

# Rejecting Identities: Stigma and Hermeneutical Injustice

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Abstract: Hermeneutical injustice is being unjustly prevented from making sense of one's experiences, identity, or circumstances and/or communicating about them. The literature focusses almost exclusively on whether people have access to adequate conceptual resources. In this paper, we discuss a different kind of hermeneutical struggle caused by stigma. We argue that in some cases of hermeneutic injustice people have access to hermeneutical resources apt to understand their identity but reject employing these due to the stigma attached to the identity. We begin with a reinterpretation of one of the cases discussed in the literature, Edmund White's novel *A Boy's Own Story*. We argue that in this case hermeneutic resources are available but are rejected due to the stigma attached to homosexuality. We then present two analogous kinds of cases: alcohol addiction and being the victim of intimate partner violence. Here, too, hermeneutic injustice occurs because of stigma attached to an identity rather than unavailability of resources. We close by suggesting that these cases may, additionally, involve the wrong of Tightlacing: by meddling with their self-conception, stigma can manipulate individuals into a view of themselves that licenses inappropriate demands on them and makes them complicit in an erasure of their identities.

Keywords: hermeneutic injustice; epistemic injustice; stigma; Tightlacing

# Rejecting Identities: Stigma and Hermeneutical Injustice

## Introduction

Hermeneutical injustice is being unjustly prevented from making sense of one's important experiences, identity, or social circumstances and/or from communicating about them. Those who suffer hermeneutical injustice are significantly wronged: they may be unable to understand what is going on, to be secure in their evaluation of it, to communicate their experiences to their communities, to protest their victimisation, and to call for support.

Hermeneutical injustice thus puts individuals, typically in virtue of their membership of an oppressed social group, in a position of hermeneutical and communicative struggle: social arrangements and their consequences unjustly complicate victims' 'meaning-making and meaning-sharing' (Medina 2017). Philosophical research on hermeneutical injustice focusses almost exclusively on the availability and employability of conceptual resources: do subjects have access to, and can they communicatively employ conceptual resources apt to capture their significant experiences? The philosophical discussion, thus, focusses on the hermeneutical struggles of those who find that their experiences cannot be properly captured and expressed within the hermeneutical framework they or their potential interlocutors employ.

In this paper, we focus on a different kind of hermeneutical struggle that is characteristically caused by stigma. Within many social contexts, certain experiences and identities are stigmatized – they are treated as shameful and the proper object of shaming responses. These experiences and identities need not be poorly understood and the conceptual resources to understand and share them may well exist. We aim to show, however, that, even in the presence of hermeneutical resources that are epistemically and practically useful, stigma can prevent subjects from understanding their situation by making them *reject available hermeneutical resources because of the stigma accompanying the identity those*

*resources describe*. We argue that this is a peculiar feature of the situation of people with stigmatized experiences or identities and that it differs from the cases that have so far been discussed in the context of hermeneutical injustice.

The paper proceeds as follows: section 2 briefly reviews existing literature on hermeneutical injustice. Section 3 attends to the experiences of a gay adolescent in 1950s America as recounted in Edmund White's novel *A Boy's Own Story*. This case has repeatedly been discussed as illustrating hermeneutical injustice but, as we will argue, has not yet been adequately described: interpreters have failed to attend to the narrator's resistance to a homosexual identity due to the stigma attached to it. Section 4 and 5 introduce two additional cases where stigma prevents individuals from accessing hermeneutical resources: addiction and being the victim of intimate partner violence. The upshot of this discussion is that stigma causes the peculiar hermeneutical situation where individuals reject hermeneutical resources although employing them would be both epistemically and non-epistemically useful. In section 6 we will argue that these hermeneutic harms are not simply the result of epistemic bad luck but rather should be seen as cases of hermeneutical injustice. For hermeneutical justice, therefore, useful hermeneutical resources need not only exist; individuals must also be situated such that they are not unjustly made uncomfortable accessing them. We conclude by pointing out a connection to a type of psychological abuse that we have described in a recent paper (Edlich and Archer 2023): Tightlacing consists in inducing a mistaken self-conception in someone that seemingly licenses overburdening demands on them. We show how attaching stigma to an identity or experience can be a way of tightlacing those having it.

### **Standard Cases of Hermeneutical Injustice**

When Miranda Fricker (2007, ch. 7) introduced the concept of hermeneutical injustice, one of the examples she relied on was the story of Carmita Wood. At her job at Cornell University, Wood was repeatedly the target of aggressive sexual conduct by a distinguished professor,

culminating in forcibly kissing her. Wood suffered both mentally and physically from these assaults and the stressful environment they created for her, and she eventually quit her job. Upon applying for unemployment insurance, she found herself unable to explain why she had quit, and she was consequently denied unemployment benefits. Wood sought out feminist activist Lin Farley and, in the context of a consciousness raising group, it transpired that many women had made experiences like hers. The group coined the term 'sexual harassment', and this expansion of the hermeneutical resources enabled, or at least made it much easier, for Wood and others to understand what had been done to them, to explain it to others, and to unite in the cause of fighting it (Fricker 2007, 149–150, quoted from Brownmiller 1990, 280–281).

