Bullshit as a Problem of Social Epistemology

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Abstract

Bullshit is a widely recognized problem. While philosophy has given the topic some consideration, the analysis it offers is limited by an individualistic understanding of knowledge and epistemology. This article reframes bullshit as a problem of social epistemology, drawing on philosophical work on social epistemology as well as related research in psychology and the sociology of knowledge to explore the problem of epistemic vigilance. The article then draws on interactional sociology as well as Glaeser's recent work on understanding and institutions to delineate those social forces that undermine the task of epistemic vigilance. The article then examines several different types of bullshit in light of this tension between the individual pragmatic need to have true beliefs and the social pragmatic need to get along.

Keywords

bullshit, social epistemology, sociology of knowledge, epistemic vigilance, interactional norms

Bullshit is a widely recognized and often complained about problem. People accuse a variety of professions, such as lawyers, politicians, corporate executives, salespeople, bureaucrats, and academics, as regularly engaging in bullshit. In the workplace, managers spout and often believe their own bullshit (Pfeffer 2015). Some jobs are bullshit (Graeber 2013). "Bullshit!" is a common refrain on online comment sections, message boards, and social media, particularly around political topics. There are books, websites, and even a television show (*Penn and Teller Present: Bullshit!*) dedicated to identifying and debunking bullshit. Skeptics warn of the bullshit nature of particular beliefs, ranging from claims about UFO encounters to alternative medicine. Of course, people also willingly engage in bullshit. Students bullshit on assignments. Subordinates feed their bosses whatever bullshit they need to hear. Whether at work, in a barbershop, in a dorm, or at a bar, bullshitting with one another can be an enjoyable pastime. At times, bullshit is a source of consternation. At times, bullshit represents a sly wink at social conventions. The many uses of this scatological expression offer an

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implicit commentary on our flexible and often problematic relationship to the truth that deserves further consideration.

Philosopher Harry Frankfurt was the first scholar to put a serious academic polish on bullshit, emphasizing its distinctiveness from lying. Frankfurt (2005) argued that the liar, like the truth-teller, recognizes the authority of the truth. The bullshitter, by contrast, prefers to obscure the question of truth or falsity altogether. Because of this, Frankfurt argued that bullshit poses a greater threat to the authority of truth that undergirds modern society than lying (see also Frankfurt 2006). Frankfurt's initial diagnosis of the problem of bullshit has proven influential as others have sporadically returned to the topic, whether in philosophy (Hardcastle and Reisch 2006), cultural criticism (Law 2011; Penny 2005), or even psychology (Pennycook et al. 2015).

For its part, sociology has largely ignored the problem of bullshit. This article aims to fix that. Much of the previous work on bullshit, drawing on philosophy's normative concerns about epistemology, has taken for granted the critique implied in the colloquial expression—namely, that bullshit represents a distinctive and problematic form of deception. While this article shares the premise that bullshit is a distinctive form of deception, it puts aside the normative evaluation of bullshit's epistemic status. Instead, this article develops a sociological account of bullshit. Bullshit cannot be made sense of without reference to the social nature of knowledge. Sociology is uniquely positioned to illuminate the problem.

While the phrase *bullshit* (and its cognates *bull*, *bull crap*, *bull session*, *B.S.*, *being full of shit*, or even *horse shit*) might be particular to the modern English-speaking world, this article takes the position that the behavior and practical concerns that the phrase evokes are not necessarily limited to the modern English-speaking world. What people have come to identify as *bullshit* emerges from a fundamental tension between our individual pragmatic need to have true beliefs and our social pragmatic need to cooperate with others. What we know about the world comes largely from social sources—that is, through either direct or mediated interaction with others. This means that we are inherently vulnerable to deception and incompetence. We rely on social cues to evaluate the trustworthiness of a source, but such cues are vulnerable to manipulation and are often difficult to scrutinize. However, successful participation in social life often involves not only a fair degree of fakery on our own part but also a willingness to put aside strong epistemic demands on others. Our need for truth and honesty—and our need for caring about truth and honesty in the first place—is not total. Both as performers and audience members, we participate in the production of the minor deceptions, questionable claims, obfuscations, exaggerations, omissions, ambiguities, creative accounting, and pseudo-profundities that sometimes get labeled *bullshit*. We often see them and hear them and let them go—and expect others to extend the same courtesy to us.

In this initial attempt to provide a sociological account of the problem of bullshit, the article is structured as followed. First, I explore the existing philosophical work on bullshit, which frames it as a problem of epistemology. I then argue that bullshit is a problem of social epistemology—that is, a problem related to the acquisition of knowledge through social sources. I explore ideas from philosophical work on social epistemology as well as related research from both cognitive psychology and the sociology of knowledge. Having framed bullshit as a problem of social epistemology, I draw on the interactional sociology to outline those basic dimensions of social life that push back against the expression of skepticism toward social sources of information. I follow by briefly exploring three broad types of bullshit through the intellectual framework developed and discuss future directions for research.

PHILOSOPHY AND BULLSHIT

In his insightful essay, *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt offered the first serious take on a topic that is largely ignored by scholars.[1] Working from few formal definitions of the phrase, Frankfurt parsed out colloquial uses of *bullshit* as well as conceptually and linguistically related terms such as *humbug*, *nonsense*, *hot air*, and *bull session*. Frankfurt (2005:56) argued that bullshitting is distinct from lying as an activity:

> When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes up, to suit his purposes.

In Frankfurt's view, what makes the bullshitter "a greater enemy of the truth" is that the bullshitter wants to convince the audience that the question of truth or falsity is unimportant (p. 61). Frankfurt explains: "Someone who ceases to believe in the possibility of identifying certain statements as true and others as false can only have two alternatives" (pp. 61–62). The first is to give up on asserting any version of the facts—whether truth or lies. Facticity depends on some basic recognition of the distinction between what is and what is not. The second is to conclude that we only ever communicate in bullshit. If it's all bullshit, then communication is reduced to mere performance. The only goal is to be more appealing than others.

Perhaps because Frankfurt's analysis of bullshit was the first serious academic attempt, it has proven largely definitive. A variety of other scholars have used Frankfurt's work as the starting point for their own analyses (Belfiore 2009; Law 2011; Levin and Zickar 2002; Penny 2005; Pennycook et al. 2015). Others have both criticized and expanded on Frankfurt's analysis of the epistemic status of bullshit. These criticisms have typically focused on alternative examples that Frankfurt did not originally consider, which in turn suggest variations on Frankfurt's definition. For example, focusing on academic arguments intentionally designed to obfuscate and resist clarification, Cohen (2002) argues that Frankfurt mistakenly focuses on bullshit as a process rather bullshit as a product. Using the example of "creation science," Reisch (2006) argues that bullshitters are not indifferent to the truth but that they disingenuously disguise their preference for another truth. De Waal (2006) argues that bullshitting is akin to Haack's (1998) notion of "fake inquiry," as opposed to Peirce's (1955) definition of "genuine inquiry," so that one of philosophy's goals should be helping people identify bullshit methods of inquiry and related knowledge claims. Most of these variations on the definition, however, share Frankfurt's normative concerns about the problematic epistemic status of bullshit.

Some scholars have been more critical of Frankfurt's initial analysis, challenging its normative premise. Richardson (2006:83) offers a more sanguine take: "Bullshit is, as we know, all well and good in its proper place. But it tends to transgress that place and crowd out other aspects of life." He argues that we do not expect candor and honesty in many parts of social life. "Bullshit genres," like letters of reference or grant proposals, are situations in which both the writer and reader understand the socially expected deviations from the truth. In Richardson's view, the problem is not the "unavoidable" bullshit that is part and parcel of social life but rather the fact that bullshit seems to be expanding into new areas.

