons for believing in a given proposition, or using certain inference rules, are inadequate (Larson 2025a). Since ideal democratic theory emphasizes that democracy is a deliberative process that requires the exchange of reasons in a variety of discursive environments, when those beliefs that we adopt as a result of external forces influence our decisions and inferences, it is difficult – near impossible – for the wheels of democracy to spin. In other words, operating within a framework that allows for beliefs that manifest not from internal rational deliberation, but from one’s embeddedness in a particular social and political context, I show that that ideal democratic theory presupposes that we have a kind of rational autonomy over our beliefs that we simply do not have. Thus, ideal democratic theory must also entail – as a result of its emphasis on community values – a particular responsibility to reflect on those beliefs that we cannot provide reasons for.

Future Work

In future work, I aim to develop a theory of intuitions and unconscious belief – how we acquire each of these epistemically significant mental states as well as how we do (and should) use them in our decision-making processes. As these two notions – intuitions and unconscious beliefs – lurk in the background of our cognitive lives, they are likely to also bear on our conscious epistemic pursuits such as inquiry or disagreement. Previously, I have touched on the idea of unconscious beliefs in my investigation of how background beliefs can impose deliberative democracy (see Larson 2025a). However, a more thorough account of these beliefs will illuminate their current place in political and moral discourse but also allow us to identify how to overcome potential blockades.

The approach that I desire to use in my investigation of intuitions and unconscious beliefs is one that builds on literature in epistemic/semantic contextualism and hinge epistemologies. Epistemic contextualism is the thesis that whether or not agent *A* knows that ϕ depends on features of the environment in which *A* utters “I know that ϕ ”. Similarly, semantic contextualism is the thesis that what agent *A* means when they utter a word, phrase or sentence ψ depends on the context in which they utter “ ψ ”. In the later works of the 20th century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, contextualism has been connected to the theories of knowledge that utilize hinge propositions (called hinge epistemologies). Hinge propositions are those unquestionable propositions which support one’s current investigation such that questioning them leads one astray from that investigation. In other words, hinge propositions *must* be presupposed in order to count as being engaged in that sort of investigation at all. In connection with contextualist theories of knowledge and linguistic meaning, hinge propositions contribute to the context which then render utterances intelligible – including utterances with epistemic content.

References

- Graham, Kevin M. et al. (2023). "Black trust and white allies: Insights from slave narratives". In: *Social Philosophy Today* 39, pp. 183–195. DOI: 10.5840/socphiltoday202369106.
- Larson, Maddox (2024). "Epistemic vulnerability and tolerance in society". In: *The Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Review* 3, pp. 15–28.
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- (2025b). "Trust, Epistemic Norms, & Vaccine Hesitancy in Black Communities". Working paper.
- Ozar, Anne, Maddie King, and Maddox Larson (2024). "Epistemic Unbelonging: Civic Trust in a Post-Truth Democracy". Working paper.