On Fricker's reading, Wood and other women had suffered a hermeneutical injustice: due to 'a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource' (2007, 151) they were unable to fully understand and communicate their experiences before the concept 'sexual harassment' was created. Lacking this conceptual repertoire, they were unable to fully understand what they are going through and to communicatively share it with others (especially those who did not share their experiences). This also caused significant non-epistemic harm (e.g. when Wood failed to receive unemployment benefits). Importantly, for Fricker, the conceptual lacuna was not incidental but the result of hermeneutical marginalisation: it was because women had been excluded from sense-making professions 'such as journalism, politics, academia, and law' (2007, 152) that this type of wrong that women frequently suffered at the hands of men had not been conceptualised. Hermeneutical marginalisation prevents the experiences of members of marginalised groups from feeding adequately into the collective hermeneutical resources, so that these resources are insufficiently attuned to the characteristic experiences of disadvantaged groups.

On Fricker's account, thus, hermeneutical injustice occurs when there is a conceptual lacuna within the collective hermeneutical resources that was caused by the hermeneutical

marginalization of a social group and that prevents experiences of members of this group from being fully understood and communicated. As Trystan Goetze (2018, 78–80) clarified, the harm of hermeneutical injustice can manifest in the cognitive harm of being unable to fully understand one's experiences and/or the communicative harm of being unable to communicate these experiences to others.

Fricker's account has been variously expanded. One point of criticism has been Fricker's focus on collective hermeneutical resources. This seemingly equated the available hermeneutical resources with those developed and employed by dominant groups and thereby underscored that marginalised groups can develop an understanding of their experiences even where this is not recognised in dominant discourse (Dotson 2012, Mason 2011) and that communicative contexts are generally 'polyphonic' (Medina 2013). Given that hermeneutical resources can be differentially available in different communities, there exist different (and potentially changing) kinds of hermeneutical injustice depending on whether the subject themselves has access to the resources they need and whom they can communicate with about their experiences (Goetze 2018).<sup>1</sup> Another criticism concerns the centrality of hermeneutical marginalization for hermeneutical injustice. Komarine Romdenh-Romluc (2016), Rebecca Mason (2021), and Debra Jackson (2022) have shown that Fricker's account of the grounds of hermeneutical injustice is prone to counterexamples. As a more inclusive understanding, Mason (2021) suggests that hermeneutical injustice occurs whenever someone's inability to understand or communicate their experiences is unjust.

Further, while Fricker insists that in hermeneutical injustice 'there is always, definitively, a paucity of shared concepts' (2017, 170), other theorists have emphasized that hermeneutical injustice need not be due to conceptual lacunae. Most importantly for our purposes, Katharine Jenkins (2017) and Mason (2021) both argue that even where hermeneutical resources are available, they may be distorted in ways that make them seem unfitting to the experiences someone wants to understand. Rape myths, for example, distort

our understanding of rape such that some victims fail to understand their experiences of rape as such. Prevalent myths like ‘rape is perpetrated by strangers, not dates or partners’ prevent victims who were raped by their dates or partners from recognizing their experiences as cases of rape. The conceptual resources to recognise their wrong as rape may be present (and even part of the legal code) but the myth prevents some victims from employing them: if ‘rape’, in the collective understanding, triggers an inference to ‘stranger’, it does not fit the experiences of those who experience rape at the hands of dates or partners. In Mason’s terminology, a hermeneutical resource is distorted if a significant number of people are disposed to draw invalid inferences from it, and where this prevents those in need of the resource from applying it, it constitutes a hermeneutical injustice.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Charlie Crerar (2016) argued that taboos, i.e. contexts where a topic is not talked about and it is de facto impossible to raise it in communication, can cause cognitive and communicative harms comparable to a case where the hermeneutical resource was lacking entirely. This implies that, to avoid hermeneutical injustice, concepts must be in active use and agents must be able to discuss them and raise questions about them. Christine Bratu and Hilkje Haenel (2021) add that individuals can be unjustly prevented from employing concepts at their disposal if prejudiced background beliefs make it irrational for them to employ them. Finally, Arianne Falbo (2022) and Nicole Dular (2023) argue that an excessive presence of unhelpful or oppressive hermeneutical resources can cause hermeneutical injustice by making helpful resources less accessible.

These expansions of Fricker’s account show that conceptual lacunae are not necessary for hermeneutical injustices. Nonetheless, central cases of hermeneutical injustice are described as those where victims and/or their (potential) interlocutors lack or cannot successfully employ the hermeneutical resources needed to fully understand victims’ experiences: the hermeneutical resources do not provide the epistemic benefits victims need;

epistemically useful resources are de facto unavailable to marginalised subjects or those they have an interest in communicating with.