Fuller (2006) offers a deeper critique of Frankfurt's work. He argues that Frankfurt and other would-be "bullshit detectors gain considerable rhetorical mileage by blurring the epistemic and ethical dimensions of the phenomenon that they wish to root out" (Fuller 2006:244). Being against bullshit—that is, being a "bullshit detector"—presumes a kind of privileged epistemic position in order to readily identify and discern which claims are true and which are bullshit: "The bullshit detector believes not only that there is truth but also that her own access to it is sufficiently reliable and general to serve as a standard by which others may be held accountable" (Fuller 2006:246). For Fuller, such a position ignores the problem of uncertainty at both the level of epistemology and ontology (Van Asselt and Rotmans 2002). *Epistemological uncertainty* refers to the inherent limits of people's capacity to know the world around them. Fuller suggests the bullshit detector has a greater confidence in his or her ability to apprehend and know the world. The position of the bullshit detector belies the fact that consistent access to clear evidence of any particular claim or belief is often hard to come by. The bullshitter's position allows for more uncertainty in his or her grasp of the world because as Fuller argues: "[W]e must make up the difference between the obliqueness of our inquiries and the obtuseness of reality's response. That 'difference' is fairly seen as bullshit" (p. 247).

This "obtuseness of reality's response," or what might also be called *ontological uncertainty*, is another source of difference. The bullshit detector is a realist, believing that "reality is, on the whole, stable and orderly." By contrast, the bullshitter is an antirealist, treating "reality as inherently risky and under construction," fraught with a greater degree of uncertainty (Fuller 2006:247). Bullshit detectors are not only overconfident in their ability to apprehend the truth, but they are being naïve or disingenuous about the messiness of reality, according to Fuller (2006). Bullshitters engage in "deferred epistemic gratification" by throwing a variety of ideas and claims out there without regard to the weight of the evidence. In Fuller's view, bullshit detectors' realist position often overstates the epistemic status of some claims over others without sufficient evidence. This amounts to dismissing some claims as bullshit without conceding the epistemic weaknesses of one's own position.

The definitional and normative concerns of the extant philosophical work on the problem of bullshit have their place; however, they limit the analysis of the phenomenon. Fuller's (2006) analysis suggests but leaves underexplored a way through this limit—namely, thinking about the epistemic conditions that make bullshit possible. Fuller frames this problem in terms of broad assumptions about ontology and epistemology: How scrutable do we think reality is, and how confident are we in our ability to apprehend it? Reducing these problems to simply staking out a priori philosophical positions is unnecessarily constraining. Some aspects of reality lend themselves to be known and understood more easily, others resist scrutiny altogether, and many fall somewhere in between. Some things we believe with a high degree of certainty, other things we believe with little to no certainty, and many fall in between. One might argue that bullshit tends to work more effectively in those areas of reality that are more complex and harder to grasp and where people's knowledge is less certain. Those aspects of reality marked by a high degree of uncertainty, ambiguity, or complexity are thus more susceptible to the problem of bullshit.

But even these epistemic conditions are insufficient for explaining bullshit. As the examples of bullshit cited by Frankfurt and others suggest, bullshit is the product of social action, and bullshitting is a decidedly social activity. Explaining bullshit requires framing the problem not just in reference to the epistemic conditions faced at the individual level but also in reference to the social production of knowledge.

BULLSHIT AS A PROBLEM OF SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Clément (2010:531) argues that "philosophers and social scientists have long neglected the fact that most of our beliefs, even our most cherished, have not been acquired through personal observations or inferences but through testimony, i.e. via a proposition communicated by a source (person, institution, media, etc.)." While it might be true that some philosophers and social scientists have neglected this fact, many scholars in these disciplines have placed socially mediated knowledge in human culture and cognition at the center of their analyses. From this research, two key questions emerge. First, how should we think about the epistemic status of knowledge received from others compared to knowledge gained by firsthand experience? The practical difficulty of verifying every secondhand claim leaves socially mediated knowledge inherently susceptible to both deliberate manipulation and incompetence. Second, given that people do rely extensively on secondhand knowledge in conducting their day-to-day lives, how do they go about evaluating the claims of others? Although people can judge some claims against their own personal experience, they must also rely on cues that are external to the claim itself to discern its credibility. Thus, the evaluation of the social sources of knowledge bleeds into the process of acquiring knowledge.

Although the term *social epistemology* has become associated with a branch of philosophy, social epistemological problems have long attracted the attention of other disciplines. For the current purposes, I use the term *social epistemology* to refer to the broader problem of dealing with socially mediated knowledge. To that end, this section explores relevant ideas from three key areas of scholarly work on the social acquisition of knowledge. The first area is the philosophical work in social epistemology, particularly work on testimony. The second area is the empirical research from social and cognitive psychology focusing on the problems of epistemic vigilance and deception. The third area is recent work from the sociology of knowledge on the problem of epistemology. Each of these areas of research offers a slightly different take on the basic problem of social epistemology relevant to explaining the problem of bullshit.

Social Epistemology

Traditional epistemology concerns itself with the evaluation of "adopting some doxastic attitude toward a proposition"—that is, whether an individual chooses to believe or reject some proposition and is justified in doing so (Goldman 2011:12). The philosophical subfield of social epistemology is distinguished by its emphasis on the social dimensions of traditional epistemological topics, such as evidence, judgment, and knowledge production. *Social* is interpreted broadly, covering a range of topics such as the evidential status of the claims of others, the properties of "collective doxastic agents" or group-level judgments, and the dynamics of social systems that produce knowledge (Goldman 2011). Social epistemology inherits its analytic focus from the traditional disciplinary and normative concerns of epistemology; it is not necessarily concerned with the empirical study of social practices that help constitute knowledge like the sociology of knowledge is (Fuller 1988, 1996; Schmitt 1994). That being said, social epistemology offers insight into several key ideas that are relevant to the problem of bullshit.

One of the central problems in social epistemology concerns the epistemic status of testimony (Coady 1992)—that is, how much evidentiary weight should we give what someone else has told us? On one side of the debate are the nonreductionists, who believe that "testimony is a basic source of justification, on an epistemic par with sense perception, memory, inference, and the like" (Lackey 2011:73). Nonreductionists argue that people are justified in believing what someone else has told them unless there is "positive evidence against

doing so" (Weiner 2003:260). Such positive evidence includes "psychological defeaters," which are subjectively experienced doubts of the reliability of someone's claim, and "normative defeaters," which are doubts that someone *ought* to have in assessing the reliability of someone's claim (Lackey 2006, 2011). Critics argue that this nonreductionist position of accepting testimony by default "sanction[s] gullibility, epistemic irrationality, and intellectual irresponsibility" (Lackey 2011:75).

On the other side of the debate are the reductionists, who argue "hearers must also possess *nontestimonally based positive reasons* in order to be justified in accepting the testimony of speakers" (Lackey 2011:74–75). Reductionism is further divided between "global reductionists," who argue that "in order to be justified in accepting the testimony of speakers, hearers must possess nontestimonially based positive reasons for believing that *testimony is generally true*," and "local reductionists," who focus on "*each instance of testimony*" (Lackey 2011:74–75). Critics of global reductionism argue that "testimony is not a unitary category" (Fricker 1994:139), but rather, it is "epistemically heterogeneous," meaning that some claims are going to be more reliable than others (e.g., reporting the weather vs. one's sexual history) (Lackey 2011:76). A globally applicable positive reason to accept testimony is unlikely to exist. Criticisms of local reductionism argue that "ordinary cognitive agents" rarely have reliable access to sufficient positive reasons to believe a good portion of the testimony that they encounter in their day-to-day lives (Lackey 2011:77).

