Macdonald, S. (2021) *LIS Neutrality: A Wittgensteinian Interpretation.* Journal of Documentation. ISSN 0022-0418

This is an Accepted Manuscript published by Intellect in its final form on 27th July 2021 at: *https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-01-2021-0007*

LIS Neutrality: A Wittgensteinian Interpretation

Abstract

Purpose: This study builds on a first study by Macdonald and Birdi (2019) that argues the concept of neutrality within Library and Information Science (LIS) demands a sensitivity to context often omitted in existing literature. This study develops the conceptual architecture of LIS neutrality in a way that is more conducive to reconciling the contextual nuance found in within the first study.

Approach: The approach taken develops LIS neutrality through a Wittgensteinian lens. Two distinct ideas are explored. First, Wittgenstein's notion of a "grammatical investigation" is used to map the varied contexts in which neutrality is used within professional practice. Liberal neutrality is explored as an analogy to lend plausibility to the concept's heterogeneity. Second, Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" develops the concept in a way that facilitates greater contextual understanding.

Findings: Three features of liberal neutrality literature: conceptual heterogeneity, distinct justifications for specific conceptions, and the possibility that neutrality may operate with limited scope, are applied to LIS neutrality. All three features successfully translate, leaving "latent conceptual space" to understand LIS neutrality as nuanced and multifaceted. Second, "family resemblance" also translates successfully, bringing its own pedagogical benefits.

Originality: This study's originality lies in its development of LIS neutrality using a descriptive Wittgensteinian lens. Understanding the concept via this paradigm may facilitate a more productive discussion of LIS neutrality and pave the way for a new, less polarised, normative response to it.

Introduction

This study builds on a first study that mapped the ways neutrality in Library and Information Science (LIS) is conceived both within literature and within professional settings through cross-sector phenomenographic interviews (Macdonald and Birdi, 2019). Within the literature four conceptions of neutrality were found: "favourable", "tacit value", "social institutions", and "value-laden profession". Four distinct conceptions – spanning three dimensions of variation - were also found within cross-sector interviews: "core value", "subservient", "ambivalent" and "hidden values". By using a descriptive methodology that charted conceptions of neutrality, first, within the literature and, second, in a phenomenographic "outcome space", the study compared conceptions in literature with those in interviews to advance the "neutrality debate" holistically. The study's main finding noted the "ambivalent conception" in interviews was largely absent from the literature. This ambivalence – an appreciation that the line between neutrality and non-neutrality is "blurred and quite slippery" – reflects the view that "there are…circumstances where other professional values would be more important than neutrality and then some in which neutrality would be more important" (Macdonald and Birdi, 2019, p.344). Ambivalence was also discovered by examining variation within interview transcripts, all of which fluctuated between different conceptions. This points towards a "fluid understanding of neutrality" that stands in contrast to a largely polarised literature "rooted in a "for or against" camp" (p.347).

This study builds on these findings by suggesting how contextual awareness could be facilitated within LIS neutrality literature. This, in turn, has potential to reduce the polarisation found with the literature and facilitate a more appreciative understanding of viewpoints either side of the "neutral non-neutral" divide. Rather than presenting or reinterpreting the data from the first study, therefore, this study maps the contextual landscape of LIS neutrality through a Wittgensteinian lens. Seen this way, many problems that plague the concept's application stem from a misunderstanding of the *logic or grammar* of the concept. This *descriptive* approach – focusing on the use of language as a "spatial and temporal phenomena"

(Wittgenstein, 1953, PI 108) - enables LIS neutrality to be seen holistically, a perspective arguably lacking in previous research. The argument draws on two strands of Wittgenstein's thought which facilitate a greater contextual awareness of LIS neutrality.

First, an analogy with liberal neutrality – invoking Wittgenstein's "grammatical investigation" - is explored. It is argued that liberal neutrality is conceived in a way that facilitates a contextual discussion lacking in LIS neutrality literature. Instead of formulating a *theoretical* understanding the concept, a *practical* understanding is reached via a *description* of the concept's use within the literature. Three analogous features are observed. First, liberal neutrality is conceived as a heterogeneous concept that forms distinct conceptions. Second, the justification in favour of these conceptions may function independently and, third, the concept may operate with limited scope in a value laden environment. These features facilitate a granularity largely lacking within LIS neutrality literature.

In the second section of argument these three observations are translated to LIS neutrality through a *description* of the concept's use. First, LIS neutrality also breaks down into distinct conceptions; the divide between personal and professional neutrality provides an example of this heterogeneity in the present study. Second, it is argued that, like liberal neutrality, different conceptions of LIS neutrality may invoke distinct justifications for their application. Third, LIS neutrality can also be conceived as a relative concept that operates in a wider value-laden environment. By using liberal neutrality as an analogous aide, it is argued that - once the heterogeneity of LIS neutrality is exposed - there is latent conceptual space to understand LIS neutrality in a way that allows greater nuance and granularity within the literature. In other words, existing literature has largely overlooked the distinct *uses* of LIS neutrality in different contexts and, instead, has often conflated these contexts in coming to all-encompassing conclusions about LIS neutrality's nature.

Finally, in the third section, it is argued that LIS neutrality could be conceptualised using Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" (1953). This idea, distinct yet closely related to the preceding argument, supports the "grammatical investigation" by providing a means of understanding the concept once its heterogeneity is revealed. Drawing on Solove's (2002) conceptualisation of privacy, it is argued that each instantiation of LIS neutrality is a distinct entity with features that resemble those within the "LIS neutrality family". This contextual conceptualisation not only buttresses the flexible and malleable LIS neutrality that emerges from the "grammatical investigation", but also has its own practical and pedagogical advantages. The overall aim, therefore, is to develop the conceptual architecture of LIS neutrality the *describing* the complex landscape that instantiates the concept's use. It is hoped this could facilitate a more productive discussion of intuitions from either side of the "neutral non-neutral divide". The Wittgensteinian lens brings *conceptual clarity* with the hope that this could, in turn, aid a more adequate normative response to the concept.

