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Epistemic Injustice

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Suppose a jury rejects a Black defendant's testimony because they believe that Black people are often untrustworthy. Or suppose the male members of a board reject a female colleague's suggestions because they believe that women are too often irrational. Imagine also a woman whose postpartum depression is dismissed by her doctor as mere 'baby blues.'^[1]

All three people above suffer what contemporary English philosopher Miranda Fricker calls *epistemic injustice*.^[2] "Epistemic" means *relating to knowledge*. Epistemic injustice refers to a wrong done to someone as a knower or transmitter of knowledge: due to unjustified prejudice, someone is unfairly judged to not have the knowledge or reasonable beliefs that they actually have.

Fricker identifies two forms of epistemic injustice: *testimonial* and *hermeneutical*. This essay explains these forms of epistemic injustice and surveys some suggestions for how to prevent them.

1. Testimonial Injustice

Testimony involves someone sharing their knowledge with someone else. Testimony typically happens when people communicate: e.g., telling directions, reporting the news, writing a research paper. Testimony isn't just statements in a courtroom: whenever we gain knowledge from other people, we rely on testimony. Testimony is *credible* when there's good reason to believe that what's claimed is true, when the person testifying knows what they claim to know.^[3]

A speaker suffers *testimonial injustice* when their testimony is judged to be not or less credible because of *prejudice* and not because the testimony itself is

unreasonable.^[4] These prejudices can be related to race, gender, accent, age, and others and impact people in many areas of life: economic, educational, professional, sexual, legal, political, religious, and more. Testimonial injustices caused by such prejudices constitute the central cases of testimonial injustice.

Testimonial injustice can take various forms. For instance, a female board member's prediction might be rejected due to the prejudices of her male colleagues: this is called *testimonial quieting*. Alternatively, that female board member might instead silence or limit her assertions beforehand knowing that she'll receive inappropriately low credibility: this is called *testimonial smothering*.^[5]

2. Hermeneutical Injustice

A second type of epistemic injustice is known as *hermeneutical injustice*. "Hermeneutical" relates to *interpretation and understanding*.

Consider sexual harassment. Although this might be surprising, that concept hasn't always existed. So imagine a woman who is sexually harassed at her workplace before the introduction of the concept in the 1970s.^[6] She lives in a society where unwanted sexual propositions are typically seen as a form of 'flirting,' and rejection of them as a 'lack of a sense of humor.' Since she lacks the concept of sexual harassment, she'll have difficulty understanding her experience adequately or finding the appropriate words to communicate it to others.

Hermeneutical injustice then is about cases of lacking the concepts to adequately understand or communicate an experience. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when this failure is due ultimately to prejudices that result in people lacking the concepts needed to understand or communicate their experiences.^[7] The injustice above was due to women's (partial) exclusion from certain professions—e.g., journalism, politics, academics, law—which tended to result in biased interpretations of women's experiences, as in interpreting sexual harassment as merely a form of flirting.

Some argue that hermeneutical injustice doesn't require a lack of concepts since it can occur when interpretations of a certain group's experiences and the resulting concepts are unduly dismissed by others. For instance, postpartum depression might be dismissed as a personal deficiency rather than a

genuine medical condition: this is called *hermeneutical dissent*.^[8]

Unlike testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice is not the result of an *individual* hearer's prejudice: no single agent perpetrates hermeneutical injustice.^[9] In the sexual harassment example, it's not any individual's prejudice, but prejudicial practices in society that resulted in people lacking the concept of sexual harassment.

3. The Wrong of Epistemic Injustice

Many people closely associate producing and spreading knowledge with being human. Epistemic injustice results in victims' being at least partially excluded from participation in these activities.

Epistemic injustice can lead to grave practical consequences for both victims and wrongdoers. A wrongly disbelieved defendant might lose their freedom or life. Not listening to a board member who might have crucial knowledge for the future of the company may have dire consequences.