Unfortunately, the debate between nonreductionism and reductionism leaves one caught between gullibility and impractical skepticism. While some philosophers attempt to delineate various conditions for the nonreductionist or reductionist approach, others expand the analytic scope to include decidedly social aspects of the testimony (Faulkner 2000; Hinchman 2005; Moran 2005). This "interpersonal view of testimony" consists of three main features: the centrality of the interpersonal relationship between the "two parties in a testimonial exchange," the role of assurance (e.g., "trust me") in "*conferring epistemic value*" on testimony, and the concession that these first two features offer "epistemic justification" that is "*nonevidential* in nature" (Lackey 2011:78). This turns attention to those qualities external to the testimony itself. These qualities include specific aspects of communication, such as assurance (Moran 2005), as well as more ambiguous social judgments, such as trust (Hinchman 2005; Origgi 2004) and authority (Fricker 2011). In focusing on qualities of the speaker or the communication itself, some philosophers hope to develop a logically consistent and practically effective set of criteria to evaluate the evidentiary weight of testimony. Things such as "indicator-properties," or qualities that make a "good informant," such as competence and trustworthiness, become central to figuring out the credibility of the testimony (Fricker 2011). Consideration of such characteristics adds a moral dimension to the epistemological problem posed by testimony (Origgi 2004). The question moves from being about how much evidentiary weight do we give testimony to how do we evaluate the trustworthiness and believability of the speaker. Fuller (2006) criticizes the proliferation of moral concepts like trust within social epistemology, but others (e.g., Origgi 2004) argue such considerations are necessary in light of the pragmatic demands of communication.

Social epistemology draws attention to the inherently problematic nature of secondhand knowledge. Ultimately, it offers no clear and consistent basis for effectively evaluating another person's claims. Still, people routinely make these kinds of judgments in their day-to-day lives. In lieu of some clear, logical standards, people rely on a variety of moving targets to make such judgments: previous knowledge, attention, emotional investment, contextual clues, ascribed judgments of trustworthiness and authority, evaluations of social performance, and so on. The complexity of such judgments makes testimony susceptible to both manipulation and incompetence. In light of this potentiality, bullshit looks less like a

violation of some agreed on or assumed rules of communication and more like a byproduct of flawed communicative machinery. Leaving behind the normative concerns of philosophy, we turn to the empirical side of the question: How do people actually deal with the problem of testimony?

Social and Cognitive Psychology

Within the fields of social and cognitive psychology, separate but related lines of inquiry have developed around the same basic problem of testimony. The general goal of this research focuses on identifying and accounting for how people manage the problem of "epistemic vigilance," or being able to discern credible from deceptive or incompetent testimony (Sperber et al. 2010). The fact that people overwhelmingly rely on others to learn about the world suggests that human beings have developed a "suite of cognitive mechanisms" for dealing with the problem (Sperber et al. 2010:359). Of particular interest are two bodies of empirical research—namely, research on how children's understanding of socially mediated knowledge develops and research on how adults deal with deception.

Traditionally, developmental psychology has viewed children as "little scientists" investigating the world as individuals (Clément 2010). Recent research, however, has focused on the various ways in which children orient themselves toward evaluating socially mediated information and how that changes over the course of their cognitive and social development (Harris 2002). Children are an especially vulnerable audience in light of the problem of testimony. They rely heavily on others to learn about the world but have a limited amount of direct experience of the world and experience navigating social relationships and interpersonal communication.

Drawing largely from experiments with children ranging from three to five years old, research suggests that they exercise a surprising amount of nuance and skepticism when dealing with the problem of testimony, but it is not necessarily total or without error (Clément 2010; Harris and Corriveau 2011; Heyman 2008; Jaswal 2010; Koenig and Harris 2007; Sperber et al. 2010). Children are selective in whom they believe, and such selectivity tends to be based on limited assessments of the character of the speaker. Experiments by Koenig, Clément, and Harris (2004); Koenig and Harris (2005); Nurmsoo and Robinson (2009); Rakoczy, Warneken, and Tomasello (2008); and Scofield and Behrend (2008) demonstrate that young children are less likely to believe, trust, or even learn from speakers who reveal themselves to be unreliable or ignorant (i.e., having a demonstrated history of inaccuracy in the context of the experiment). The exercise of such skepticism, however, emerges at a particular stage in cognitive development, with children demonstrating a greater degree of skepticism at around four years old (Clément 2010; Clément, Koenig, and Harris 2004; Mascaro and Sperber 2009). Sperber et al. (2010:373) point out that this development of epistemic vigilance tracks with the established research on the "development of mindreading," or the ability to recognize that others have minds and beliefs of their own, which emerges around the same age. Overall, this growing body of research suggests that children do possess some kind of "*cognitive filter* that enables children to take advantage of testimony without the risk of being completely misled by it" (Clément 2010:548).

However, these cognitive filters against the naïve acceptance of all socially transmitted information are not without their flaws. Reviewing the extant research, Clément (2010), Harris and Corriveau (2011), and Koenig and Harris (2007) conclude that children's evaluation of testimony often focuses on their assessment of characteristics of the speaker rather than the testimony itself. Moreover, children don't just evaluate the relevant cognitive characteristics of the speaker (e.g., demonstrated unreliability in the task at hand) but include

"indirect" characteristics, such as age, social consensus, benevolence, and familiarity (Clément 2010). Given the patterns of trust emerging from the research, Harris and Corriveau (2011) argue that children are primed first and foremost to trust information from familiar and reliable caregivers and second to trust information from someone from their own cultural group. Navigating testimony is simultaneously a problem of cognitive development and social development. Just as children are developing a set of cognitive capacities to navigate problems of reasoning and rationality, so too are they developing a set of capacities to navigate social relationships. Moreover, these two patterns of development are arguably intertwined (Mercier and Sperber 2011; Sperber et al. 2010). Children must not only learn to assess claims for logic, consistency, and accuracy based on what they might know already, but they must also learn to assess the social sources of a claim.

Related research on how adult subjects manage the problem of epistemic vigilance suggests that this task does not get any easier. Psychologists have examined just how well people manage the challenge of detecting and discriminating between true or false claims using the dual-processing view of cognition. The dual-processing model divides cognition into two basic systems: System 1, or automatic, unconscious cognition, and System 2, or deliberate, conscious cognition (Kahneman 2011). The assumption of this model is that while these two systems are interrelated, they process different kinds of information and work in different ways when it comes to cognition and behavior, including evaluating the truthfulness of a claim.

Early work by Gilbert and colleagues (Gilbert 1991; Gilbert, Krull, and Malone 1990; Gilbert, Tafarodi, and Malone 1993) suggests that when an individual confronts some new piece of information, he or she automatically codes it as "true." In particular, their experiments show that when the subject's cognitive capacities became overloaded (in particular, System 2), the subjects were unable to "unbelieve" information that they consciously recognize as false. This research suggests that people's default cognitive position is gullibility. More recent research by Hasson, Simmons, and Todorov (2005) and Richter, Schroeder, and Wöhrmann (2009), however, contradicts these earlier findings. Even under conditions of heavy cognitive load, subjects were able to make accurate judgments about semantically false statements under experimental conditions. Sperber et al. (2010) argue that this discrepancy between earlier and later research stems from the fact that the more recent experiments offered tasks with more cultural and cognitive relevance to the subjects.[2] If the default state of System 1 is to believe new information, as the early research by Gilbert and colleagues suggests, then the problem of explaining how and why people come to disbelieve certain pieces of information still remains. As Sperber et al. (2010) suggest, if System 1 draws on deeply learned cultural beliefs, then the acculturated unconscious aspects of cognition play a role in the task of epistemic vigilance.

