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Intimidation as epistemological violence against social science conservation research

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Article impact statement: Increased awareness about ongoing intimidation of social scientists in conservation improves long-term conservation.

Abstract

We investigated intimidation of conservation social scientists, which is ongoing and aimed at silencing or discrediting research findings. Although social scientists share with conservation biologists the desire to understand and address the biodiversity crisis, their analysis of structural power relations and contradictions in conservation is sometimes not appreciated. Intimidation can take place before and during fieldwork, during the publication process, and after publication in academic and public spheres. We examined our diverse experiences of intimidation, including legal threats, character assassination, physical threats, job exclusion, and curtailment of academic freedom. Diverse actors, including national research granting bodies, international policy makers, donors, ethics bodies, and conservation biologists and organizations, may target research that does not align with their political, economic, financial, and ideological interests. We refer to intimidating practices to suppress or alter unwelcome perspectives or research findings as *epistemological violence*. Tactics of epistemological violence relate to structural, systemic, symbolic, discursive, and material violence and have significant implications for understanding and improving long-term

conservation. Epistemological violence can impede the progress, effectiveness, and social justness of conservation and suppress critical or differently informed perspectives crucial for a well-functioning academia. Intimidation hampers crucial collaborations among disciplines and with societal partners. Epistemological violence has detrimental consequences for affected individuals, the broader conservation community, people living in or near conservation areas, and conservation achievements.

KEYWORDS
conservation, epistemological violence, fieldwork, intimidation, publication, qualitative methods, social science research

INTRODUCTION

Much conservation knowledge is "produced by specialists in natural sciences who pay… [little] attention to social, political and economic systems [that] have…encultured and politicized nature" (Ramutsindela, 2016, p. 27). There is increasing recognition that conservation is a multi- and transdisciplinary field requiring collaboration of scientists and others from various backgrounds, including social scientists, who bring valuable insights, methods, and philosophies on human dimensions, social behavior, societal dynamics, and socioecological governance systems (Bennett et al., 2017; Kareiva & Marvier, 2012; Larsen & Brockington, 2018; Moon & Blackman, 2014; Moon et al., 2019; Sandbrook et al., 2013).

We focused on qualitative social science epistemological approaches that differ from quantitative approaches and considered a concerning trend in which critical social scientists (i.e., those studying social conditions, power structures, and inequalities) working on nature conservation are threatened, intimidated, and sometimes silenced. This happens when their research, perspectives, and findings are not welcomed by private institutions, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), other scientists or practitioners, and big international nongovernmental organizations (BINGOs). BINGOs, often in collaboration with governments and donor agencies, have considerable funding and thus substantial power over conservation knowledge and its applications (Milne, 2022; Ramutsindela, 2016). Critical social science addresses social injustices related to power differences (Watts & Hodgson, 2019). We considered such power differences in conservation.

Intimidation can hinder understanding of complex conservation problems and solutions, which can undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of conservation outcomes. We refer to intimidating practices as *epistemological violence*, which includes attempts to prevent, discredit, or alter divergent knowledge and perspectives related to dynamics of structural, systemic, symbolic, discursive, and material violence. Our examples thus go beyond differences of opinion.

Conservation social scientists are not the only ones being intimidated (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). For instance, conservation natural scientists and investigative journalists are also targeted (Driscoll et al., 2020; Guerisoli et al., 2023; Nowak et al., 2024; Van Beemen, 2024). Social scientists can also harm other scientists or local communities (Teo, 2010). We nonetheless highlight social scientists' specific interest in historical circumstances, contradictory processes, and issues of power and politics that may be connected to delineation of so-called undesirable conservation perspectives. For example, conservation social scientists often interrogate and critique how political power and wealth align to marginalize local peoples and perspectives (Koot, 2021; Milne, 2022; Riyanto, 2023). Relatedly, social sciences often use qualitative, inductive, and constructivist methodologies based on grounded analyses. Interviews and participant observation imply a bottom-up approach, whereas natural scientists often take objectivist approaches (Koot et al., 2023b; Moon et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2018). Social scientists frequently engage with local groups beyond their research (often marginalized peoples that are affected strongest by conservation) over long periods, including through activism, development initiatives, and advocacy (Kirsch, 2018; O'Reilly, 2012).