However, one of the cases Fricker used to introduce the very concept of hermeneutical injustice seems to fall outside this understanding, and attending to it will bring out how stigma can cause hermeneutical injustice characterised by a distinct kind of hermeneutical struggle.

### **The Non-Standard Case: *A Boy's Own Story***

Fricker's final example for introducing hermeneutical injustice is taken from Edmund White's autobiographical novel *A Boy's Own Story* (2016\1983), which recounts how the adolescent narrator struggles with his homosexuality when growing up in 1950s America. Fricker attends to the difficulty he encountered because 'the hermeneutical resources of the day burden his sexual experience with layers of falsifying meaning' (2007, 163) as he is confronted with constructions of homosexuality as a phase, sickness, or weakness of will and of the homosexual man as a vampire or 'queen'. This put him in the peculiar predicament of being fully aware of his homosexual desires but refusing to think of himself as homosexual:

I see now that what I wanted was to be loved by men and to love them back but not to be a homosexual. [...] It was men, not women, who struck me as foreign and desirable and I disguised myself as a child or a man or whatever was necessary in order to enter their hushed, hieratic company, my disguise so perfect I never stopped to question my identity. Nor did I want to study the face beneath my mask, lest it turn out to have the pursed lips, dead pallor and shaped eyebrows by which one can always recognize the Homosexual. What I required was a sleight of hand, an alibi or a convincing act of bad faith to persuade myself I was not that vampire. (White 2016\1983, 184–185)

Fricker describes this as a case where the narrator's experience of 'a simple love of men' was 'inarticulable' (2007, 165) because he has at his disposal only 'various powerful bogeymen constructions of The Homosexual' where '[n]one of them fits' (2007, 164). Fricker's view seems to be that this is a case of hermeneutical injustice because no conceptual resources are

available that capture the boy's experience of love rather than ascribing a substantially different experience to him (of a sickness, or a phase, a weakness of the will, or a vampire-like nature). This locates the injustice White's protagonist suffers in the absence of a concept that accurately describes his experience.

But the case sits uneasily with this interpretation because White's narrator does not, like Carmita Wood, find himself confused and unable to articulate his experiences due to a conceptual lacuna. The concept of homosexuality is available and, the narrator does recognise it as capturing something about his situation, though he nonetheless fails to apply it to himself. Despite the stigma inherent in the conceptual resources at his disposal, there were both epistemic and non-epistemic benefits to be had from accepting that he was homosexual. Epistemically, this would have ended his state of active denial and put an end to his search for alternative narratives: notably, White's narrator temporarily *hopes* for his homosexual desires to be just a phase (White 2016\1983, 128) or a sickness his psychoanalyst may cure (White 2016\1983, 185) to avoid the painful recognition that it is a persistent trait. The boy's denial of this fact caused a lack of understanding of himself and led him to reach for resources that clearly did not capture his experiences:

Perhaps I became so vague, so exhilarated with vagueness, precisely in order to forestall a recognition of the final term of the syllogism that begins: If one man loves another he is a homosexual; I love a man...

I'd heard that boys passed through a stage of homosexuality, that this stage was normal, nearly universal—then that must be what was happening to me. A stage. A prolonged stage. Soon enough this stage would revolve [...]. (White 2016\1983, 127–128)

Fricker uses this passage to argue that White's protagonist lacks the resources he craves to make sense of his love for another boy. However, the passage states that he embraces one set of resources – that it is a stage – over another – that it is a shameful trait. The latter, however, while carrying a false and burdening evaluation, was available and would have been epistemically more accurate.

It also harmed him non-epistemically: it caused anxiety and a desire to denounce rather than enjoy the homosexual activities he engages in, and led him to betray the one person with whom he had a stigma-free homosexual encounter.<sup>3</sup> While accepting that he was homosexual might have seemed shameful, it was possible and would plausibly have had epistemic as well as non-epistemic benefits.

So Fricker's analysis of the case faces the problem that there were hermeneutical resources available to White's protagonist that, while stigmatizing, would have captured something about his experience and come with epistemic and non-epistemic benefits. What is significant about the case is that he nonetheless refuses to employ these resources. Mason (2021) has acknowledged this problem for Fricker's account and suggests understanding the hermeneutical situation of White's protagonist as involving conceptual distortion rather than a conceptual lacuna. Much like victims of date rape may resist describing their experiences as 'rape' because of its inferential link to 'stranger', in White's social context 'homosexual' was distorted due to its inferential link to 'sickness' and 'deviance'. Therefore, while the concept 'homosexuality' was present, White's protagonist is prevented from applying it to his experiences because this would trigger false implications.