The problem of evaluating others' claims is usually thought of as a conscious, deliberate, System 2 cognitive act, whether framed positively (e.g., choosing to be skeptical of someone's claim) or negatively (e.g., being duped by a false claim). Research that examines people's ability to detect deception speaks directly to this problem. Bond and DePaulo's (2006) meta-analysis of the literature on deception judgments suggests that people are only slightly better than chance (54 percent) on "lie-truth judgments." Moreover, people appear slightly better at correctly identifying truthful statements (61 percent) than lies (47 percent). The research also suggests that people generally believe that their interaction partners are honest, particularly those with whom they are close and familiar. These results suggest that social familiarity lowers epistemic vigilance.

More recent research examines not just people's ability to detect outright lies but other forms of obfuscating communication. Rogers and Norton's (2011) experiments on "dodge

detection" tested subjects' ability to identify when a speaker gave a fluent but incorrect answer (e.g., when a political candidate answers a different question than the one posed by the debate moderator). The authors found that unless prompted, subjects were unlikely to detect speakers' dodges, particularly when the speaker answered fluently. In fact, one of their experiments suggested that subjects rated fluent dodgers more positively than speakers who gave correct but disfluent answers. Pennnycook et al. (2015) examined subjects' ability to detect what they call "pseudo-profound bullshit," or phrases consisting of impressive sounding buzzwords that are semantically empty (e.g., "Hidden meaning transforms unparalleled abstract beauty"). The authors found that individuals vary in their "bullshit receptivity," meaning that some were more willing to judge these statements as profound. This bullshit receptivity is associated with intuitive (vs. analytic) thinking style, lower cognitive ability, religious beliefs, belief in the supernatural, and "ontological confusions" (e.g., using prayer to heal).

Research from cognitive and social psychology presents us with something of a muddled picture of how people actually manage the problem of epistemic vigilance, which isn't surprising given the age-related approaches to the topic. Research involving children tends to emphasize their capacity for epistemic vigilance despite the fact that they presumably lack sufficient experience to make effective judgments about a speaker's testimony. By contrast, research involving adults paints a different picture. Adults struggle to make accurate judgments about deceptive or problematic communication. How do we make sense of this difference? First, the difference could be an artifact of the types of experiments with each group. Children are expectedly held to a lower standard when it comes to testing their capacity for skepticism. Adults understandably face more sophisticated problems under the experimental conditions. A second possibility is that for practical and ethical reasons, research on deception detection is limited to less serious or inconsequential lies, which subjects may have less motivation to detect (Bond and DePaulo 2006). Another possibility has to do with the normalization of lying in adult life. DePaulo et al.'s (1996) research shows that self-admitted lying is quite commonplace but that people tend to regard these lies as nonserious. If lying is a fact of social life, then the challenge is not to detect lies but to determine what lies are worth one's time, energy, and attention.

In order for bullshit to exist and proliferate in social life, it has to work some of the time. If bullshit—or any other form of deception or misinformation—were not detectable at all, then the very capacity to transmit information socially would be undermined. If bullshit were too easily detectable, then it would not exist, at least as we currently understand it. How then might we explain this variation in epistemic vigilance? Pennycook et al. (2015) suggest that we might explain some of this variation by individual-level characteristics, including personality and cognitive ability, but I suspect that this approach is limited. The problem is not exercising epistemic vigilance in general. This would be cognitively exhausting and socially alienating in a world where "white lies" are commonplace. Rather, the trick lies in figuring out when and where to exercise epistemic vigilance. Making such judgment points to a source of variation outside of the individual—namely, social context.

The Sociology of Knowledge

The sociology of knowledge frames knowledge as a collective phenomenon. Distinct bodies of knowledge and styles of thought emerge out of the particular social organization of historically situated groups (Goodman 1978; Mannheim [1936] 1991). Such an analytic scope explains knowledge in reference to factors that lie outside of the individual: social institutions, the opportunity structure, existing cultural categories and taxonomies, cultural

understandings of trustworthiness and authority, the influence of material and ideological interests, and more. In this sense, the individual doesn't confront epistemological problems on his or her own but with a set of socially determined tools to judge, evaluate, and make sense of any particular claim. Although epistemology has arguably been a part of the sociology of knowledge since its inception (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Rawls 2005), only recently has a growing body of research explicitly taken up the topic, with particular attention to the relationship between culture and epistemology (Reed and Alexander 2009). This body of research is loosely connected as it draws on a variety of disparate contexts, but it offers several insights worth considering in light of the problems of bullshit and epistemic vigilance. At its core are questions about the social forces that shape how people collectively recognize, evaluate, and communicate what they consider to be knowledge.

The sociology of knowledge has long gained traction studying science because of an observed contradiction. While scientific communities publicly favor a monistic understanding of truth (Kurzman 1994), studies of the actual production of scientific knowledge have repeatedly revealed the ways in which social forces influence supposedly objective standards. Knorr-Cetina (1999) has detailed the distinct "epistemic cultures" that have developed in large-scale, specialized scientific endeavors, like molecular biology and high-energy particle physics laboratories. The central idea is that these subfields often develop distinctive practices as well as specialized technologies and vocabularies for dealing with some highly specified problems. The catch is that the ability to make sense of or recognize novel or important contributions to knowledge in a specific subfield typically hinges on one's embeddedness in that subfield's epistemic culture. Abend (2006) has noted similar distinctions between the way American and Mexican sociologists present their findings and theoretical arguments despite their shared disciplinary background. The epistemic culture that produces some form of knowledge—even scientific knowledge—emerges from particular practices, technologies, vocabularies, methods, history, and social context. As a culture, it involves norms about what constitutes appropriate ways of knowing, presentation of evidence and claims, and sufficient evidentiary weight. The truth of a particular claim is not necessarily self-evident; rather, it becomes evident within a particular epistemic cultural context that defines social expectations about who is communicating and how they communicate their claims (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Shapin 1994).[3] In essence, people rely on cues external to the claim itself but are related to social position and performance in order to make judgments about credibility.

Just as an epistemic culture sets norms about what constitutes credible knowledge and knowledge claims, so too does it establish boundaries against ways of knowing that are to be excluded (Gieryn 1983). Epistemic cultures often define problems in ways that preclude the consideration of both alternative theoretical framings as well as alternative sources of evidence (Rodriguez-Muniz 2015). Whooley (2008, 2013) has shown that competition can emerge between different groups that advocate for some forms of knowledge and ways of knowing over others. Claims derived from the accepted methods are viewed as legitimate, while other topics and types of claims are often actively marked off limits (Whooley 2013). In this way, one might argue that ignorance, like knowledge, is the product of social, cultural, and political forces, not just through the manipulation of evidence but through competition between countervailing epistemic standards (Oreskes and Conway 2008, 2011; Proctor 2008). Distinct epistemic cultures offer competing ideas about what counts as evidence, how to weigh and interpret evidence, how to present a claim, and conversely, what is not worth consideration and what kind of claims are off the table.