Wittgenstein and the Re-orientation of Philosophical Enquiry

Before embarking on an investigation into the nature of LIS neutrality it is first necessary to elucidate the Wittgensteinian lens through which the study is viewed. The aim of this section, therefore, is twofold. First, to summarise Wittgenstein's approach within his later work, that is, its emphasis on rotating "our way of thinking" (Hacker, 2004, p.19) away from a *deep theoretical* account of the rules that govern language's application towards an understanding of language as a "temporal and spatial phenomenon" (Wittgenstein, 1953, PI 108), and second, to explain how this reorientation manifests itself within the current study through the exploration of LIS neutrality as a heterogeneous concept with a wide ranging use throughout the LIS profession. The overriding aim, therefore, is to show how the Wittgensteinian lens forms a substratum that runs throughout the current study.

Wittgenstein's overarching aim within his later period of philosophy – reaching its most complete and mature form in the *Philosophical Investigations* – is to change the paradigm through which philosophical enquiry is pursued. Hacker likens to this shift to Kant's "Copernican revolution" by which our understanding of the phenomenal world shifted to depend "upon our cognitive apparatus". For Wittgenstein, by contrast, this shift represents a rejection of a *systematic uniformity* in the logic of our language. In other words, language should not be studied by searching for a deep, a priori structure, theoretically abstracted from its everyday use (Hacker, 2004, p.19). The *Philosophical Investigations,* therefore, sets out to *persuade* the reader that the "crystalline purity of logic" assumed by the Western analytic tradition from which Wittgenstein emerged is a dogmatic illusion that both "dictates the questions asked and specifies the form the answers will take" (Fogelin, 1987, p.109). Seen this way, Wittgenstein not only questions specific theses – ranging from the basic notion that a name corresponds to an object it represents, to his own sophisticated account in the *Tractatus* whereby "real names have meaning and elementary propositions have sense" to be uncovered by breaking down propositions into constituent parts (Hacker, 2004, p.5) – but targets the *antecedent presumption* upon which these theses are based, namely that questions of the form "what is X?" should be answered by "penetrating phenomena" (Wittgenstein, 1953, PI 90) and uncovering a watertight criterion that captures their essence. McGinn - who characterises this presumption as a "*theoretical attitude"* (2013, p.16) – notes the challenge of examining Wittgenstein's thought as, by rejecting the theoretical attitude, Wittgenstein chooses not to present ideas in a systematic or theoretical way. Instead, the *Philosophical Investigations* takes the form of numbered remarks intended to *guide, cajole* and *persuade* us that philosophical enquiry constitutes an examination of the *surface grammar* of our concepts, rather than a *deep exploration* of their hidden properties (p.29).

Instead of denying that language has a logic, however, Wittgenstein draws our attention to its true nature – the "misunderstanding of the logic of our language" (Wittgenstein, 1953, PI 93) can be dispersed by conducting a "grammatical investigation" by which we command "a clear view of the use of our words" (PI 122). The negative rejection of the theoretical attitude, therefore, is replaced a positive notion of "conceptual clarity" through the investigation of language embedded in its everyday context (Hacker, 2004, p.17). Here, Wittgenstein employs the term "grammar" to represent the "structure of our *practice of using* language" (McGinn, 2013, p.14) as a "spatial and temporal phenomenon" (PI 108). In this guise, philosophical investigation disperses the "fog" (PI 5) cast by a theoretical attitude by studying the “concrete cases…in which our concepts are used” (McGinn, 2013, p.13). Instead of proposing an alternative *theory*, therefore, Wittgenstein’s advances an alternative *method* of philosophical enquiry – one that is *descriptive.* In this guise, philosophy is a *therapeutic* process whereby the reader is trained to resist a drift into theoretical construction and *accept* the complex landscape that instantiates a concept’s use. Once this *descriptive* clarity is understood, philosophical enquiry is at its end for, simply put, “there is nothing [left] to explain” (PI 126).

This Wittgensteinian lens forms the paradigm through which the current study is viewed. Instead of critiquing LIS neutrality, or offering a *theoretical analysis* of its nature, it is *described* as a heterogeneous concept with ranging uses in varied contexts. This heterogeneity is not *deduced theoretically,* but *observed* through a *descriptive* process that examines the concept’s instantiation throughout the literature and professional practice. Crucially, Hacker (2004) attributes this heterogeneity to Wittgenstein, noting that a grammatical investigation leads to a perspective whereby “propositions of a language form a family of heterogeneous structures” (p. 13). Instead of positing *conclusions*, therefore, an exploration of the grammar of LIS neutrality *paints a picture* of the concept’s application. The concept of liberal neutrality is used as an analogy to help persuade the reader that the grammar of LIS neutrality is – like liberal neutrality – varied and diverse. This analogy, however, is not a *theoretical* comparison but is used, as characterised by McGinn, “to prompt us to see our practice of using language in a new light” (2013, p.13) – that is, once the heterogeneity of liberal neutrality is described, we are more readily *persuaded* to change our perspective of LIS neutrality when its own heterogeneity is revealed. It is observed, in turn, that this diversity has been neglected by a largely polarised existing literature that fails to capture the granularity of LIS neutrality’s application. Whilst this *could* be construed as a concrete conclusion that grinds against the spirit of a descriptive Wittgensteinian analysis, this need not be problematic for the current study. The Wittgensteinian lens can also be construed *pragmatically* – that is, on its ability the *conceptually clarify* LIS neutrality holistically and bring a perspective lacking within current literature. Michael Dummett’s remark that those who reject some of Wittgenstein’s views nevertheless “stand… in [his] shadow” encapsulates the thought that we can both capture the insight Wittgenstein’s method provides and articulate its benefit in a meaningful way (Dummett, 1991, p. xi, cited in Fogelin, 1996, p.30).