Social scientists aim to understand structures that constrain human–nature relationships, taking into account their roots in colonialism, capitalism, and militarism. Social and natural science approaches are valuable and complementary (Neimark et al., 2019; Rust et al., 2017). They represent different types of knowledge that can be combined to effect appropriate conservation choices (Huntington, 2000; Vermeylen, 2019). Social scientific knowledge, however, is often disregarded by influential conservation institutions (Corson & Campbell, 2023; Milne, 2022), where the dominant discourse prioritizes seemingly objective, positivist science, evidence, and methodologies (Neimark et al., 2019; Turnhout, 2018), even though mainstream conservation discourses profess to appreciate other ways of knowing.

In spite of increased attention on local perceptions (IUCN, 2022; Rights+Resources, 2023), collaborations often still position local communities as ecological stewards in market-based systems that tend not to fully recognize other forms of socioecological knowledge (Fennell, 2008; Martin et al., 2013). Intimidating social scientists then becomes an extension of a larger trend in which local knowledge and interests are disregarded, whereas donors, consultants, government bodies, and private sector partners (e.g., tourism operators, trophy hunters, green investors), often connected to conservation NGOs, have a much bigger say (Chapin, 2004; Cohen, 2009; Corson & Campbell, 2023; Igoe et al., 2009; Milne, 2022; Sullivan, 2002). Thus, social scientists may "consistently [be] defined as…a problem to be managed rather than communities to be engaged and considered" (Igoe & Sullivan, 2009, p. 16).

We considered epistemological violence and how it builds on earlier discussions about conservation and social sciences. We also provide concrete examples of 3 crucial phases in scientific inquiry in which intimidation may occur: before and during fieldwork, during the publishing process, and after publication. We analyzed these examples as cases of epistemological violence and related them to other forms of violence.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

The term *epistemological violence* refers to the domination of reductionist science to "establish its monopoly on knowledge" through means of exclusion that result in "violence against the subject of knowledge, the object of knowledge, the beneficiary of knowledge, and against knowledge itself" (Shiva, 1988, p. 233). This differs from physical and material violence and from Teo's (2010) usage of the term to mean violence by the researcher to the so-called Other through knowledge production. Despite clear links, epistemological violence cannot simply be equated with epistemic violence. A crucial difference is that epistemic violence is specifically used to silence marginalized groups (Spivak, 1988), which social scientists are not. The implicit reductionism in epistemological violence functions as a means to abstract facts "from their contexts to produce objective" realities based on "value neutrality, context independence and affective detachment" (Banerjee et al., 2015, p. 29). Epistemological violence then contains the domination of particular regimes of truth in which power and knowledge are one and the same and effect social control. What is considered true largely depends on cultural values that serve the interests of those who set and maintain those values. In science, broadly speaking, this refers to rational discourses centralizing an objective reality that is nonetheless constructed (Foucault, 1980).

Our contribution builds on earlier work on power relations in nature conservation (Chapin, 2004; Igoe et al., 2009) and how formal institutions often consider that critical conservation studies create "disobedient knowledge" (Igoe et al., 2009, p. 6). The intimidation we describe diverts debate and critique that is indispensable for academic progress. We underscore the impacts this can have for social scientists (including early career scholars), the communities they work with, and natures warranting conservation and protection.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIOLENCE BEFORE AND DURING FIELDWORK

Intimidation before and during fieldwork manifests when social scientists are undermined or prevented from engaging in meaningful research on site. This can happen by denying or canceling research permits or by restraining access to resources or field sites. Government officials and BINGOs that find social scientific approaches threatening can exacerbate this when evaluating requests for permits. Governments of course have rights to grant or deny researchers access, but this can create complexities and inequality. Researchers from former colonial powers generally tend to have more access to areas in former colonies, whereas this is mostly not the case vice versa. By extension, intimidation may occur through physical or psychological harassment in the field. Some of the examples we provide in this section may also apply to other scientific fields.