The co-presence of alternative epistemic cultures does not necessarily result in competition. Research on interdisciplinary grant review committees shows how scholars with very

different epistemic standards collectively evaluate the merits of proposals from a variety of disciplines (Lamont 2009; Lamont, Mallard, and Guetzkow 2006; Mallard, Lamont, and Guetzkow 2009). Rather than "translating" the grant application and their evaluation of it into more generalizable criteria for evaluation, the grant committee members engage in "cognitive contextualization," placing the application within the intellectual and epistemological context of the field from which they come (Lamont et al. 2006). These committees also develop sets of interactional norms to manage these epistemic differences, such as the reciprocal expectation of deference to expertise, respect for methodological pluralism, and even kinds of horse-trading (Lamont 2009; Mallard et al. 2009). In other words, the committees develop strong norms to minimize conflicts among competing epistemic standards, instead promoting the dual goals of collegiality and epistemic pluralism. Although this is a highly specialized social situation, it suggests that people have the capacity not only to recognize the alternative epistemic standards but also to bracket their own epistemological point of view in the interest of cooperation toward some collective goal. Commitment to some epistemic culture is not necessarily total. It can be relativized and put aside under the right conditions.

It is important to keep in mind that most research in the sociology of knowledge focuses on the formal or official production of knowledge. Translating lessons from science to a more mundane and broadly framed problem such as bullshit is not straightforward. It is useful to study formal sites of knowledge production because the knowledge is produced under conditions of explicit scrutiny. This allows the researcher to bring into sharp relief the gap between the professed universalistic epistemic ideals of science and the socially contingent nature of the actual production of knowledge. For current purposes, one way to frame this issue is to point out that even when people attempt to produce knowledge that is universally true, they still rely heavily on social judgments of the sources of information. If this is the case in science, then we might reasonably expect that such dynamics play an even larger role in social settings where epistemic standards are not agreed on, not particularly well thought out, and rarely, if ever, made explicit.

To that end, the recent sociological interest in epistemology suggests several ideas worth considering in light of bullshit and epistemic vigilance as social problems. First and foremost is the recognition of the role of culture in informing epistemic standards. As work in social epistemology indicates, one cannot judge the credibility of someone's testimony based purely on the testimony alone. People draw on pieces of information that are external to the claim. Such information indicating credibility—or not—happens within the context of a particular culture that sets standards for trustworthiness and credible social performance. Culturally rooted epistemologies also marginalize or discredit certain ideas, topics, and ways of knowing. Those who engage with certain ideas or topics or alternative ways of knowing are potentially suspect from the point of view of another epistemic culture. But interestingly, differences do not necessarily lead to discrediting. In some situations, it seems that people can recognize differences in epistemic standards and effectively put aside any doubts that they might have. Thus, in elevating the problems of truth and credibility beyond the individual and to the social, a kind of metacognition emerges. People learn not only how to judge the credibility of others but how to recognize alternative epistemic standards and relativize their own epistemic judgments. In other words, while people draw on social information to navigate the problem of epistemic vigilance, they also draw on social information to determine when and where to exercise that vigilance. In sum, these are key pieces in the puzzle of social epistemology: the problem of testimony, the challenge of epistemic vigilance, the reliance on social and cultural cues to manage epistemological problems, and a flexible relationship with these socially derived epistemic standards. It is in the context of these ideas that I develop a sociological account of bullshit.

A SOCIOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF BULLSHIT

Frankfurt defined *bullshit* as a disregard for the question of truth or falsity. Bullshitting is a kind of communicative performance the steers the audience away from such concerns. As Fuller suggests, Frankfurt's argument assumes a kind of privileged, bullshit-detection, epistemic position where there is clear and consistent access to the truth. Relevant research in social epistemology casts serious doubts on such a privileged epistemic position. Instead, people navigate the world of secondhand knowledge by relying on a variety of flawed social and contextual cues. It is often unclear what the truth of the matter is and whether or not the truth really matters at the moment.

A sociological account of bullshit understands the phenomenon relative to these unsettled epistemic conditions. While Frankfurt sought to draw a clear line between liars and bullshitters, a sociological perspective offers a more nuanced interpretation of bullshit as a social act. Whether the would-be bullshitter intends to be deceptive (like a liar) or sincerely believes and promotes some form of nonsense is less important than the fact that he or she is able to get away with it (to varying degrees) largely because of the lack of clarity and agreement over the relevant epistemic standards. A sociological account of bullshit also places greater emphasis on those aspects of social life that work against epistemic vigilance. Although our social relationships are the main conduit through which the acquisition of knowledge occurs, the acquisition of knowledge is not necessarily the defining feature of those social relationships. Other considerations—issues of morality, sociability, and power—shape those relationships. The unsettled nature of epistemic standards is directly related to those dimensions of social life that prioritize things other than questions of truth or falsity.

To that end, what follows is an attempt to highlight the key features of sociality that push back against epistemic vigilance and create the space necessary for bullshit to proliferate. My approach is intentionally multilayered in order to account for the array of behaviors commonly identified with bullshit. The first layer, which draws on Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and Sperber and Wilson's inferential model of communication, is the fundamental expectation of trust and cooperation involved in social interaction and communication. The second layer involves Goffman's exploration of the role of tact and manners in social interactions. The third layer under consideration is the problem of framing, particularly as it relates to the exercise of epistemic vigilance. The final layer under consideration draws on Glaeser's recent work on the sociology of understanding and the role of institutions in shaping understanding.

Trust and Cooperation

Communication is often framed as a matter of information exchange. The speaker encodes his or her thoughts into language, transmits them through speech, and the listener receives the words and decodes them into thoughts in his or her own mind. What this "code model of communication" ignores is just how little is often said in conversations that is both coherent and meaningful for speaker and listener alike (Sperber and Wilson 1995). Garfinkel (1967) made just how much is unsaid in typical day-to-day interactions a focal point of his ethnomethodology. It is a problem that suggests an underlying structure that people assume in their social interactions. People's phrasing is often vague and ambiguous, relying heavily on the listener's ability to draw on context to make sense of what the person is saying. Garfinkel emphasizes this indexical nature of communication: Our talk often points to things without fully explicating or specifying them. Sperber and Wilson (1995) developed similar ideas in their inferential model of communication, arguing that such indexical or ostensive statements are part of the ongoing process of establishing mutual relevance and intelligibility.

The speaker assumes that the listener will be able to pick up the presumably relevant cues in what he or she is saying and relate them appropriately to the established context of the conversation. In doing so, the speaker relies heavily on the listener's inferential abilities. Because mutual relevance and intelligibility typically unfold over the course of the conversation, the listener holds off—and is often expected to hold off—on queries about unspecified and ambiguous phrasings, questionable ideas, and even nonsense, with the hope that the speaker will eventually clarify things.

Implicit in this inferential model of communication is the profound sense of trust underlying the cooperative dynamics of social interactions. Asking for clarifying or specifying questions may help the speaker and listener work toward mutual relevance and intelligibility, but such behaviors carry potential risks, as Garinkel's (1967) breaching experiments show. Depending on the context, scrutinizing such ordinary talk—that is, asking people to specify their statements and claims—may prove deeply offensive, invoking emotional reactions. A skeptical listener threatens the implicit moral order in social interactions, indicating mistrust in what the speaker is saying and implying mendacity or incompetence on the part of the speaker. This underlying expectation of trust and cooperation in many conversational and interactional settings creates an impetus against public expressions of epistemic vigilance.

Silence and Tact

Goffman's work also explored just how much is often left unsaid in most social interactions but in slightly different directions. Goffman (1959) described successful social interactions as invoking a kind of thin "surface agreement" or "veneer of consensus" about what is going on in the situation among an interaction's participants—and thus guiding how they should respond. In order for these fragile surface agreements to hold together, individuals have to put aside private thoughts and emotions that might otherwise be deemed inappropriate or irrelevant to the current social interaction (Goffman 1959). This idea draws attention to the split that the individual experiences between his or her individual self—with its myriad private thoughts, emotions, and urges—and his or her social self constrained by the external expectations of others.