This analysis seems correct: White's protagonist struggles with the inferences seemingly implied by 'homosexual'. It is important to note, however, that the conceptual distortions of 'homosexual' are very different from those of 'date rape' and cause White's protagonist to experience a peculiar form of hermeneutical struggle. To see this, we must attend to just how conceptual distortions prevent the application of epistemically useful concepts. Mason is largely silent on this matter, but one way this happens can be found in Jenkins' discussion of rape myths and domestic abuse myths. Jenkins, convincingly, claims that 'acceptance of myths leads people to develop a working understanding of rape or of domestic abuse that encodes faulty assumptions, such that it excludes certain abusive situations by definition' (2017, 194). Thus, myths may distort concepts such that they seem

not to apply to some of their instances; to victims of date rape, the concept 'rape' may therefore simply appear not to be a factually adequate description of their experience since the inference to 'stranger' misdescribes their case. Thus, victims do not apply epistemically useful concepts because applying them to their experiences seems incorrect.

This, however, is not what happens in *A Boy's Own Story*. If it were, we'd have to ascribe to White's narrator reasoning of the following kind: 'Homosexuality is deviance. I am not deviant. So I cannot be homosexual.' But while this may be supported by some passages, the overall story is of the boy not as one who is so confident in his worth and non-deviance; rather, it is the story of a boy deeply afraid he may turn out to be deviant and worthless. He neither doubts that homosexuality may be an illness, nor is he convinced that he is not ill – indeed, he starts visiting a psychoanalyst in an attempt to cure himself of his homosexuality. Nor is he convinced he is not a vampire – he is afraid he might be! Plausibly, he resists a characterisation as homosexual not because he perceives it to be an incorrect description of his case, but because he is afraid it may be true. Homosexuality, including the highly stigmatizing distortions attached to it, was not so much something he did not seem to be, as something he very much did not want to be. Rather than experiencing the concept as unfitting, he (at least temporarily) avoided entertaining the possibility that it might be fitting, resorting to a 'sleight of hand, an alibi or a convincing act of bad faith'. He avoided identifying as homosexual not because this would have introduced 'layers of falsifying meaning' (Fricker 2007, 163) that seemed unfitting to his case, but because he perceived it as shameful.<sup>4</sup>

This, too, is the result of conceptual distortion, but what distinguishes this case from other cases of conceptual distortions is that the conceptual resources are not (only) such that it is impossible to describe his experience in a way that seems adequate, but that applying them is not possible without accepting stigma. Following Erving Goffman (1963), we understand stigma as 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance'. As Goffman (1963) explains, stigma arises in social contexts which may be more or less local.

An identity that is stigmatized in one place or time may not be stigmatized at all in another socio-historical context. Stigma also functions as a form of social control by ‘enlisting support for society among those who aren’t supported by it’ (Goffman 1963,138).

White’s narrator is refusing to accept a stigmatized identity, and he differs from other central cases of hermeneutical injustice precisely because his hermeneutical situation is characterised by this refusal. His situation is that of someone faced with hermeneutical resources that capture (part of) their experience but the stigma attached to the identity that these resources describe discourages him from employing them. It is the distinct experience of someone who *rejects* hermeneutical resources even though they (partly) fit their experience and employing them may have epistemic and non-epistemic benefits. White’s narrator is thus in a very different situation from both Carmita Wood and victims of date rape: Wood lacked conceptual resources to describe her experience and so struggled to understand them; victims of date rape may, in principle, have access to fitting resources but perceive them to be unfitting. White’s narrator, by contrast, actively shies away from resources that are at his disposal because of the shamefulness that comes with employing them: to him, the hermeneutical landscape is not confusing or unhelpful but positively fearful.

This causes him the same cognitive and communicative harm victims of other forms of hermeneutical injustice suffer (plus the cognitive effort it takes him remain in denial of his sexuality), but the cause of his hermeneutical predicament lies in the fact that the conceptual resources are attached to a stigmatized identity rather than unavailable or distorted such as to seem unfitting. Stigma can create a hermeneutical situation different from that caused by conceptual lacunae or non-stigmatizing distortions: epistemically and non-epistemically beneficial hermeneutical resources may be available, but actively rejected by those who need them. Both Fricker and Mason are aware that it is stigma that causes the narrator’s hermeneutical struggle.<sup>5</sup> But while they are right that the presence of a non-stigmatized way of understanding homosexual love would have mitigated the problem, they overlook how

stigma creates a specific kind of hermeneutical struggle. Fricker and Mason underemphasize how different the experience of someone at pains of avoiding applying stigmatizing resources to themselves is from that of someone who has no resources at their disposal to accurately capture their experience. White's narrator is able to understand his identity, resources that offer epistemic and non-epistemic benefits are available (even though they are clearly non-ideal), but he actively rejects an available understanding of his identity because the identity comes with stigma. Being uncomfortable using an epistemically helpful concept, for reasons that are unjust, must be acknowledged as a particular experience of hermeneutical injustice.