In Indonesia, a country with a long history of intellectual repression (Hadiz & Dhakidae, 2004), the state denies permits for research that does not fit its developmentalism agenda. One of us observed modes of muting social scientists and undermining interdisciplinary alliances. Applicants for university or state research funding were often dissuaded from doing sensitive research that could undermine national security (e.g., the Papuan right for self-determination). Numerous administrative interrogations narrow the kinds of research that scholars in Indonesia can work on and have shaped an insulated way of producing research topics (Rakhmani, 2021; Rakhmani & Sakhiyya, 2024). Similarly, in India, national security is used to censor research. In preparation for fieldwork related to a planned development project at the Nicobar Islands by the Indian government, one of us contacted a prominent conservation NGO who conveyed that they no longer do any "political ecology" there, that their staff was denied permission to visit the islands, and that they cannot officially collaborate with academic institutions based outside India that have "foreign" funding. This could jeopardize the author's ongoing projects on the islands or lead to dismissal by the government.

From 2002 to 2006, M.S. conducted fieldwork in Parque Nacional do Limpopo, Mozambique. Plans to resettle 8000 families from the park sparked protests. Accused of inciting local residents, M.S. and a student were denied park entrance. The student moved with one of the resettled communities and documented the resettlement process. The ban was revoked a year later, when a park official concluded that local residents had good reasons to resist. In South Africa, the national lobby organization Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA) intimidated PhD students by warning its members not to collaborate (Brandt & Josefsson, 2017). The students conducted research about farm conversions to game farming (see Spierenburg & Brooks, 2014) and had just presented preliminary findings at a local university. Accessing game farms remained possible because the students were well-embedded locally—although students from formerly disadvantaged groups struggled for access (Kamuti, 2016; Mkhize, 2012). Threats were extended to farm dwellers at local workshops. Representatives of WRSA dominated the discussions with loud interruptions, questioning the validity of the research and points raised by farm dwellers. Moreover, game farmers decided which of their people could participate in the workshops or expressed anger toward researchers who had spoken to their farm workers (Brandt et al., 2018).

Intimidation also happens through physical and psychological harassment. One of us doing research about militarized transboundary conservation in Africa was considered a spy for going on patrols with park rangers. At one point, she was forced by national intelligence service officers to enter a car, driven to an empty and fenced complex, and interrogated for 3 hours. The male officer showed pictures of hacked body parts and other physical mutilations of people who had apparently been killed in the area where she conducted research, indicating that

she should identify them. She was also blamed for being a representative of Western colonialism, whereas the officer repeatedly confirmed his power and ability to imprison or kill her and her local hosts. In fear and anxiety, she left her fieldwork site to protect herself and the people she worked with. Similarly, one author, affiliated with a Belgian university, worked in a conflict-prone transboundary area with heightened presence of the Indian army. During her fieldwork, she was interrogated by the police and paramilitary on why Belgium was interested in funding a study there and if she were maybe a Belgian spy. During a meeting with a group of paramilitary personnel, an officer explained that as an Indian citizen, she had the right to free movement but cautioned her that she could be held for questioning by law enforcement officials due to concerns of national security. In both cases, it is unclear whether the intimidation took place because the authors are social scientists or because of the specific time and place of their research, although it must be stressed that their topics of research did not ease relations with authorities.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIOLENCE IN THE PUBLICATION PROCESS

Legal threats, manipulation of peer review processes, abusive or hostile emails, and stifled academic freedom can prevent social scientists from publishing their research results. In the late 1990s and early 2000s when writing up detailed fieldwork on Indigenous plant use practices, S.S. experienced intimidation related to new donor-funded and NGO-initiated community-based conservation structures. For about 4 years, she received abusive and widely shared email communications intent on character assassination and denigration of her research. For example, "[t]he problem with the 'tabloid' approach to research is that it is very similar…to the news media and the harlot: they have power without responsibility" (male conservation consultant, email dated 26 October 1999). Gender is deployed to denounce both researcher and research, despite long-term, detailed, social science and ecological research. Subsequently, publishers and editors revealed to S.S. repeated attempts to prevent publication of her research through strongly worded denunciations. More than 20 years later, these abusive communications are still being shared with her by concerned friends, demonstrating how systematically the protagonists worked to discredit her character and research.