Maintaining the surface agreements that make interactions work is not simply a matter of keeping quiet about one's own thoughts. One of the themes that Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967) returns to again and again in his work is the role that others play in helping individuals recover from interactional miscues. For Goffman, social interactions are performances that involve the cooperation of multiple players to work. Thus, there is a mutual obligation to assist one another in making the interactional performance work. An ill-advised remark, a revelation of something private, a stutter, misspeaking, or perhaps some poorly timed bodily noises can all disrupt the veneer of consensus. Of course, how people respond to the disruption is going to depend on their interpretation of the situation. There are certainly some situations in which disruptions can lead to a redefinition of the situation, such as when person uses a self-deprecating comment on his or her own miscue to transform a tense, formal meeting into an informal, friendly encounter (Winship 2004). However, Goffman is particularly interested in those situations in which members of the audience help the offending participant repair the breach in the veneer of consensus. Common tactics include changing the subject, drawing attention elsewhere, or even pretending like the disruption didn't happen. Miller (2003:226) argues that politeness, poise, and tact are at the center of "Goffman's moral order."

Although most societies have strong norms against dishonesty, this kind of fakery is part and parcel of social life (Miller 2003; see also Kimbrough 2006), but it is not without consequences. The expected polite give-and-take of normal social interaction might lead people to

avoid challenging some questionable claims and actively assist the person in constructing a lie. In situations involving power, authority, or the (explicit or implicit) threat of coercive force, these dynamics come into even sharper relief than usual. The normative expectations to keep quiet and overlook others' displays of dishonesty arguably lay the foundation for silence even in the face of morally compelling problems (Zerubavel 2006). Social expectations for tact and polite cooperation are a disincentive for scrutiny; moreover, in many situations, there is little to be gained—epistemically or otherwise—in going against those expectations. We learn to adopt a certain amount of flexibility with the truth, facts, and honesty.

The Problem of Framing

The normative pressures to cooperate in social interactions that work against the individual's need for epistemic vigilance are not all-encompassing and vary according to the demands of the context. This variation creates a kind of meta-epistemological problem. Individuals don't just need to determine whether someone is speaking truthfully or not, but they have to decide whether it matters in the current context. This is why understanding the role of culture in establishing relevant epistemic standards is so important. People learn to read not just other people but the situation as well. Social cues clue people into both the kind and degree of scrutiny one must expect to exercise in relation to the claims that people make.

Here Goffman's ([1974] 1986) later work on "framing" is useful for the current analysis. The challenge, as Scheff (2005) points out, is that Goffman's work on framing is particularly enigmatic. He even fails to define the central concept of *frame* very clearly. In broad terms, a frame is a "schemata of interpretation" that helps an individual organize his or her subjective experience in a meaningful way (Goffman [1974] 1986). Frames can be thought of as passive interpretive lenses through which people view some situation. However, *framing* has an active, deliberate quality to it. It is something people do, particularly in a social context, in order to "key" the "mutual focus of attention or mutual awareness" among people so that they share an interpretation of the situation (Scheff 2005:371). In social interactions, framing helps establish a presumably mutually recognizable "definition of the situation" that allows individuals to focus on particular aspects of reality, take the appropriate tone, respond with the expected reaction, and even apply the appropriate epistemic standards (Goffman [1974] 1986). Framing is something that people do—through language, tone, staging, dress, and interactional style—in order to focus attention, provide a particular impression, and elicit particular responses from others. Arguably, these deliberately constructed frames help individuals establish "context," which in turn helps to make immediate actions and claims more mutually intelligible (Scheff 2005). A shift in framing—and thus context—can result in the same communicated content having vastly different meanings (e.g., a sincere expression of emotion vs. an ironic or sarcastic remark).

In this sense, framing has relevance to the problem of epistemic vigilance. Frames offer a kind of metacognitive signal about how to respond to and interpret what is going on in that strip of social activity, even issues related to epistemology. Frames help people determine whether or not they exercise epistemic vigilance, how they should be thinking about issues of testimony, and by what standards they should evaluate others' claims. We might refer to the explicit or implicit epistemological dimensions of a given framing as the *epistemic framing* of a given situation.

The problem, as Goffman pointed out, is that people bring many potential frames to any given situation. Cultural competence means having an array of social frames available to you in order to effectively judge the meaning of a given context. However, it also means that one might encounter competing frames in any social interaction. This nuance creates a new

layer of problems and considerations. Once the problem of competing frames emerges, a variety of considerations external to the interaction, such as power, authority, identity, other relevant cultural norms, as well as social and cognitive psychological dynamics, are likely to come into play in determining which frame becomes dominant in the interaction and determining the mutual focus and attention of the group. People may or may not sincerely go along with the particular framing another person puts forward. However, just because people go along with a particular framing publicly does not mean that they have abandoned the perspective offered by the frame that they bring to the table. The experience of competing frames in turn becomes subject to the usual interactional norms, including those that favor cooperative silence.

Understandings and Institutions

Here Glaeser's (2011) argument for a "sociology of understanding" as an alternative to the sociology of knowledge has relevance. Glaeser advocates for the notion of understanding over knowledge because knowledge denotes a greater degree of certainty about the world than most people experience. The idea of understanding, by contrast, allows for a greater degree of epistemological and ontological uncertainty when thinking about how people apprehend, interpret, and react to both their own experiences as well as the claims of others. *Understanding* captures the vaguer, more ephemeral grasp that people often have of the world around them. Glaeser (2011:175) argues that these understandings need to be "propped up by social input." Rather than thinking about some piece of information or claim that is believed or disbelieved due to the weight of evidence—that is, something known—we should be thinking about how events and claims corroborate, validate, or resonate with our understanding of the situation.

Glaeser (2011) also argues that the arrangement of social institutions reinforces or undermines one's ability to incorporate experiences into his or her understandings. The organization of institutional responses creates an iterative process in which individuals have particular understandings validated by those in authority while simultaneously bracketing off those experiences and pieces of countervailing evidence that might threaten the dominant understanding. In this sense, the organization of institutional responses to some problem acts as a cognitive resource for individuals to make sense of some situation or problem at hand, but it may also be disconnected from a practically effective response to the problem because it excludes countervailing evidence. On top of this, people engage in a kind of metacognition, or what Glaeser (2011:197) calls "meta-understanding," to contextualize their understanding of some event or claim "as belonging to a certain domain of social life, thus emphasizing some comparisons at the expense of others." Understanding the arrangement of institutions that they traverse, people sometimes frame contradictory or problematic evidence as belonging to one particular institutional domain but not necessarily to the other relevant domain. The institutional feedback and the resulting meta-understanding thus can create a socially sustained cognitive dissonance. People do not simply ignore particular problematic events or claims, but the social feedback they receive sometimes fosters contradictions between perceived facts and professed beliefs.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF BULLSHIT

Being social means turning down and at times turning off one's epistemic vigilance, at least publicly. Not only are we expected to let questionable claims go unchallenged, but sometimes we are expected to actively participate in what we know to be fictions. The constructed,

artificial nature of the social world is not simply the purview of academics. It is the lived and felt experience of the individual who is torn between what he or she thinks to be true and what he or she knows is expected of him or her in a certain social situation. Bullshit captures this lived and felt experience of the gap between some believed truth and some presumed social fiction. This is what ties together the common variations in the usage of the phrase, ranging from *bullshitting* as an activity among friends to *calling bullshit* as a criticism of someone's claims or professed beliefs. These variations express the apprehension of the compromised nature of our social epistemological capacities, but they also express a different moral and emotional stance in relation to that realization.