The hermeneutical struggle of White's narrator is characterized by his rejection of stigmatizing resources while employing them would have been epistemically and practically beneficial. His situation, at least to a significant degree, is that of being in denial. The cause of this, and what makes it unjust, is that epistemically useful descriptions of his sexuality are available but to accept these descriptions would mean accepting a stigmatized identity. In his case, the source of the problem lies in the stigma attached to homosexuality. In the next sections, we will show how the hermeneutical predicament of rejecting beneficial epistemic resources due to stigma we show how this kind of hermeneutical struggle occurs in a variety of contexts.<sup>6</sup>

### **Alcoholism, Stigma and Denial of Hermeneutical Resources**

The first such case we will consider, is that of alcohol addiction. Alcoholism and other drug addictions are highly stigmatized and those who suffer from such addictions are seen as blameworthy, weak-willed or even dangerous (Corrigan et. al. 2009; Hammarlund et. al. 2018; Romo and Obiol 2023). This stigma attached to alcoholism is a significant barrier to people seeking out medical assistance, as people are unwilling to accept the label 'alcoholic' (Hammarlund et. al. 2018; Hanschmidt et. al. 2017; Saunders et. al. 2006).<sup>7</sup> In her own memoir of alcoholism and recover, the writer Caroline Knapp provides a clear account of the

barriers that this stigma presents to those trying to manage their addiction. In the grip of her addiction she would be so drunk that she would ‘drive home with one eye shut, to avoid double vision’ (Knapp 1996, 54). Despite this, she was reluctant to seek help. Knapp describes going to an Alcoholics Anonymous after being advised by her therapist to stop drinking and finding that her own revulsion at those in the meeting prevented her seeing herself as an alcoholic:

I had an image of lots of young women like me—young professional women who’d be seated comfortably in a room and given literature to read by some kindly, maternal older woman [...] It looked nothing like I’d hoped: the room was cavernous and dingy, with rows of metal chairs; cigarette smoke swirled up from every other seat; old men sat and sipped coffee from white foam cups [...] I looked around at the dingy room with the old men sipping coffee from foam cups and I thought, *No way. No way in hell I’m doing this. This is not me. I do not belong here.* (Knapp 1996 90-191).

As Knapp explains, accepting that she was an alcoholic would mean not only accepting that she belonged in this room with these people but also ‘owning up to flaws and imperfections and depths of confusion I was too ashamed to reveal’ (1996, 83). This shame that she felt about her alcoholism was a response to the social stigma attached to it. Even when she had accepted her alcoholism and stopped drinking, Knapp continued to be very careful about which people she would discuss it with ‘for fear of being judged’ (1996, 244). While Knapp did not believe that alcoholism was a sign of weakness or a moral failing, she struggled to internalise this belief due to the deeply ingrained stigma attached to alcoholism.

As Knapp points out, this difficulty in accepting one’s addiction is a major problem, given that this acceptance is crucial for overcoming the addiction (1996, 213). Only once Knapp had accepted that she was an alcoholic was she able to gain access to the ways of thinking about herself that allowed her to stop drinking. This included the realization that she drank to avoid having to confront negative emotions, the challenges of adulthood and having to decide for herself who she wanted to be. Accepting her addiction was also necessary for

Knapp to seek out the support that she needed, particularly the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, without which she would be incapable of staying sober (1996, 231).

In this case, then, Knapp denied herself access to the hermeneutic resources that go with the label 'alcoholic' because of the stigma attached to this identity, which led her to refuse to accept that the label applied to her. As with the White case, the problem here is not that helpful hermeneutic resources did not exist, nor that Knapp lacked access to them. The label 'alcoholic' existed and once Knapp accepted that it applied to her, she could access the resources she needed to manage her addiction, including a supportive community of people struggling with the same problem. Within this community, being an alcoholic is not stigmatized but rather used to help members find ways to deal with their addictions and to manage their relationships with themselves, others and the world around them. For as long as she rejected the identity, though, Knapp deprived herself of both the epistemic benefits of coming to an accurate understanding of her relationship with alcohol and the significant practical benefits that arise from finding a way to manage her addiction.

### **Intimate Partner Violence**

A similar phenomenon occurs with those who face violence from a romantic partner.

Survivors of intimate partner violence often face significant societal stigma in which they are blamed, belittled or held responsible for the violence they have faced (Crowe et. al. 2021).