Epistemic injustice also harms the victim's identity. We typically define ourselves partly by our group identities: racial, sexual, religious, political, and more. We construct this part of our identity largely by communicating with others or using the available conceptual resources. So, being considered untrustworthy or lacking the conceptual resources to make sense of our experiences potentially prevents us from constructing our own social identity—from becoming who we are. If a woman who is interested in and has a talent for politics is constantly excluded from political dialogue, she can hardly fulfill her potential to become a politician.^[10]

4. How to Prevent Epistemic Injustice

To prevent epistemic injustice, Fricker suggests that we cultivate reliable character traits—virtues—that neutralize prejudice.^[11]

We should aim to be aware of the potential prejudice in who we judge as credible. If we find that the low credibility we assigned to a speaker is due to prejudice, we should work to change that attitude.^[12]

Since victims of prejudice can have undue difficulty articulating their experiences, we should try to make out how their experiences would be understood in a prejudice-free climate.

Some argue that individual efforts, though they should prove useful, may not be enough to defeat epistemic injustice. For instance, education is a

marker of credibility. But the lack of proper education might be due to the absence of fair opportunities for education. So that some people are unfairly considered not credible and excluded from participation in knowledge-related activities is due to underlying injustice in social institutions. The solution then requires changes in social institutions, not just individual efforts.^[13]

5. Conclusion

It's difficult to overestimate the value of being (recognized as) someone with knowledge. So it's difficult to overestimate the badness of knowledge-related unfairness or epistemic injustice. Avoiding such injustice, however, might require both serious personal efforts and social and political change.

Notes

[1] See Medina and Pohlhaus (2017) for further discussion on, and examples of, varieties of epistemic injustice.

[2] Fricker (2007, p. 7).

[3] See Green, *Epistemology of Testimony*, for further discussion on the epistemology of testimony.

[4] More specifically, a speaker suffers testimonial injustice when they are given a level of credibility different from what's appropriate due to prejudice. Hence, a speaker might suffer testimonial injustice also as a result of their testimony being judged as *more* credible than it actually is. Fricker argues that *individual cases* of one's testimony being judged more credible doesn't constitute testimonial injustice. However, she accepts that these cases seldom might *add up to* testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007, pp. 20-21). Davis (2016) argues that a speaker's testimony being judged more credible is a bigger problem than Fricker thought. This is because, Davis argues, testimonial injustice is wrong primarily because the victim is treated merely as a member of a group and not as the unique person that she is. And when a speaker is judged as more credible due to (positive) prejudices that are based on (positive) stereotypes, she's treated merely as a member of a group and not as the unique person that she is.

[5] Doston (2011). Beyond statements and explanations, asking questions can also be treated unjustly. For instance, questions asked by women might be unjustly dismissed as irrelevant (Hookway 2010).

[6] See Fricker (2007, p. 149-152) for a history of how the concept of sexual harassment was introduced.

[7] Fricker (2007, p. 158).

[8] Goetze (2018).

[9] Fricker (2007, p. 159). However, as Fricker notes, “[w]hile hermeneutical injustice is not perpetrated by individuals, it will normally make itself apparent in discursive exchanges between individuals” (Fricker, 2007, p. 18).

[10] Fricker (2007, p. 54).

[11] Corresponding to the two forms of epistemic injustice, Fricker identifies two different character traits and calls them *the virtue of testimonial justice*, and *the virtue of hermeneutical justice*. A virtue, roughly, is a relatively stable character trait—like honesty, generosity, or compassion.

[12] This is one way the aim of the virtue of testimonial justice could be achieved. Another way it could be achieved is by plain personal familiarity. Suppose a certain accent presents an obstacle to one’s fair credibility judgment. One could converse with people having that accent, or socialize with them, which can in time eradicate this obstacle. With plain habituation, people’s race, age, accent, etc. can stop being relevant to their credibility (Fricker 2007, p. 96). Fricker also suggests that if “the whole business of judging credibility becomes too indeterminate, we may need to suspend judgment altogether” (Fricker 2007, p. 92).

[13] Anderson (2012).

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Huzeyfe Demirtas is a PhD candidate and teaching associate in the Department of Philosophy at Syracuse University. He mainly works in ethics, but also has interests in epistemology and metaphysics. His dissertation investigates the relationship between moral responsibility and causal responsibility: must you have caused anything for you to be morally praised or blamed? He has taught Theories of Knowledge and Reality, Introduction to Moral Theory, and Logic. <https://philpeople.org/profiles/huzeyfe-demirtas-1>

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