Interactional norms and conversational conventions might encourage us to put aside strong epistemic demands. This disjuncture can easily result in social interactions that devolve into nonsense—specious claims, conspiracy theories, wild accusations, circular logic, inflated jargon, tall tales, and so on—nonsense that we put up with because of those norms. Conversely, a person can actively take advantage of those same norms to produce bullshit. But bullshit is not simply a problem of social interaction. It is a typified activity that we associate with particular professions (e.g., lawyers, politicians, etc.) and institutional settings (e.g., bureaucracies, academia, etc.). Here the issues of epistemic framing and the role of institutional arrangements come to the fore. Different groups develop distinctive epistemic standards that often seem opaque or misleading to laypeople. Particular institutionalized settings (e.g., the sales pitch, the election campaign) become associated with a particular amount of flexibility with the truth and so get bracketed off from the "usual" kind of scrutiny. Given the interactional norms, the lack of agreement about relevant epistemic standards in a diverse society, and the experience of navigating institutional settings that often have seemingly questionable epistemic standards, it is also important to recognize the significance of calling bullshit. Such bullshit detection is an act of epistemic vigilance under such conditions, imposing a particular set of epistemic standards on some claim or situation in which said standards have been violated.

In drawing attention to the various layers of social life relevant to the issue of epistemic vigilance, my hope is that such a sociological account will help explicate and tie together the myriad ways people use the term *bullshit* in social life. What follows is a preliminary sociological exploration of several different types of bullshit pulled from the different colloquial uses of the term: self-described bullshitting, contextualized bullshitting, and bullshit as criticism. The goal of this analysis is to identify the relevant social dynamics at play and connect them to the larger themes about the experience of the compromised nature of social epistemology.

Self-described Bullshitting

Self-described bullshitting refers to those situations in which people engage in what they willingly describe to (some) other people as bullshitting. Such self-described bullshitting behavior may be instrumental (i.e., done as a means to some end) or expressive. I will consider each type in turn.

Self-described bullshitting is often a cynical act: a student bullshitting on an assignment, a manager bullshitting through a meeting, a salesperson feeding a customer a bunch of bullshit, a social worker bullshitting on the required paperwork to get a client into a program, and so on. In describing their activities as bullshitting, these self-professed bullshitters communicate their savvy in terms of understanding the difference between what is required of them (typically by some authority) and what is real or true (at least in their minds). In these situations, one bullshits in order to conform to the demands of a role or meet some

institutional goal. Importantly, this kind of bullshitting typically means avoiding the outright lie. Bullshit comes wrapped in the local jargon, in the form of vague abstractions, convoluted technical language, neutral bureaucratese, and otherwise noncommittal word choice. It has a kind of plausible deniability to it that lying does not. Effective bullshit resembles the expected form of communication with minimal substance to it, saying enough to get things done. Take the example of the student bullshitting on a writing assignment, as elaborated by Smagorinsky et al. (2010). The student typically attempts to disguise a lack of effort or understanding of the material. This is done through abstractions, disciplinary jargon, ambiguity, equivocation, or catering to the professor's perceived political or personal biases. Such bullshitting persists not just because some professors fall for it[4] but also because normative and practical pressures (e.g., student evaluations) prevent professors accusing students of dishonest performances for what may be incompetent performances.

People also engage in self-described bullshit for noninstrumental, expressive reasons. Here, bullshitting is used to describe particular kinds of social encounters that seem to serve no other purpose than sociability. We might think of the self-described "dorm room bullshitting" or "bull sessions" that undergraduates often engage in outside of the formal classroom settings. Such conversations usually involve undergraduates engaging one another in high-minded topics of which they only have tenuous grasp. Students try out different positions on an issue, play devil's advocate, and argue for argument's sake. Describing such conversations as bullshit reflects an appreciation for the inexpertness of the opinions expressed, the sense that the accuracy of any claims is not terribly important, and perhaps most importantly, the inconsequentiality of it all. Engaging in such bullshit is its own kind of reward: social and intellectual stimulation within a particular group setting. Mukerji (1978) captures a similar kind of self-described bullshitting that hitchhikers engage in through tall tales about adventures on the road, full of exaggeration and fiction. While outsiders and younger, more naïve hitchhikers might mistake such bullshitting for truth-telling, experienced hitchhikers understand it for what it is—a kind of playful narrative gamesmanship that is meant to pass the time on long road trips. In this kind of expressive bullshitting, participants "key" these situations through the tone they take and the use of obvious hyperbole, exaggeration, irony, illogic, or nonsense and in doing so, bracket off the usual epistemic standards that guide their day-to-day activity. Describing these activities as a kind of bullshitting reflects an implicit (or sometimes explicit—e.g., "Calm down! We're just bullshitting.") relaxation of the usual epistemic vigilance that is expected outside of the actual context.

Contextualized Bullshit

There are situations that come to be widely recognized as producing or being made up of bullshit. Drawing on established cultural meanings, people understand that what someone in that situation says is not to be taken at face value. Certain professions, for example, have a reputation for being flexible with the truth: lawyers, politicians, corporate managers, salespeople, advertisers, and public relations professionals. While criticism often has a moralizing tone, people generally understand that these professions have powerful financial incentives and even professional obligations to lie, obfuscate, or otherwise avoid the truth. Because this caveat is widely understood, what a lawyer, politician, or CEO says typically gets bracketed off from the usual epistemic standards of honesty. In other words, culture provides people with a particular kind of epistemic framing as a way to deal with the typically questionable claims of such professions. Believing what a lawyer, politician, or CEO says not only represents a kind of epistemic naïveté but also amounts to a kind of cultural incompetence.

Richardson's (2006) concept of "bullshit genres" has relevance here as well. Certain typified activities become associated with a certain amount of bullshitting. In Richardson's example of academic letters of recommendation, letter writers and letter readers are both supposed to understand that the writer is not expected to be (and perhaps cannot be) completely forthright. Praise for even middling students or colleagues tends to be inflated. High praise could reflect a high opinion or a desire to get rid of an irksome student or colleague. Readers learn to read between the lines of what is said and what is left unsaid in such letters.

Even the law enshrines the expectation of nuanced epistemic framing in the legal concept of *puffery*. The term *puffery* refers to overly optimistic and effusive subjective claims made in marketing or advertising—for example, a diner that serves the "world's best cup of coffee" or the car advertisement that promises the "ride of your life." While false claims in marketing or advertising may be labeled *fraudulent* (and thus be subject to legal sanctions), the law makes an exception for puffery (Hoffman 2006). Puffery is legally allowed because it is assumed that any reasonable person would not take such a claim to be a literal, objective truth. Even though the law generally protects consumers from blatantly false or deceptive claims, it also explicitly expects that culturally competent members of society (i.e., any "reasonable" person) understand over-the-top, unverifiable claims as unproblematic in the context of marketing and advertising.

Contextualized bullshit is not universally recognizable but rather is recognized within a given cultural context. Arguably, the contexts cited here share some key characteristics—namely, strong instrumental motivation for being deceptive and situations that are defined by a high degree of interpretive work or symbolic manipulation. Nonetheless, culturally available frames act as a cognitive resource for individuals to recognize patterns of expected epistemic flexibility.