A Wittgensteinian lens does not represent a precise or distinct methodology, but a *way of understanding the nature of concepts and their practical application.* In this guise, the current study does not attempt to place itself within the “LIS neutrality debate” nor take any antecedent neutral stance, for it is the very *meaning* of neutrality in LIS that is investigated. The overriding purpose, therefore, is to gain a birds-eye view of LIS neutrality and bring this holistic dimension to the “LIS neutrality debate”. By doing this, a broader understanding of the concept could help develop a more adequate *normative* response to it. Whilst the normative question - how and when the concept should be employed in professional practice - is beyond the scope of this study, a Wittgensteinian lens acts as a precursor, clarifying the grammar of the concept and untangling it in a cartographic spirit that enables it to be seen holistically. It is this *new perspective*, arguably lacking in previous research, which a Wittgensteinian lens brings.

Liberal Neutrality

Unlike LIS neutrality, liberal neutrality is the subject of a large body of theoretical literature. Consequently, the concept has been fine-tuned to a degree often lacking in discussions of LIS neutrality. This section *observes* three features of liberal neutrality which can also be applied to LIS neutrality. Its purpose is to sketch an analogy - exposing the *grammar* of the concept – that aids an understanding of LIS neutrality that is both flexible and context sensitive.

The concept of liberal neutrality, broadly construed, is the notion that the state should remain neutral between rival conceptions of the good; this is crystallised by Kymlicka (1989) who notes that “a distinctive feature of contemporary liberal theory is its emphasis on “neutrality”– the view that the state should not reward or penalize particular conceptions of the good life” (p.883). The way the state should conceive this neutrality, however, is a matter of considerable difference. Zellentin’s (2012) example of a teacher’s right to wear a hijab in a classroom in secular Germany illustrates this complexity. If the teacher is prohibited from wearing a hijab, the state breaches neutrality from her viewpoint by discriminating against her religious beliefs, yet if it allows it she may have a non-neutral influence upon her Muslim pupils for making her decision (p.13). If a compromise is reached where symbols congruent with a “free democratic state” are permitted, this line too could be blurred, in some cases representing an arbitrary prejudice against new or unusual ways of life (p.14). This diversity in the way liberal neutrality can be applied in specific situations – a slippery concept used to advocate different standpoints - is well acknowledged within the literature. Consequently, unlike LIS neutrality, liberal neutrality is more readily conceived within the literature as a heterogeneous concept that branches out into distinct, yet closely related, conceptions.

Conceptions of Liberal Neutrality

This conceptual heterogeneity forms a first analogous feature; five conceptions demonstrate this diversity. First, neutrality may be conceived as a concept that produces equal *consequences*. This notion, common in the literature, is expressed with a range terminological variation. Zellentin describes a “neutrality of impact” that ensures “the third party’s action…has equal *impact* on the disputants” (2012, p.16). For Dimock, this represents a “neutrality of equal consequences” where the “state ought to promote all conceptions of the good life to an equal extent” (2000, p.44) and Wall equates this conception to a “neutrality of effect” where “the state should not do anything that has the effect…of promoting any non-neutral conception of the good” (2001, p.391). Kymlicka (1989), drawing on Raz’s notion of “equal political concern”, describes “consequential neutrality” whereby the outcome of state policy is neutral between competing conceptions of the good (p.884). In a similar vein, Balint (2015) crystallises this notion coining the very term “neutrality of outcome*”* to describe an ideal whereby the state has a duty – whether intentionally or not – to produce policy that promotes each conception of the good to an equal extent (p.499). Within this first conception, therefore, neutrality is measured by the *actual results* state action or inaction brings about.

A second conception of liberal neutrality is “equal opportunity”; instead of demanding neutral *consequences,* neutrality reflects an equality of opportunity in pursuit of the good (Zellentin, 2012, p.18). Zellentin equates this with Raz’s “comprehensive neutrality”; the state has an obligation to provide all an equal playing field to pursue their goals. For Raz, this comprehensive neutrality is expressed via an analogy of conflict whereby the scope of intervention between two parties should be equal in “all matters relevant to the conflict between them” (1986, p.122). Phrased differently, the state has a duty to rectify existing background inequality or, as characterised by Dimock, it promotes an ideal where “all individuals have an equal opportunity to achieve their good” (2000, p. 44).

Another distinct conception is “justificatory neutrality”. Here, emphasis shifts from the *consequences* of state policy to the justificatory *rationale* for adopting policy. Kymlicka (1989) attributes this conception to Rawls who, in *A Theory of Justice,* concedes that whilst a just society may result in the prevalence of some conceptions of the good over others, the state should not evaluate these “from a social standpoint” (Rawls, 1972, p.94) or, in Rawls’ (2005) later thought, that principles of justice should be justified via publicly accessible reasoning. With justificatory neutrality, therefore, the focus switches from *outcome* to *procedure*. In short, neutrality “prohibits reference to particular conceptions of the good in the justification of political action”. Instead, the state should deliberate neutrally in the justification of policy (Zellentin, 2012, p.22).

A further conception comes in the guise of “neutrality of intent”. Here, emphasis shifts from both consequences and justification to the intended effects of action. The state should not enact policy that intends to promote a conception of the good. (Balint, 2015, p. 498). Arneson (2003) characterises this type of neutrality as a “neutrality of aim” (p. 193). This neutrality – unlike “neutrality of effect” - does not require neutral *consequences*; instead, the justification for a policy must have *intended* it to have such consequences. In other words, the scope of this neutrality is limited to the *aim* of state action or inaction.

Finally, Patten – who confusingly uses the umbrella term "neutrality of intentions" to refer to both neutrality of intent and justificatory neutrality – shuns both conceptions in favour of a "neutrality of treatment". Here, neutrality is maintained when the state "extends equivalent levels of assistance…to rival conceptions of the good" (2012, p.254). Crucially, this neutrality is distinct from "neutrality of effect"; rather than ensuring the *outcomes* of policy are neutral, Patten pushes emphasis to *inputs* (2012, p.258). Neutrality of treatment is maintained, therefore, when the state inputs equal resources to differing conceptions of the good despite the fact that this may result in the prevalence of some conceptions over others. In allowing a sports field to be used at weekends, for example, the state equally assists all sports which could use such space (2012, pp.258-259). This does not mean, however, that all sports will be played equally. In short, "neutrality of treatment" restricts the scope of neutrality to the equal treatment of rival conceptions of the good.