Sending hostile emails to prevent critical publications is a widely shared experience. A network of conservationists and natural scientists associated with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in South Africa wrote such emails in response to a conference abstract about conservation in Namaqualand, South Africa, to T.A.B. and colleagues.

In East Africa, Western directors of a local NGO sent N.A.v.Z. and her supervisors threatening emails that included abusive language, discrediting her research findings and threatening to report her to the university authorities. Her study focused on assessing whether a conservation scheme could be classified as a payment for ecosystem services program (Anyango-Van Zwieten et al., 2015). The NGO interpreted the draft findings shared with them as criticism of their approach. In collusion with the local chapter of an American institution—one that N.A.v.Z. had also interviewed and shared preliminary findings with—the threatening NGO swiftly produced a peer-reviewed article that countered Anyango-Van Zwieten et al.'s (2015) findings. The NGO seemed mostly concerned about negative publicity reaching its funders.

Similarly, in 2014, a journalist published B.B.'s findings in a Dutch newspaper that the Peace Parks Foundation (PPF) was having substantial problems with a major grant received by the PPF to address rhinoceros poaching in South Africa. The PPF then pressured interview respondents and halted the broadcasting of a South African documentary on the topic. Subsequently, in 2015, B.B. and his colleague wrote an article that explicated how peace parks support the protection of rhinoceroses from poaching through forms of "green violence" (Büscher & Ramutsindela, 2016). A draft of the article was leaked to PPF (not by the authors), which then threatened the authors with legal action. A subsequent legal and extralegal back-and-forth ensued among PPF, the authors, the authors' universities, and the journal. The PPF put enormous pressure on the authors, the journal, and leaders of the involved institutions to halt the publication. The latter factions persisted to guarantee academic freedom and in recognition that the article was based on solid data and supported by the journal editor and publisher. After publication, PPF immediately stopped all communication, suggesting their intent was only to stop publication.

Institutional support was also important in facilitating the publication of Dutta's (2020) policy brief on corruption in national parks in India. The brief was sent to WWF (Indian chapter) for review. Then, WWF urged the principal investigator on the project based out of her institution to stop or alter the findings of the publication. Meanwhile, A.D. tried to have a meeting with WWF India staff who had reviewed her publication and to discuss their concerns about this particular policy brief, but they refused to meet with her. The institution, however, did not give in and the brief was published.

Researchers participating in the abovementioned research on game farming in South Africa often experienced derogatory remarks at conferences and research seminars. Their research was frequently dismissed as anecdotal or an $n = 1$ study (something several of us have experienced over the years). In fact, the team conducted 11 in-depth case studies on as many game farms and used an extensive and systematic combination of methods. Additionally, they conducted research in 8 farm dweller communities and conducted more than 250 interviews with other stakeholders.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AFTER PUBLICATION

Publication of research can sometimes lead to character assassination, (threats of) job loss, public defamation, and hostile emails.

WWF-Norway has a history of using intimidation to discredit researchers. Two op-eds (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2004; Bryceson et al., 2011) highlighting the neglect of African peasants' and

pastoralists' rights in conservation led to WWF-Norway's chief operating officer asking the researchers' employers, Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) and Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA), to silence the researchers. Each time NMBU rejected the request, referring to academic freedom, and NINA's managing directors treated WWF's requests as legitimate. In response to Bryceson et al. (2011), WWF-Norway also disseminated a letter accusing the authors of not using a "solid" scientific approach. WWF-Norway's letter demonstrated a lack of knowledge about social science methods. Later, NINA also tried to silence criticism of the institute's research through a public personal attack on T.A.B. (Benjaminsen, 2020; Myklebust, 2020). Together with colleagues, he had published critiques of how Sámi reindeer herders in Norway were harmed by neocolonial state policies (Benjaminsen et al., 2015; Marin et al., 2020) and how NINA's biologists have provided a scientific alibi for these policies based on questionable ecological arguments (Benjaminsen et al., 2015).