Those who face such violence often find themselves disbelieved by friends, family members, the police and healthcare professionals (Crowe and Murray 2015). The stigma leads survivors to conceal the fact that they have faced intimate partner violence from others (Murray et. al. 2015; Murray et. al. 2018; Overstreet and Quinn 2013). In a survey of survivors of intimate partner violence conducted by Christine Murray and colleagues, they found that many participants reported avoiding telling others about the violence they had faced, for fear of being stigmatized, with participants making statements such as the following:

‘I worry that people will think I’m a slut, that I’m passive, that I “asked for it.”’  
‘I was ashamed I felt like people would think I was stupid and weak if they knew.’  
‘I was afraid to tell people what was going on because I did not want people labeling me as weak or a bad girlfriend.’ (Murray et. al. 2018, 530).

Here, the identity of being a victim of intimate partner violence is stigmatized. This is in part due to the prevalence of rape myths which hold that people who suffer such violence are partially responsible for this violence and so suffer a loss of status as a result. Rather than suffer this loss of status, many participants in the study preferred to avoid letting others know that they have faced such violence.

More relevantly for our purposes, this stigma also acts as a barrier to people recognizing that they are the victims of domestic abuse (Murray et. al. 2018; Wuest and Merritt-Gray 2001). In the same survey from Murray et al, many self-identified survivors of intimate partner violence reported that they were initially reluctant to identify as such, due to their internalized stigma (Murray et. al. 2018, 530). In a systematic review of the literature of female survivors of Intimate Partner Violence and stigma, Federica Taccini and Stefania Mannarini (2023) found that survivors face significant public stigma which often leads to self-stigmatization. This stigma influences how people understood what had happened to them and led them (at least initially) to avoid categorizing what had happened to them as abuse.

Here, the stigma attached with being a victim of intimate partner violence prevents people from accessing less negative ways of understanding their situation. These survivors were eventually able to recognize themselves as survivors of abuse, as is clear from the fact that they identified themselves as such in the survey. The initial barriers to accessing this way of understanding their situation, due to stigmatizing distortions of the concept, come at an epistemic cost, as it prevents survivors from accessing the hermeneutic resources that would enable them to fully understand the nature of the violence that they have faced. It also comes at significant practical harm, as a proper understanding of this violence is often an important

pre-condition for leaving abusive relationships and seeking out support from friends, family, and social services. This is another case in which hermeneutic resources exist which would allow people to understand and name the situation they are facing, the relevant people are aware of these resources, and they are in some sense available to them, but they reject them due to the stigma that comes with accepting the relevant identity label.

The cases we have considered in the previous sections involved stigmatization that accompanies oppressed or marginalized identities such as being a homosexual or someone with an addiction to alcohol. This is also true for many who face intimate partner violence, where the stigma that is attached to being women who are a victim of such violence from a male partner fits into a wider system of patriarchy and sexist oppression. However, the stigma attached to identifying as a survivor of intimate partner violence also affects male survivors of intimate partner violence, many of whom are unwilling to accept that they have suffered domestic abuse (Cheung et. al. 2009; Corbally 2015) or feel intense shame or embarrassment because of it (Tsui et. al. 2010).<sup>8</sup> An important issue in these cases, particularly where the violent partner is female, is that it clashes with ideals of masculinity. In a questionnaire study of male victims of intimate partner violence (mostly from the UK), Julie Taylor and colleagues found that respondents commonly felt pressure to deny this abuse to themselves and others. The reason commonly given, in statements like the following, was that admitting this would make them feel like less of a man:

‘given societal expectations for my age demographic, I find it hard to admit that this happens to me as a man’ (Participant 112, 54 years).

‘It is very difficult to show others my failure as a male’ (Participant 147, 74 years)

‘We must man up and take all punishment. If we act or call for help, we are not a man’ (Participant 72, 46 years)

‘It felt terrible, but I just thought it was something wrong with me. Like I wasn’t good enough. I still haven’t told anyone all of what happened as it is embarrassing/shameful’ (Participant 3, 29 years) (Taylor et. al. 2022, 18427)

In these cases, stigma was a significant barrier to identifying as a victim of intimate partner violence. The stigma here was that such victims are weak and failures. This was particularly difficult for men to accept, given the pressure on men to be strong and successful. This difficulty was exacerbated when the perpetrator was a woman, as the stereotype of woman as weak makes their male victims appear even weaker.

### **Stigma and Hermeneutic Injustice**

We have considered three kinds of cases in which people suffer both epistemic and practical harms from denying themselves access to hermeneutic resources that would come from accepting that they possess a particular social identity. In these cases, the gap in the agent's understanding of themselves comes from neither a gap in the available hermeneutic resources nor a distortion that makes them appear unfitting but from stigma attached to the identity which those resources describe.<sup>9</sup>

We argued that these cases involve epistemic *harms*. This does not by itself, though, suffice to show that these are cases of epistemic *injustice*. As Fricker (2007) argues, not all epistemic harms arise from injustice, they might also arise from epistemic *bad luck*. For there to be a hermeneutic injustice, Fricker argues that a hermeneutic disadvantage must be not only harmful 'but also wrongful, whether because discriminatory or because otherwise unfair' (Fricker 2007 151). To show that the cases we have considered involve hermeneutic injustice, then, we need to explain why these hermeneutic harms are also unjust. Making this case is straightforward when it comes to our first two kinds of example. The stigma attached to homosexuality forms part of the discriminatory prejudice against homosexuality that is all too common in heteronormative societies. Similarly, the stigma attached to addiction is part of the wider discriminatory prejudice faced by those with mental health conditions in many societies.