These contrasting conceptions demonstrate liberal neutrality to be a heterogeneous and diverse concept which may manifest itself from a range of perspectives. Within this first feature discussed, neutrality becomes a salient feature either at different points, or with differing emphasis, within the decision-making process. Neutrality can be seen as pertaining to the consequences (or intended consequences) of policy, the justification of policy, the equal treatment of individuals, or the equity of each conception of the good. For the pro-neutralist, therefore, the task is not merely to argue for neutrality per se, but to identify the dimension to which it applies.

Justification and Scope within Liberal Neutrality

Having demonstrated that liberal neutrality can be conceived as a heterogeneous concept, two other analogous observations come to light. First, the justification for rival conceptions also diverges. Consequently, the pro-neutralist camp is a fractured between those who endorse some, yet criticise other, conceptions. This can be seen by examining the contrast in arguments against neutrality of effect and justificatory neutrality. The principal criticism of neutrality of effect is epistemic i.e. it is impossible to *know* the exact consequences of policy decisions (Zellentin, 2012). This is echoed by Dimock who asserts "equal consequences" would require difficult calculations relating to the results of state policy. Likewise, Patten notes all liberal policies have non-neutral effects; an even distribution of resources may discriminate against those with “expensive tastes” or those with unusual ways of life (2012, p.257).

With justificatory neutrality, by contrast, *effects* are overlooked; a justification which omits reference to conceptions of the good does not eliminate bias per se. Wall gives an example of taxing opera. Whilst this tax could be justified neutrally through need to raise revenue, its *effects* would still be non-neutral - especially if revenue could be raised by alternative means (2001, p.406). Again, however, this policy would have the non-neutral *effect* of privileging one religion over others (Patten, 2012, p.256). These contrasting criticisms serve to illustrate the independence of different conceptions. Not only are there distinct conceptions of neutrality, but the *justification* for these conceptions may function independently.

Second, neutrality can also be seen either as an absolute concept or a relative concept. To illustrate this, a final conception should be considered; “fundamental neutrality”. Unlike other conceptions, this conception is not evaluated by its normative effects but, rather, in its ability to provide a neutral justification for the wider liberal project (Dimock, 2000, p.201). In this way, it requires a liberal theory to invoke a neutral justification that does not refer to antecedent non-neutral liberal values. It may be seen as a special kind of justificatory neutrality, albeit one that justifies a liberal ideology rather than the individual decisions made within it. The necessity of fundamental neutrality, however, is disputed within the literature. Dimock notes a fundamental justification can be made via the contractarian tradition by which a “negative liberty” is justified as a valueless default position on the basis that restrictive measures prohibiting freedoms require a value laden justification (2012, p.202-203). This outcome, however, results only in a negative affirmation of liberty-by-default, rather than embracing the positive notions i.e. freedom, equality and “autonomous choice” that the concept embodies (2012, p.203). She concludes by arguing fundamental neutrality should not play a justificatory role within liberal theory; shifting the onus to the neutralist’s requirement for a neutral justification simply begs the question. Instead, liberalism is a “substantive moral theory” that hinges on the merit of the values the concept embodies and their advantage over alternative ideology (p.203).

This shows neutrality to be a concept that may operate within a wider value laden environment. In other words, the conceptions of neutrality *within* liberalism, outlined above, can operate *without* the need of a neutral justification for the wider liberal project they embody. In this way, neutrality may be seen as a relative concept that operates alongside non-neutral values. This distinction is neatly encapsulated by Patten who distinguishes between an "upstream" and "downstream" value. An upstream value acts as a "master principle" from which all other justification derives (2012, p.252). Rawls' "original position" in *A Theory of Justice,* whereby principles of justice are formulated behind a "veil of ignorance" is an attempt to provide this ultimate neutral justification (1972, p.302). The reason for this justification is, broadly, twofold. First, an advocate of neutrality must – on pain of consistency – provide a non-circular justification for the content of their thesis. Second, for Rawls, this "upstream" justification is also practical; a neutral justification, if successful, ensures that principles of justice are acceptable to those with differing conceptions of the good.

Downstream value, by contrast, is humbler in nature. Here, it is accepted that neutrality sits within a wider value laden framework. With downstream neutrality, Patten notes, "it is *because* certain non-neutral values hold sway that the state ought, in some limited domain, to adopt a stance of neutrality" (2012, p.253). This malleable "pro tanto" neutrality – free from the burden of an upstream neutral justification – can be applied judiciously in accordance with a wider value orientation. To illustrate, if A's relationship with B is valued but this relationship would be jeopardised *unless* A's relationship with C is neutral, neutrality towards C is justified with recourse to A's valued relationship to B, rather than any recourse to a fundamental neutral justification (2012, p.253). As a consequence, neutrality takes on an extra conceptual dimension, operating with limitation and restraint within an unashamedly value orientated environment.

To summarise, this section has *observed* three features of liberal neutrality. First, that liberal neutrality is a heterogeneous concept that breaks down into closely related, yet distinct, conceptions, second, that the justification and criticism of these conceptions may function independently and, third, that neutrality may also be seen as a relative concept. This section's overall purpose, therefore, is to provide a backdrop against which LIS neutrality can be compared. Whilst the literature discussed is theoretical in nature, the Wittgensteinian approach does not engage directly with conceptions but *describes* them in order to demonstrate liberal neutrality's heterogeneity. By using liberal neutrality as an analogous aide, the three features discussed can help *persuade* us that LIS neutrality is also a varied concept with a sensitivity to context that has been largely overlooked.

LIS Neutrality

Moving to LIS neutrality, this section demonstrates how the three features of liberal neutrality, highlighted in the previous section, can be applied to LIS neutrality. First, the personal and professional contexts within LIS neutrality literature are outlined – this demonstrates LIS neutrality to be, like liberal neutrality, a heterogeneous concept. Second, it is argued that the justification in favour of different conceptions of LIS neutrality may function independently and, third, that LIS neutrality may also be viewed as relative concept.