In 2017, W.D. and colleagues began working with a well-known NGO on why community-based conservation had failed to stop Dayak peoples from leasing out their lands for corporate oil palm plantations in Kalimantan, Indonesia. They identified patterns observed elsewhere in Southeast Asia: local peoples tended to align with NGO livelihood supplements as alternatives to industrial extraction (e.g., timber felling, mining, and plantations) only when these supplements were greater than the costs of the restrictions. Believing these results would be useful to NGOs to overcome project failures, W.D. and colleagues published their results as an opinion piece in a national newspaper to help ground unrealistic NGO interventions. In response to this, W.D. received emails from a prominent NGO working in the area stating that his team had misinterpreted program results. They argued that the programs were never intended to incentivize local communities away from more extractive forest uses. W.D. wrote a rejoinder in the same newspaper stating that his results were not disparaging the work of NGOs in the area, but the threat of possible legal repercussions remained.

N.D.R. experienced how organizations can sometimes breed a culture of adherence to a specific conservation ideology that impedes critical research. Following a publication about tiger conservation in India (Rai et al., 2019), he faced several obstacles to conducting his work from the environmental research institution where he was then a faculty member teaching PhD candidates and conducting research. When he gave a presentation to the governing board about his research concerning the adverse impacts of tiger conservation on Indigenous peoples, he subsequently received serious resistance from the institution's president. N.D.R.'s work on local livelihoods was allegedly undermining the livelihoods of the institution's researchers. When N.D.R. published a paper critiquing the economic valuation of ecosystem services in tiger reserves (Menon & Rai, 2019), the director of his institution at the time pressured him to work instead on implementing a carbon market mechanism in tiger reserves. The director oversaw N.D.R.'s sabbatical proposal and conditioned its approval on a change in research direction, forcing N.D.R. to quit his job.

In 2022, 2 of us were accused by the former director of an international conservation NGO of quoting one of the NGO's employees without informed consent. When the authors explained that discussions with the person were not used and asked which quotes the director was referring to, they received no answer. Subsequently, the former director complained, directly to the journal, that the research had been conducted unethically and demanded a full review of the research process undertaken, including identification of interviewees. The director offered no concrete examples of the ostensibly problematic process. Despite this lack of clarity, the journal's publisher, Taylor & Francis, initially demanded that the authors provide the research proposal, review and ethics clearance processes, and interview transcripts. This last demand could have compromised interviewee identities, so the authors refused to provide this, after which followed a back-and-forth process in which the onus was entirely on the authors to prove they had not acted unethically. At the end of this nearly year-long ordeal, the publisher finally agreed that all interviews were conducted according to ethical codes of conduct.

Similarly, S.K., P. Hebinck, and S.S. experienced personal attacks by employees of WWF-Namibia, WWF-US, and connected smaller NGOs and legal threats from advocates of trophy hunting, including representatives from University of Oxford's WildCru and International Union for Conservation of Nature's Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group. These attacks followed a review paper they published (Koot et al., 2023b) about possible conflicts of interest that may arise when conservation practitioners also conduct research about the programs they are involved in and how such research may be mobilized by advocacy groups in the public domain. Complaint letters by the WWF group and the trophy-hunting advocates—to which S.K., P. Hebinck, and S.S. responded in detail—prompted the authors to suggest a debate in the journal, which in the end all parties agreed on (Dickman et al., 2023; Koot et al., 2023a; Naidoo et al., 2023). However, after Taylor & Francis took over the editorial process from the journal editors, the original paper (Koot et al., 2023b) and the authors' response to the complainants (Koot et al., 2023a) were retracted without prior communication with the authors. They never received a satisfactory explanation. Taylor & Francis first wrote that a person in their legal department suggested the retractions. Later, a different explanation was provided: retraction was due to a "production error." Moreover, factual errors in the rejoinders by the complainants that S.K., P. Hebinck, and S.S. pointed out to Taylor & Francis multiple times were not addressed and are now published, and personal attacks on S.K. and S.S. were allowed in the WWF group's response (Naidoo et al., 2023), despite an agreement to refrain from such attacks.