The case is less straightforward in some of the cases of survivors of intimate partner violence. In the cases of male victims of this violence at the hands of female partners, the stigmatization attached to the identity does not result from a general epistemic marginalization.<sup>10</sup> As Debra Jackson (2022 292) has argued in relation to male victims of sexual violence from women, men are faced with harmful and prejudicial stereotypes as men that would undermine their credibility. Nevertheless, as Jackson goes on to argue, it is not simply bad luck that prevents male victims of sexual violence from being taken seriously:

These harms systematically target a portion of the male population – those who are victimised by sexual violence – in order to preserve the social dominance of men as a group. The fiction of male sexual invulnerability is, as I have argued, sustained by legal categories that conceptually resist the recognition of male sexual victimisation. In addition, this fiction is supported by a web of widely accepted beliefs which prevent the social recognition of male victimisation even in the face of testimonial evidence to the contrary. (Jackson 2022, 292)

Jackson claims that the existence of men who have faced sexual violence from women challenges several persistent rape myths:

[S]uch as ‘male rape does not happen’, ‘men cannot be forced to have sex against their will’, ‘male rape only happens in prisons’, ‘a woman cannot sexually assault a man’, ‘if a victim physically responds to an assault, he must have wanted it’, and ‘a man is expected to be able to defend himself against sexual assault’ (Jackson 2022, 293).

The prevalence of these myths is a barrier to these men being recognised as rape victims and having their testimony taken seriously and so constitutes a form of epistemic injustice.

While the cases of hermeneutic harm we have discussed is not the same kind of epistemic injustice as that discussed by Jackson, the same kind of reasoning can be applied to show why this is a case of epistemic injustice rather than epistemic bad luck. The possibility of male victims of violence from female intimate partners challenge several prevalent patriarchal myths about the relationship between men and women. For example, that men are

powerful and that women are weak, and that men are dominant and women subordinate. The stigma that is attached to being a male survivor of intimate partner violence discourages people from identifying as such and so is another instance in which a subgroup of men faces epistemic and practical harms which help to keep the general social dominance of men in place. This stigma discourages these men from accessing the hermeneutic resources that would be available to them if identified as survivors of intimate partner violence. The hermeneutic harms these men face, then, is not simply the result of epistemic bad luck but rather a form of epistemic injustice.

## **Conclusion**

We have outlined a novel form of hermeneutical injustice. Existing work on this topic has focused on the situation facing those in situations where the existing hermeneutical resources do not provide understandings that appear correct and are epistemically useful. We have drawn attention to cases where useful hermeneutical resources are available to those who can identify themselves as having a certain identity or having undergone a certain experience but where people are discouraged from accessing these resources due to the stigma attached to these identities and experiences. In these cases, the stigma leads people to reject the available hermeneutic resources and, thereby, reject the identities and experiences described by them. We began by re-examining the case of Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*. We argued that rather than understanding this as a case where adequate hermeneutical resources are unavailable, we should instead view it as a situation where such resources, to some degree, are available but where they are refused due to the stigma that is attached to them. The problem White's narrator faced was not that the concept of a homosexual did not exist, or that distortions made it appear unfitting, but that the stigma attached to homosexuality led him to reject this identity. We then presented two more cases in which stigma acts as a barrier to accessing hermeneutic resources. First, the stigma attached to being an addict is a barrier to

those experiencing addiction to accept that they have a problem. Second, the stigma attached to being a victim of intimate partner violence also makes it difficult for people to access the available hermeneutic resources, especially for male victims of female intimate partners. In these cases, people suffer both epistemic and practical harms as a result of denying themselves access to hermeneutic resources by rejecting a certain stigmatized identity. We finished by arguing that these epistemic harms deserve to be seen as a form of hermeneutic injustice, as this stigma is not simply the result of epistemic bad luck but are part of wider processes of discriminatory prejudice.

If what has been argued is correct and stigma causes individuals to reject epistemically useful descriptions of themselves and their experiences, attaching stigma to a socially significant kind of experience can potentially wrong those having the experience in yet another way: it can tightlace them. Tightlacing is a type of wrong that we have theorized in a recent paper (Edlich and Archer 2023). It consists of inducing in someone a mistaken conception of who they are so that they are manipulated into applying to themselves norms that do not fit who they are and that are, therefore, potentially overdemanding. If, for example, you induce in someone the view that they are capable of perfectly and costlessly managing away their emotional reactions, and they subsequently feel called upon to manage away any emotion that may potentially be disagreeable to others, they are tightlaced. This wrongs them by obscuring to them their own nature, including their needs and limitations, thus erasing their true identity, and by making them innocently complicit in a denial of their rights.