A review of the literature relating to neutrality within LIS can be found in the first study (Macdonald and Birdi 2019). The present study focuses on the personal and institutional contexts in order to demonstrate that LIS neutrality's heterogeneity. This is not, however, to deny that other contexts may be present within LIS neutrality nor that it may be possible to delineate them using an alternative conceptual schema. An alternative presentation would even strengthen the present argument, namely that LIS neutrality is diverse and variable.

Conceptions of LIS Neutrality

One context of LIS neutrality is personal neutrality. Here, emphasis is on the interaction between the LIS professional's personal beliefs and their role in professional practice. This context is crystallised by IFLA's Code of Ethics which states "librarians and…distinguish between their personal convictions and professional duties" (IFLA, 2012, cited in Johnson, 2016, p.26). Similarly, Foskett notes that "during reference service, the librarian ought virtually to vanish as an individual person, except in so far as his personality sheds light on the working of the library" (Foskett cited in McMenemy, 2007, p.178). Likewise, Hart (2016), in the context of a presidential election, notes "public librarians are public servants, and must remain politically impartial as to not appear to use their public position to forward the interests of a specific political party or candidate".

This personal dimension also comes to the fore in the first study via the "core value" conception, as epitomised by statements such as "you shouldn't bring the personal into the professional" and "on a personal level you shouldn't express one way or another" (Macdonald and Birdi, 2019, p.343). One participant notes, "I don't think…anyone in the library should be showing that they support any particular party or movement" (p.342) and "[you shouldn't] bring the personal into the professional…OK you've had a really rubbish day – but that doesn't mean you can take in out on the next customer" (p.343). This personal dimension is clearly delineated by a participant who states, "I worked with someone…he had a huge film library at home, but he also had a parallel film library in the library, and it seemed to me wrong because it was his own space" (p. 343). Here, personal neutrality is largely viewed as a positive concept that protects the user from unprofessional bias.

The impossibility of "fundamental" personal neutrality is also raised by a participant who notes "we are all products of our upbringing, the society we have been brought up in, the family situation we are brought up in…so they will all influence what we do" (p.345). The personal dimension is also noted by Wenzler who, in a spirit contrary to the pro-neutralist attitude expressed above, alludes to those who believe librarians "who fail to use the influence conferred on them by their education and their social status to reduce ongoing social injustice are as culpable as witnesses who do nothing to stop ongoing crimes" (2019, p.60). This comment raises the idea, prevalent in activist literature, that personal neutrality may also be seen as a negative concept that restrains progressive intervention. Rather than explore these themes, however, the purpose here is to *describe* the personal context within LIS neutrality literature and challenge the notion that LIS neutrality is a homogenous concept. The defining feature of this personal context is, whether positive, negative, or related to the coherence of personal neutrality, the discussion of personal values and the degree to which they influence professional practice.

The institutional context, by contrast, conceives neutrality as a concept that pertains to the library as an institution and, often, its function in wider society. Rather than discussing personal beliefs, the most virulent line of attack against the pro-neutralist is the notion that the library is an institution which tacitly reflects the prevailing status-quo and a corresponding dominate value-orientation. McDonald (2008), for example, notes a hegemony in LIS dominated by "corporate decision making". This has led the American Library Association to intertwine "its operations and organizational goals with…multi-million-dollar corporations" (p.11). This chimes with Martin's assertion that neutrality is a myth; he argues "our buying decisions, our cataloguing practices, and our use of commercial search engines…are not neutral" (2020, p. 132). Likewise, Blanke (1989) argues LIS has become a technocratic profession that has embraced a neoliberal stance where information is a "commodity to be marketed". He concludes that neutrality "allows an unquestioned acquiescence to the imperatives of the most powerful and influential elements of society" (p.40). Similarly, Radford (1992) and Dick (1995) also allude to neutrality at an institutional level; for them, LIS neutrality is a property of a positivist and science driven attitude adopted in attempt to align LIS with "traditional social sciences" (p.217). The activist line of criticism is also epitomised by Stoffle and Tarin (1994), who note that "institutions are not neutral" but "structured around the culture, values, and rules of the dominant white heterosexual male society" (p.47). Similarly, in an essay entitled "the myth of the neutral professional", Robert Jensen argues LIS neutrality is undermined. The pro-neutralist passively accepts current arrangements

(2008, p.91). Gibson et al. (2017), by contrast, describe LIS neutrality as a "fallacy" for the separate reason that LIS practice is ingrained within existing "epistemological and ontological values" which affect users' interactions with LIS services, often marginalising minority groups (pp.2-3). In a similar vein, Bales and Engles, using Althusser's notion of "Ideological State Apparatuses", argue the academic library is tacit pillar of support for bourgeois ideology that hides behind a pretence of passive neutrality; "the neutral academic librarian [who] works passively in the controlling interests of society…acts politically" (2012, p.21).

Similarly, this institutional and societal context can be found within the data from the first study. For the "subservient" conception, neutrality should give way to "external obligations", promoting "progressive values" and "serving communities" (Macdonald and Birdi, 2019 p.343). This is summed up by statements such as, "CILIP…ignored the library cuts and the library closures…so I think to ignore those trends because you're trying to be neutral…is worse for the profession" (p.344) and "we do positively push political agendas; LGBT [groups] are working with libraries at the minute…you could argue that's taking a political stance" (p.344). The "hidden values" conception, by contrast, also explores this institutional and societal dimension, as epitomised by the statement, "I'm not sure neutrality is possible…people for example talk about library stock being balanced and neutral…but inevitably, because of the way book publishing works, some voices will be [louder] than other voices" (p.345) and "you can aim for objectivity, but to remain completely neutral in a system that was already functioning at a time before neutrality was really aspired to [is impossible], because it was made by white men" (p. 345). Rather than focusing the *evaluative* stance taken towards neutrality, however, the present argument draws attention to the *context* in which they are made. Here, this is an *institutional* context – neutrality is conceived as a concept that relates to the structure of the LIS profession and its relationship with wider society.