Subsequently, S.K., P. Hebinck, and S.S. were bullied on Twitter (now X) by trophy-hunting proponents. In a more recent blog interacting with a media article by Sullivan (2023), one proponent posted a litany of insults aimed at S.S. (Dickman & Cotterill, 2023). Sullivan was called "confused" and "arrogant" and accused of presenting a perspective from "the comfort of the UK's leafy Bath," despite the fact that she had spent long periods in past years living locally in arid northwestern Namibia. The impression such responses give is that any perspective of concern regarding conservation effort, despite the in-depth field research it might be based on, is illegitimate

and needs to be squashed. Social media has become more important in science (Huber et al., 2019) and as an instrument of epistemological violence.

E.M.'s research on Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of Congo, led to pushback because Virunga's donors—in particular, a big European donor—were unhappy about nonacademic publications discussing the park's negative consequences. The park and its supporters articulated a narrative in which Virunga's management would not only protect biodiversity but also contribute to peacebuilding and development. Yet, some blog posts and media appearances by E.M. and colleagues explain how the militarized approach of the park further kindled violence instead of addressing it (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2017). After one public, critical analysis of the blockbuster documentary *Virunga* (Baaz et al., 2015), the donor organization called E.M. to tell her she should stop critiquing the park.

HOW EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIOLENCE HAPPENS

Although our focus on fieldwork and publishing addresses the heart of social sciences, there are other academic spheres where intimidation might also take place, such as teaching, funding, or research dissemination beyond scientific publications. Importantly, we also have experienced positive collaborations: S.A.A. and C.L., for instance, had positive collaborations with Indonesian biologists, who were open to collaboration with social scientists and environmental activists to improve local peoples' relationship with protected areas (Lowe, 2006). Considering the social sciences' structural engagement with sometimes controversial and complex issues, including the history, politics, and power in conservation, they are more prone to becoming subjects of these power relations themselves.

Despite epistemological violence's detrimental consequences for people and nature, such intimidation sometimes works. What the above examples show is that tactics of epistemological violence are used to control narratives about conservation by protecting reputations and financial interests of institutions. At the core of this control are dynamics of power and knowledge among the different actors and what happens when one speaks out against dominant structures (Foucault, 1980, 1984). Power and knowledge are at the root of hierarchies that create and maintain ecological and social problems. In these hierarchies, "[d]ominant discourse holds that policy must be based on sound science, so in this context where we have so thoroughly scientised policy, we should not be surprised that in turn science gets politicised" (Turnhout, 2018, p. 363). Due to the political and corporate character of conservation, social scientists seem to experience a relatively large amount of epistemological violence. Their knowledge and that of the people they work with is often considered "disobedient" (Igoe & Sullivan, 2009). Based on the above examples, we engaged with broader ideas about different types of violence and how these inform epistemological violence.

Epistemological violence takes place against the background of structural, indirect, and systemic violence required to let economic and social systems function normally (Galtung, 1969; Žižek, 2008). Structural violence is not perpetrated by a specific actor; it is "built into structure" (Galtung, 1969, p. 171). It refers to "the political-economic organization of society [that] imposes conditions of physical and emotional distress" (Bourgois, 2001, p. 7). This includes research hierarchies and conservation funding and refers to the dependence of conservation NGOs on funding for their reputation as successful (Büscher, 2014; Koot et al., 2023b). Intimidation of critical social scientists has therefore been ongoing (Chapin, 2004; Igoe & Sullivan, 2009). Within current structures, conservation actors rely on a positive narrative to increase their chances of funding. Scientific knowledge, perhaps especially when used beyond academia, plays a crucial role in this.

Epistemological violence cannot be seen apart from systemic violence, which is closely related to, but not the same as, structural violence. It refers to the economically, psychologically, physically, or culturally harmful consequences based on institutional procedures and practices. Systemic violence thus concerns the "catastrophic consequences" of our "economic and political systems" (Žižek, 2008, p. 1). The examples above show that not all researchers have equal access to a field site, for instance, based on their nationality, ethnicity, gender, or class. For example, India is increasingly focusing research funding on the natural sciences and invalidates social science research as anecdotal and lacking in robustness. Systemic violence also applies to early-career scholars seeking secure employment, who must adapt their research proposals so as not to undermine state interests, and to scholars being denied jobs or promotion. Systemic violence thus contains "often slow yet steady social oppressions (e.g., gender exclusions, wage discrimination, the daily grind of alienating work)" (Kapoor, 2013, p. 93).