This also happens in the three examples we discussed. Take White's narrator: in rejecting a (self-)description as homosexual, he holds on to a conception of himself as someone whose healthy sexuality is directed towards women. Consequently, he feels called upon to act as someone for whom this is the case: to date girls, to treat homosexual urges as proper object of psychotherapeutic treatment, and, of course, to fit into a thoroughly

heteronormative environment.<sup>11</sup> If this is correct, stigmatizing certain experiences and identities not only threatens to commit or exacerbate hermeneutic injustice, it also has the potential to tightlace individuals and thereby make them complicit both in significant harms to their agency and the erasure of their identities from discourse.

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- <sup>1</sup> Relatedly, theorists have emphasised the role of dominantly situated subjects in hermeneutical injustice when they fail to take up hermeneutical resources developed in marginalised groups. In such 'willful hermeneutical ignorance' resistant resources are denied uptake in dominant discourse in epistemically culpable ways (Mason 2011, Pohlhaus Jr. 2012), thus upholding structures of hermeneutical injustice and culpable ignorance (such as 'white ignorance', Mills 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> Jenkins' strategy is slightly different and relies on Haslanger's (2012) distinction between manifest and operative concepts. Jenkins argued that rape myths cause victims and their potential interlocutors to adopt an operative concept of rape that excludes, e.g., date rape, while maintaining a manifest concept that may include it (Jenkins 2017, 195–196). Yap (2020) makes a similar argument in relation to sexual consent in 'power-over relationships'. For the purposes of our discussion, we will employ Mason's framework.
- <sup>3</sup> This was his teacher, Mr. Beattie, and it clearly qualifies as sexual abuse within a teacher-student relationship. As White narrates the episode, though, the protagonist held the initiative but, cruelly, turned Mr. Beattie in for drug sales on campus to effectively annihilate his partner right after their affair (White 2016\1983, 229–238). Setting the abusive nature of the incident aside, it shows how White's protagonist, due to his desire not to be homosexual, is unable to relate openly to other homosexual men.
- <sup>4</sup> This is not to say that a reaction to stigmatized descriptions more similar to what Jenkins describes is not a plausible one – only it is not that of White's narrator. Someone with a healthy sense of self-worth may engage in this kind of reasoning: they may reject the label 'homosexual' because it is associated with deviance and they perceive themselves as non-deviant. Unfortunately, stigma frequently undermines just the self-respect required for this type of response.
- <sup>5</sup> Fricker acknowledges that 'one version of the unnatural homosexual—as a vampire-like version of a man—leads our adolescent subject to fear the name, and to experience his own nascent identity as a homosexual as a terrifying prospect, something to be pre-empted at all costs and, in so far as it already exists, disguised' (2007, 165) and that he struggles against 'collectively endorsed

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meanings attaching to homosexuality that have the power not just to haunt him with bogeyman would-be selves but actually to constitute his social being' (2007, 166). Mason is explicit that White's protagonist 'finds himself unable to make sense of that experience because he is unwilling to apply that concept to himself given its pathological and heteronormative associations' (2021, 252).

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we have understood the impact of stigma as a form of conceptual distortion: there appears to be an inference from a concept like 'homosexual' to something that licences shaming responses, e.g. 'deviance'. Thus understood, the problem is a conceptual distortion licensing stigmatizing inferences. Our focus, however, is the hermeneutical struggle of someone rejecting available resources due to the stigma that comes with accepting the identity described by them, and it is at least conceivable that there may be stigma in the absence of conceptual distortions: members of a society may reliably show shaming responses towards persons with a particular identity without basing these on conceptual distortions, and someone may shy away from thinking of themselves as such a person without being misled into thinking it is shameful. In the cases we describe, however, the stigma indeed shows in distorted concepts.

We thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing us on this point.

<sup>7</sup> Hanschmidt et. al. (2017) note that this stigma presents a larger obstacle to treatment in some countries (e.g. France and Italy) than in others (e.g. Germany, Spain and the UK).

<sup>8</sup> Jackson (2022) discusses related issues in her analysis of the epistemic injustice faced by male victims of sexual violence. We consider this analysis in Section 6.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that there may be more options available to people in this kind of situation beyond simply identifying or rejecting a particular identity. See, for example, José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) work on disidentification.

<sup>10</sup> Though this will not be the case for all men, as Tommy Curry (2017) argues, the oppression faced by Black American men is a form of gender-based oppression.

<sup>11</sup> Note: to the degree that this is done instrumentally to keep his sexuality private, this is passing behaviour. To the degree that this is done because he perceives it as behaviour fitting who he is, it is the result of Tightlacing.