By delineating both the personal and institutional contexts, therefore, LIS neutrality can be seen, like liberal neutrality, as a heterogeneous concept that breaks down into closely related but distinct conceptions. Seen through the descriptive Wittgensteinian lens, the personal and institutional contexts do not represent a *theoretical* presentation of LIS neutrality, but serve a pragmatic purpose, namely to *persuade* the reader that LIS neutrality is a heterogeneous concept.

The Justification and Scope of LIS Neutrality

Importantly, however, this heterogeneity is largely overlooked within LIS literature. Characteristically, LIS neutrality is treated as a homogenous concept with arguments made either for or against neutrality per se, rather than for or against specific *conceptions or contexts* to which neutrality may apply. This conclusion was established in the first study where it was argued that a "fluid understanding of neutrality is not generally reflected by existing literature which is generally rooted in a "for or against" camp" (Macdonald and Birdi, 2019, p.347). Put another way, the concept's heterogeneity has been overlooked by a literature which has largely neglected the *grammar or logic* of the concept as it is used within the LIS profession, that is, as a concept with many and varied uses within language as a "spatial and temporal phenomena" (Wittgenstein, 1953, PI 105). Whilst heterogeneous contexts run throughout LIS neutrality literature, writers typically conflate or do not explore them sufficiently in reaching a homogenous conclusion that argues either for or against neutrality, or questions the coherence of neutrality. This assumption, however, need not be correct. Once it is accepted that LIS neutrality is a heterogeneous concept, akin to liberal neutrality, it must also be acknowledged that the justification for different conceptions of neutrality may, like liberal neutrality, pull apart. This points towards an exciting, yet latent, conceptual space in which LIS neutrality could be understood as nuanced and multifaceted

This lack of exploration is evident within the literature. First, neutrality may be selectively perceived in some contexts but not others. Bales and Engles (2012), in a criticism of neutrality, cite the ALA code of ethics by which librarians "distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties" (p. 19). This code, they argue, has two interpretations. First, that librarians should "set aside their prejudices and collect and connect users with resources they may not personally find suitable or believable" and, second, that "it encourages librarians to maintain a neutral standpoint on social justice issues" (p.19). Crucially, however, Bales and Engels only perceive neutrality within the second interpretation. This leads to a conclusion critical of the concept i.e. that "the neutral academic librarian [who] works passively in the service of the controlling interests of society…acts politically" (p.21). It is, however, feasible to also perceive neutrality in the first interpretation whereby librarians "set aside their prejudices and collect and connect users with resources". Crucially, Bales and Engles do not appear to consider this first interpretation problematic. In fact, this is the neutrality often espoused by those who defend the concept citing a personal neutrality by which LIS professionals compartmentalise their personal beliefs, as epitomised by Foskett's claim that during reference enquiries "the librarian ought virtually to vanish as an individual person" (Foskett cited in McMenemy, 2007, p.178).

Second, the contexts to which neutrality applies, even when delineated, may also be conflated or muddled. In a 2014 article addressing institutional oppression within the library, for example, the personal neutrality inherent in the ALA's code of ethics is presented alongside the institutional context.

"We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources." However, it is pretty easy to see that libraries are far from neutral spaces. There are many examples in the literature about the ways that collection development, reference [and] cataloguing…reveal deep biases in how the library as an institution exists" (de Jesus, 2014).

Here we see a rare contrast of the institutional and personal context. Despite this, however, the article moves from an acknowledgment of the "deep biases" inherent within the library as an institution to the more homogenous conclusion that "it is impossible for neutrality to exist" (de Jesus, 2014). Importantly, the present argument does not seek to challenge criticisms of neutrality but switches emphasis towards the existence of two closely related, yet distinct, conceptions of neutrality in the above passage. In other words, it is possible both to accept the "deep biases" inherent within the library as an institution, yet still subscribe to a personal neutrality whereby the LIS professional refrains from letting personal views influence professional practice. This is not to deny that conceptions of neutrality *could* be criticised collectively but, once it is accepted that the justifications for institutional and personal neutrality *may* diverge, this *possibility* should be adequately dealt with as part of a collective justification.

It is important to note that, in a rare moment within the literature, this contextual variation is acknowledged by de Jesus (2014). LIS neutrality literature, it is argued, tends to "focus on the coherence of the neutrality of the individuals operating and working within libraries or on some of the processes and systems of libraries (like classification)" (de Jesus, 2014). In addition, institutional neutrality is delineated; "the main notion of neutrality that I challenge within this article is that of institutional neutrality" (de Jesus, 2014). Despite this acknowledgement, however, the possibility of divergent justifications applicable to some, but not all, conceptions of LIS neutrality remains largely unexplored within the wider literature. A Wittgensteinian lens, by contrast, describes these conceptions and brings them into view.

In opposition to this view it may be objected the LIS neutrality debate can be short circuited. Neutrality is an impossible, even fallacious concept that can be undermined at every turn and in every context. This line of argument typically begets statements such as "it is impossible for neutrality to exist" (de Jesus, 2014), "the fallacy of library neutrality" (Gibson et al. p.753) and the "myth of the neutral profession" (Jensen, 2008). If this were to be accepted, the utility of latent conceptual space for developing a position that acknowledges the merit of some conceptions yet not others would risk being undermined. If, as widely reported in the literature, it is accepted that both the library as an institution and LIS professionals are irreducibly clouded by wider values, both overt or covert, a fundamental account of LIS neutrality appears problematic for the heterogeneity explored.

Once again, however, this fixed theoretical conception overlooks the *grammar* of the concept as it is used within professional practice, namely that neutrality may be used as a relative concept that operates within a wider value-laden environment. Here, the third feature of liberal neutrality explored in the preceding section is also applicable. In other words, an advocate of a refined “down-stream” neutrality may freely admit that *complete* LIS neutrality is impossible, yet point towards coherent *uses* of the concept of that do not depend on a fundamental account. The proponent of a flexible “downstream” LIS neutrality can draw an analogy with “fundamental neutrality” within liberal theory, as affirmed by Patten who notes a “down-stream” liberal neutrality may be applied *for the very reason* that “certain non-neutral values hold sway” (2012, p.253). Likewise, once it is accepted that LIS neutrality can operate with limited scope within a wider value orientation, any attempt to short-circuit the LIS neutrality debate by placing the onus on the need for a complete or fundamental neutrality can, and should, be sidestepped.