Bullshit as Criticism

People use bullshit as a criticism in a wide variety of situations—criticism of a person's claims, beliefs, ideological commitments, or even of a particular action that a person is taking. To call bullshit on someone, whether in a friendly or confrontational manner, is to accuse that person of failing to be truthful. Such accusations often presume a shared set of epistemic standards and thus some shared understanding of what truthful and honest claims are. However, people also call bullshit in situations in which it is not clear that all parties would agree on what the truth is. For a skeptic, alternative medicine or homeopathy is bullshit. Liberals consider conservatives' arguments to be a bunch of bullshit and vice versa. Individuals from either camp are unlikely to agree on a mutually recognizable version of the facts and standards of evidence. What is clear evidence for one group is bunk to the other; they do not share the same epistemic frame. In this sense, calling someone else's ideas a bunch of bullshit is not necessarily an accusation of deception but rather an accusation of failing to be a reasonable and responsible social epistemic agent. The accused party has failed to adequately assess the factuality of the claims or has been duped by some questionable ideology. In passing such beliefs off as true, the party has failed in their basic obligation to communicate true information to other people.

Recognition and accusations of bullshit like this represent a potentially critical and disruptive social resource in the face of cultural and epistemological pluralism. In some situations, the accusation is an attempt to marginalize what many would consider to be fringe elements that pose a potential threat to the greater well-being of society, such as anti-vaccine advocacy groups. In other situations, accusations of bullshit are an act of defiance against

people in positions of power and influence, meant to challenge the legitimacy of official actions and explanations. And in other situations, accusations of bullshit serve to reinforce partisan identities and divisions—if we can't agree on facts and truth, then how can we even work together? Describing some set of beliefs as bullshit thus has the potential to reinforce existing power structures and authorities or challenge or undermine them.

It is also important to recognize that these accusations of bullshit reflect a kind of commonsense assumption that the accuser has access to the preferred epistemic frame—and thus access to clear knowledge and the truth—in a sea of competing frames. Although people might make social adjustments for some alternative epistemic frames by letting some kinds of claims go unchallenged, it does not necessarily follow that they put such alternative epistemic frames on par with their own. Recognition and tolerance of other people's bullshit is understood as part of the fabric of social life in a diverse society. Bracketing off one's epistemic standards is not an abdication of a belief in the truth but a savvy response to the demands of the social situation. The insistence that others' professed beliefs are bullshit reflects belief in both some universal standard of truth and the normative obligation to recognize it. It reflects the practical role that considerations of truth play in the ordinary social and cognitive organization of our lives. As social beings who depend on one another for information, we sometimes view individuals who are less than trustworthy—even unintentionally—as morally problematic.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article represents an initial attempt to provide a sociological account of the problem of bullshit. In framing bullshit as a problem of social epistemology, I have attempted to move discussion of the topic past the limits of Frankfurt's initial diagnosis of the problem. Social epistemology, broadly defined to include philosophy, cognitive psychology, and the sociology of knowledge, points us to a central question: How do we decide whose claims to believe? An individual's own experiences play some role, but they are inherently limited. Instead, people rely on a variety of social sources to evaluate the trustworthiness and credibility of secondhand knowledge: culturally specific notions of authority, appropriate methods and topics, as well as acceptable styles of presentation and argumentation. The problem with these heuristics, however, is that the very social channels that we rely on to make such evaluations are not designed solely for the task of epistemic vigilance. Social expectations at multiple levels often encourage us to put aside strong epistemic demands of others. As the work of Garfinkel and Goffman reveals, the norms of social interactions go a long way into silencing us in the face of unclear and questionable claims—and expecting that cooperative silence in return. Culturally available frames can similarly shape our expectations of just how much or how little scrutiny of others' claims we exercise. Institutions, as Glaeser's work suggests, also play a role in how we respond to the often tenuous grasp we have on the various issues that surround us. Institutions may reinforce some ideas and not others. But the arrangement of institutions and institutional domains also encourages us to relativize and compartmentalize our epistemic demands, sometimes relegating the exercise of epistemic vigilance to only narrow social domains. Putting all of this together, I have tried to show that bullshit is best thought of as a byproduct of the dynamics between the individual pragmatic need to have true beliefs and the social pragmatic need to get along. People are accustomed to faking it and going along with social fictions when necessary. As a result, bullshit becomes a distinctive, recognizable thing. I have identified three different types of bullshit—self-described bullshit, contextualized bullshit, and bullshit as criticism—with this theoretical framing in mind. My hope is that this initial analysis connects bullshit to themes already of interest within the sociology of knowledge.

Historically, the sociology of knowledge has placed the contested nature of knowledge at the center of its analytic scope. Different social and institutional forces give shape to the production of knowledge that comes to be accepted as true. The problem of bullshit deserves serious consideration in this light. Bullshit is born out of the contradictions of the social nature of knowledge. This crass colloquial expression reveals that the contested nature of knowledge is a mundane problem that people regularly confront in their day-to-day lives. Bullshit reflects the competing commitments of epistemic vigilance and maintaining certain necessary social fictions. It reflects those elements of social performance that allow us to get by without a clear standard of truth and honesty. As a complaint and as a criticism, it reflects an underlying commitment to some shared sense of and obligation to the truth, even in the face of murky epistemic standards. Bullshit is therefore a large and distinctive category of epistemologically problematic claims and behavior that deserves further sociological consideration. The problem of bullshit is not only something interesting in its own right, but it is part of the broader sociological conversation about the social nature of knowledge.

People find themselves in a sea of nonsense, half-truths, exaggerations, wild speculation, insinuation, and other epistemologically questionable claims. If knowledge is the product of social processes, then bullshit is a byproduct of those same processes. But this byproduct might tell us more about both the social and cognitive processes that make knowledge possible than studying knowledge production by itself. Yes, people often buy into bullshit (perhaps due to some flaw in cognitive processing), but sometimes they recognize bullshit for what is and go along with it anyway. People tolerate others' bullshit. People sometimes have no choice but to put up with others' bullshit. People sometimes cynically produce their own bullshit. People sometimes happily bullshit with their friends. People sometimes call others out on their bullshit. What people consider bullshit, why they put up with it, why they participate in it, and when they can no longer tolerate it suggests a surprisingly inconstant and nuanced relationship to knowledge and the truth that sociologists have left underexplored to this point in time. The truth matters in social life, but only some of the time. The pressure to get along with others tempers the individual need for epistemic vigilance. Zeroing and cataloguing specific kinds of pressures against epistemic vigilance in various social settings represents an important step for future work on bullshit in the sociology of knowledge. When informants describe something as bullshit, we should pay greater attention because they have revealed a gap between what they believe to be true and the imposed, artificial shape that the social world has taken. Sociologists who are interested in the social dimensions of knowledge and epistemology should find bullshit to be fertile ground. Seriously.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

1. Frankfurt's essay, originally published in 1986, was republished in 2005 as short monograph. It became a bestseller, gaining a wide audience (for a work on epistemology) when the author appropriately appeared on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* on March 14, 2005.
2. Gilbert and his colleagues, by contrast, relied on a task involving the Hopi language.
3. Although her work predates discussion of epistemic cultures, Vaughan's (1996) analysis of the eleventh hour meeting of engineers and NASA officials prior to the fated launch of the *Challenger* space shuttle reveals how norms about what constitutes a "good engineering argument" doomed the hastily put together but ultimately accurate objections of Morton Thiokol engineers. The engineers had some evidence that the predicted low temperatures on the morning of the launch might compromise

the rocket boosters but failed to present that evidence in a way that was consonant with the norms of NASA's engineering culture. The numbers did not speak for themselves, thus the engineers were ignored by their colleagues.

4. It is important to consider the fact that sometimes what the student considers bullshit may not in fact be bullshit from the professor's perspective. Students accustomed to rote, formulaic writing assignments might not actually understand what constitutes original thought, analytic insight, or persuasive argumentation. Therefore, when they try to fake their way through a paper, they may actually be doing what is expected of them.

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