Epistemological violence also relates to symbolic violence, which is related to how hegemonic actors try to determine what is valid knowledge and discredit knowledge that falls outside their imposed categories of thought and perception (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Systems of presentation and the usage of visuals and language are used to portray certain actors, which—importantly—also includes the concealment of aspects that do not fit the desired image (Kapoor, 2013; Žižek, 2008). In the examples above, the reputation of many conservation actors is crucial. With good intentions and a belief in the urgent need to conserve nature, they need to portray their work as successful and to avoid critique that might cause damage to their reputations.

Discursive violence stresses "how the silencing…of perspectives may be structurally linked with specific axes of difference" (Koot et al., 2023a, pp. 593–594; cf. Douglas, 1995). The difference, in this particular case, is often focused on the specifics of the social sciences, including constructivist research perspectives, qualitative research methodology, and concern for injustice and power asymmetry. More concretely, discursive violence contains personal attacks (often public), legal threats, and threats of academic defamation in its questioning of the credibility and ethics of scientists (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). At the institutional level, this translates into institutional violence. Not

only do large organizations produce the dominant discourse, they also target individuals when they articulate unwelcome ideas and try to shut down inconvenient knowledge constitutive of discursive violence (Ahmed, 2021; Milne, 2022). In the above examples, the attacks on S.S. and N.A.v.Z. stand out, as do the personal attacks by several BINGOs on specific people.

These types of violence not only inform epistemological violence but also form the background against which physical and material violence can happen. In 2 of the above examples, researchers were threatened directly. Material and physical violence in conservation have a long history, especially through green militarization (i.e., "the use of military and paramilitary (military-like) actors, techniques, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation" [Lunstrum, 2014, p. 817]). Physical and material violence thus include physical and psychological threats. Many social scientists are themselves relatively privileged, which offers them protection to a degree. This is often not the case for local research collaborators, whose security and well-being are more ambiguous. In several instances, research collaborators faced serious intimidations.

The courage to speak the truth is not optional but an obligation (Foucault, 1984). This highlights the specific role social scientists often take, including activism based on their research and collaborations with local peoples. Considering that many conservation actors have a reputation to uphold on which they also rely for their funding, in some ways it is unsurprising that choices are made to avoid critique arising from one's research and activities. A dominant discourse based on objective, positivist science then becomes crucial in this suppression, based on what is perhaps "a positivist bias in conservation" (Rust et al., 2017, p. 1308). This leads to a set of violent activities that together are epistemological in nature. Perhaps the specific role of social scientists is then "to shake up long standing traditions and biases in environmental knowledge as well as the communities of scholars that have formed around them, and to fundamentally and creatively rethink what it means to do environmental knowledge" (Turnhout, 2018, p. 368).

Although we do not claim to have an answer to epistemological violence, we share 4 suggestions that we believe can help prevent intimidation by increasing the understanding of different types of knowledge. First, conservation organizations can engage with critical social science instead of attacking it. This is already happening (e.g., Rust et al. [2017] and the above examples of S.A.A. and C.L.), so our intention here is to emphasize its importance. Second, social scientists should attempt to better understand the position of conservation practitioners and their interests and go beyond mere critique, combining critique with more practical applications and attention to context. Third, it is important to incorporate social sciences in mainstream conservation and to diversify education curricula because "[w]ho teaches matters" (Slater et al., 2024, p. 9). Ecological and biological educational programs should keep a strong focus on a natural scientific approach and create awareness among future ecologists of the importance of social issues and power relations. Finally, some of our examples suggest that epistemological violence is often triggered by the fear of losing funding. We therefore advocate that funders revise their set of criteria for evaluating success to make room for critical reviews and that they become aware of their own positions of power.

We conclude that epistemological violence negatively affects individuals, the broader conservation community, including people living in or nearby conservation areas, and conservation success. With this essay, we hoped to create more awareness of this important issue and illustrate the extent and dynamics of epistemological violence. We hope local communities, conservationists, natural scientists, governments, and social scientists collectively will find respectful and appreciative ways of collaborating for the good of people and nature.

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