To illustrate, suppose library staff at “Institution A” are prevented from endorsing a political party during an election campaign based on a justification that they should be professionally neutral with respect to the choice between mainstream political parties. This neutrality is derived from the antecedent value of liberal democracy. Wenzler (2019), for example, defends LIS neutrality on these grounds, arguing that libraries are liberal institutions modelled on values from the enlightenment in which the library fosters “the free inquiry necessary for a liberal democracy” (p.66). He argues this commitment leads to the acceptance of Rawlsian neutrality where the library maintains impartiality between “comprehensive moral doctrines” and different ways of life (p.67). In this context, therefore, personal neutrality stems from an antecedent non-neutral value rather than a fundamental neutral justification. Crucially, this isn’t a *theoretical* ad-hoc response to an objection, but an observation derived from a grammatical investigation that clarifies how the concept is used. Or, to put it another way, an example that LIS neutrality can still be *spoken about in a meaningful way* without the need for a fundamental justification.

Importantly, having dealt with this objection, “Institution A” could also make use of the latent conceptual space sketched above to develop a nuanced normative position. Having noted that LIS neutrality is a heterogeneous concept and that the justifications for different conceptions may diverge, an acceptance of personal neutrality need not be “Institution A’s” rigid stance in all contexts. It could, for example, take a non-neutral position on issues that fall within the *institutional* context. Here, the library may jettison a commitment on neutrality to promote specific causes such as, perhaps, anti-racist or socially progressive movements. This is not to deny that there may be instances in which institutional neutrality may be appropriate – perhaps, in the context of mainstream parties at a national election. With this in mind, the two contextual conceptions sketched above – personal and institutional – need not represent the structure of “Institution A’s” LIS neutrality stance. A flexible and malleable approach allows neutrality to be applied judiciously in different policy areas, each with their own morally salient features.

The present argument does not answer *how* LIS neutrality should be applied by providing a normative account of LIS neutrality in specific instances. That is, provide precise answers to “Institution A’s” moral dilemmas. It could be possible to defend a theoretical rules-based account of LIS neutrality that specifies how, and in which contexts, neutrality should be endorsed or avoided. The rigidity of a theoretical rules-based approach, however, appears at odds with the contextual fluidity the concept commands. A more promising avenue, therefore, may take the form of a virtue-based account that focuses on the quality of *rational deliberation* in individual instances that LIS neutrality manifests itself. This anti-theoretical and contextual approach to LIS neutrality’s application appears more congruent with the argument developed thus far - that LIS neutrality is a heterogeneous concept and that the reasoning in favour of different conceptions may diverge in specific situations (see Macdonald and Birdi, 2019; Burgess, 2016). A virtue-based framework is also more congruent with the spirit of Wittgenstein’s thought. Nordby (2008) notes that Wittgenstein’s approach “shares with virtue approaches the idea that our applications of concepts are made on the basis of a conceptual competence” (p.7). That is, instead of specifying prescriptive rules or principles, both approaches embed a response to ethical problems within the *specific context* that they come before us. Whilst Wittgenstein focuses on the correct use of concepts within the contexts they arise, the virtue ethicist focuses on how we should *evaluate* each situation based on *rational deliberation* (p. 10). This similarity is emphasised by Davis, who argues that, "ethics, for Aristotle and for Wittgenstein, does not stand in need of a superhuman foundation or justification" but is acquired through education and exposure to circumstance (2004, pp.191-192). Despite this insight, however, the purpose here is to provide the antecedent *conceptual clarity* from which a normative response can be made.

Contribution to practice

To take stock, the argument thus far has taken three features of liberal neutrality; conceptual heterogeneity, the diversification of justification, and "downstream" application, and shown, through a descriptive "grammatical investigation", that they can be applied to LIS neutrality. It has been shown LIS neutrality is also a heterogeneous concept, second, that the justification for different conceptions may diverge and, third, that LIS neutrality can operate with a limited "downstream" scope. These symmetries, it is argued, expose a latent conceptual space in which to understand the concept in a way that is both nuanced and multifaceted. In this way, the present argument seeks to reclaim LIS neutrality from sceptics who question its coherence within the LIS profession. By doing this, however, an advocate of a malleable neutrality accepts that neutrality's application sits within a dominant value orientation and, second, has licence to disregard the concept in other contexts with differing moral features. Seen this way, a commitment to neutrality may *sit alongside* interventionist approaches that prioritise the promotion of overt values in specific contexts. The balance of these dual commitments - deciding in which circumstances to favour neutrality or a value stance – should now become a matter of substantive discussion both within the literature and in practical professional settings. Crucially – by noting that neutrality and social responsibility can be reconciled – the present argument paves the way for a less polarised and more inclusive debate that appreciates intuitions both sides of the "neutral non-neutral" divide. This is not, of course, to deny that there may be *genuine disagreement* about which approach to adopt in a given context but, rather, that the *disambiguation of contexts* has potential to rectify the false dichotomy between "neutralists and anti-neutralists" which has shaped the architecture of the existing LIS neutrality debate.

LIS neutrality and Family Resemblance

Having described for a malleable and flexible account of LIS neutrality, this final section – drawing on a related strand of Wittgenstein's thought – suggests understanding LIS neutrality via "family resemblance" is conducive to the flexible reading of neutrality advocated thus far, and to reducing the polarisation found within the literature. For Wittgenstein, "family resemblance" is a progression of the resistance to a "theoretical attitude". Moving from the idea that there is no a deep a priori structure to our language, it represents a means of understanding the *relationship* between the instantiation of concepts employed in different contexts. To introduce this notion, Wittgenstein uses the example of the concept of a game. Here, a search for a theoretical definition of "game" involves looking for the similarities the run throughout all uses of the word. The idea of "winning or losing", perhaps, is inherent in all games. Wittgenstein, however, draws our attention to other uses of the word in which "winning or losing" would not be appropriate i.e. a child bouncing a ball against a wall. When examining concepts, therefore, instead of finding abstract definitions we find "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein, 1953, PI 66). These descriptive similarities represent the "family resemblances" that hallmark the instantiations of a concept's application (PI 67). This conceptualisation has noted precedent throughout the wider literature including the treatment of privacy (Solove, 2002), power (Haugaard, 2010), science, (Irzik and Nola, 2011), statehood (Willcox, 2017) and partnering in construction (Nyström, 2005).

Transposing this a family resemblance conceptualisation to the concept of power, Hauguaard (2010) notes "a family resemblance concept entails that there can be no single best definition of power. Rather, any theorist who is interested in power is interested in a cluster of concepts" (p.427). Likewise, in contrast to a theoretical definition, Solove (2002) calls for a focus on the "similarities and differences" between the practical applications of privacy arguing that "we should act as cartographers, mapping out the terrain of privacy by examining specific problematic situations rather than trying to fit each situation into a rigid predefined category" (p.1126). By using a family resemblance conceptualisation to examine both power and privacy, therefore, both Hauguaard and Solove move emphasis away from an abstract understanding towards instantiations of concepts in specific scenarios. This “cartographic” spirit was also noted in the first study which “descriptively [mapped]…conceptions in a holistic framework that brings them into view” (Macdonald and Birdi, 2019, p. 347).

Applying this conceptualisation to LIS neutrality, therefore, a family resemblance understanding would facilitate the contextual understanding which is inherent within professional practice. By its nature, family resemblance recognises the heterogeneity of LIS neutrality, noting that each instantiation of a concept is a distinct entity with features that resemble those within the “LIS neutrality family”. Instead of relating instantiations to each other to form a further general *theory,* it approaches conceptualisation from “the bottom up…within particular contexts” (2002, p.1129). This understanding goes hand in hand with the present argument, which draws our attention to the grammatical differences found within the literature. Seen this way, a “family resemblance” conceptualisation strengthens the Wittgensteinian lens through which the study is viewed.

Having sketched a “family resemblance” conceptualisation, this section concludes by examining three practical benefits of its application. First, family resemblance can accommodate the possibility that LIS neutrality’s application may change or expand over time. Irzik and Nola (2011), applying family resemblance to science, note it “recognizes the fact that, as science develops, it may…acquire new characteristics” (p.602). Citing how scientific methodology has evolved from the 18th century to the present, they argue family resemblance has the flexibility to recognise fresh instantiations of the concept within a modern paradigm. This approach, therefore, allows scientific method to be characterised by its looser resemblance to historical instantiations rather than its fit within a theoretical definition. Applying this to LIS neutrality, it is possible that the concept will take on new and distinct meanings within the LIS profession. Technological innovations bring new challenges; the issue of “net neutrality”, for example, has posed LIS new ethical quandaries and it is likely that other dilemmas relating to, for example, “big data” will continue to emerge. In short, a family resemblance approach provides the conceptual space that accommodates its "dynamic, open-ended nature" (p.602).

Second, even if a rigid theoretical account of LIS neutrality could be specified, the contextual variation found within the profession points towards a highly abstract, inaccessible criterion. This point is made by Barrenechea and Castillo (2019), who argue that the search for necessary and sufficient conditions of heterogeneous concepts may result in attributes "so abstract that in practice they are rendered unhelpful" (p.118). Seen this way, a family resemblance becomes practical; it may be favoured, not because it is the *only* conceptualisation on offer, but because it would be the most *informative* conceptualisation. That is, an approach that exposes the practical features, as opposed to abstract features, of a concept's instantiation.

Third, family resemblance may also have a pedagogical advantage. Irzik and Nola (2011) argue that family resemblance facilitates an open discussion of the conceptual landscape. Taking "science", they argue "the teacher may begin by asking what scientists do" (p.602). This, they note, leads to a discussion of the ways the term "science" is used within its practical context which, in turn, leads to an explorative discussion of the term's application. Similarly, the pedagogic benefit to LIS neutrality becomes apparent; by teaching a family resemblance conceptualisation – perhaps in relevant CPD or post-graduate qualifications – students and LIS professionals may come to appreciate the range of contexts in which LIS neutrality may be helpful or harmful to the profession's wider goals. Rather than posing the question "should we be neutral?", the proposition "how is neutrality used within LIS?" facilitates a deeper, exploratory discussion. This, in turn, has potential to start reducing the polarisation found within the literature and focus, instead, on the nuance, found within the LIS profession.

Conclusion

The present argument has aimed to change the tone of the LIS neutrality debate by changing the way the concept is conceived. First, a "grammatical investigation" – drawing on an analogy with liberal neutrality - was explored. Three features of liberal neutrality - conceptual heterogeneity, the diversification of justification, and "downstream" application – translate, through observation and persuasion to LIS neutrality. This paves the way for a more nuanced discussion about a concept, often misunderstood, that has polarised opinion within the LIS profession. It has been argued that there is flexibility to both recognise the benefits of neutrality's application, whilst simultaneously appreciating situations where an overt value stance should be taken. Understood this way, the opposition between "neutralists" and "anti-neutralists" becomes a false dichotomy; rather than sit rigidly in a "pro" or "anti" corner, the proponent of a flexible "pro-tanto" neutrality has license to judge each situation on its morally salient features. Second, conceptualising LIS neutrality using "family resemblance" facilitates this flexibility, recognising that each instantiation of LIS neutrality may have distinct features that help the proponent of a flexible neutrality account for their normative response in contrasting situations and contexts. By doing this, the LIS profession should begin to have a more open discussion about the range of contexts in which neutrality helps or hinders the profession's wider goals. This approach may enable the development of an inclusive normative framework that adequately captures the granularity of neutrality's application. This is the issue that should now be addressed.

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