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*Salient Alternatives and Epistemic Injustice in Folk Epistemology*

**1: Introduction.** The notion of salience figures prominently in contemporary epistemology and some empirical evidence suggests a *salient alternatives effect* on folk epistemological ascriptions of knowledge: People are less inclined to ascribe knowledge that *p* to a subject when a possibility, *q*, that is incompatible with *p* is salient.

Sometimes epistemologists use the term ‘salience’ as synonymous with ‘salient alternatives.’ This is a mistake since salience is a *property of* alternatives and of other epistemically relevant phenomena. For example, practical factors such as stakes or urgency may be salient or non-salient in a given context. Likewise, it may be salient or non-salient that a subject has strong evidence, is in an inhospitable environment, has formed her belief on a lucky basis etc. The salience or lack thereof of such factors should be expected to affect folk judgments about knowledge, evidence, rationality etc. Thus, salience does not solely concern alternatives to someone’s knowledge. However, in the present paper I restrict the discussion to the salient alternative effect on knowledge ascriptions with the aim of highlighting how it may lead to epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007, 2017).

The paper builds on previous work in which I argue that the salient alternative effect on knowledge ascriptions is best understood as a cognitive bias (Gerken 2012, 2013, 2015, Gerken 2017a; Gerken and Beebe 2016; Gerken et al. forthcoming). I continue this approach by considering a number of questions for foundational epistemology that arise from further reflection on salience of alternatives and epistemic position. On this basis, I turn to more applied issues. First, I will consider work in social psychology to motivate the working-hypothesis that social stereotypes will make some alternatives more, and some less, salient. A related working-hypothesis is that social stereotypes may lead to both overestimation and underestimation of a subject’s epistemic position. If these working-hypotheses are true, the outcome may be a distinctive route to epistemic injustice.

**2: Salient alternatives in epistemology and folk epistemology.**

Epistemologists conceive of various error-possibilities as alternatives to possession of knowledge. In this section, I briskly present this idea via *relevant alternative* epistemology and the distinction between salient alternatives and epistemically relevant ones. I then turn to folk epistemology and consider some puzzling patterns of ascriptions of knowledge and sketch an epistemic focal bias account of them.

**2.1: Salient alternatives vs. relevant alternatives.** The idea of a salient alternative may be approached by way of relevant alternative theories of knowledge (Dretske 1970, 1971). An epistemically relevant alternative is a proposition, *q*, that is incompatible with S’s knowing that *p* unless has ruled out that *q* is true. The simplest example is one in which *q* (the tree is a beech) is incompatible with *p* (the tree is an elm). Since knowledge is factive, a knowledge ascription is falsified by every true proposition that is incompatible with its complement clause. For example, it is false that S knows the tree is an elm if it is true that the tree is a beech. However, an *epistemically relevant* alternative, *q*, is such that in order to know that *p*, S must rule out that *q* is true.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A crucial aspect of relevant alternatives theory is that not every alternative is epistemically relevant. Consider, for example, the alternative that the elm has been uprooted overnight and replaced with an indistinguishable but different tree-type, a schmelm, invented in a lab. Such an unlikely alternative is an epistemically *irrelevant* one which S does not need to rule out in order to know that the tree is an elm.

However, epistemically relevant alternatives may be salient. For example, they may be part of the description of the case to be evaluated, part of the conversational context or otherwise highlighted to someone evaluating whether S knows. The relationship between salient and epistemically relevant alternatives is debated among epistemologists. Some theorists think that the salience of an alternative renders it an epistemically relevant one. For example, Lewis sets forth the following *Rule of Attention*: “No matter how far-fetched a certain possibility may be, no matter how properly we might have ignored it in some other context, if in *this* context we are not in fact ignoring it but attending to it, then for us now it is a relevant alternative.” (Lewis 1996: 559).

If we take attending to *q* as equivalent to or entailing *q* being salient, salience willentail epistemic relevance. If we merely take it that salience will mostly make the speaker attend to *q*, salience will only mostly yield epistemic relevance. In either case, Lewis uses the *Rule of Attention* to motivate contextualism about ‘knows’ – the view that the content expressed by ‘knows’ varies with conversational context (see Blome-Tillmann 2014 for a critical discussion). So, the salience of an alternative in the conversational context can – via attention – result in a change in what is expressed by ‘S knows that *p*.’ For example, the fantastic alternative that the elm has been uprooted and replaced with a schmelm may, once it is salient in the conversational context, result in a change in the content of the utterance of ‘S knows that the tree is an elm.’ Specifically, it may result in a change in content such that the sentence is false.

In contrast, strict invariantists argue that ‘knows’ does not vary its truth-conditional content with conversational context.[[2]](#footnote-2) In consequence, many strict invariantists argue that salient alternatives and epistemically relevant alternatives may come apart. Here is how I put it (Gerken 2017a: 70):

***Salience-Relevance Distinction***

Not all salient alternatives are epistemically relevant ones.

Thus, even if the schmelm alternative is salient in the relevant conversational context, it is not thereby epistemically relevant. So, ‘S knows that the tree is an elm’ may remain true even if S can’t rule out the schmelm alternative that is salient to the evaluator (Dretske 1970, Gerken 2017).

Thus, the epistemological debate between contextualist and strict invariantists is partly a debate concerning the relationship between salience and epistemic relevance. Contextualists take their view to be supported by patterns of intuitive judgments about knowledge that appear to be sensitive to the salience of alternatives. Such a pattern is called a *salient alternative effect*. There is now a good deal of empirical work supporting the existence of salient alternative effects in lay ascriptions of knowledge (Knobe and Schaffer 2012; Nagel et al. 2013; Alexander et al. 2014; Buckwalter 2014; Buckwalter and Schaffer 2015; Turri 2015; Waterman et al.in print; Gerken et al. forthcoming.)

According to strict invariantists the salient alternative patterns of knowledge ascriptions are misleading because they only reflect something pragmatic or because they reflect a psychological bias. This view will be *assumed* in the present paper. More specifically, I assume, for the purpose of the present investigation, a psychological account of salient alternative effects – the epistemic focal bias account. I have argued for this account elsewhere and now I want to explore its ramifications for epistemic injustice (Gerken 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017a; Gerken and Bebee 2016; Gerken et al. forthcoming. For criticism, see Stoutenburg 2017; Langford forthcoming).

**2.2: Epistemic Focal Bias and the *Principle of Contextual Salience*.** According to the epistemic focal bias account of salient alternative effects, it is a mistake to move uncritically from salience to epistemic relevance. While doing so may be a reasonable cognitive heuristic insofar as salient alternatives are typically epistemically irrelevant, it leads to systematically misleading – that is, biased – judgments (Gerken 2017a). When an epistemically irrelevant alternative is salient, we tend to mistakenly process it as an epistemically relevant one. The epistemic focal bias account explains this via two principles that are descriptive of our folk epistemological processes:

***Principle of Contextual Salience***

Normally, for an agent, A, *q* is a contextually salient alternative to S’s knowledge that *p* iff A processes *q* as an epistemically relevant alternative to S’s knowledge that *p*.

***Principle of Epistemic Satisficing***

Normally, an agent, A, forms epistemic judgments on the basis of a prima facie reason that is arrived at by processing only a limited part of the evidence that is available to A.

In conjunction, the two principles predict biased judgments in cases that feature a mismatch between psychologically salient and epistemically relevant alternatives. For example, if a salient alternative is *not* epistemically relevant is salient, *Principle of Contextual Salience* has it that it will be mistakenly processed as an epistemically relevant alternative. According to *Principle of Epistemic Satisficing* the verdict will normally be made on this basis without reflecting on whether the alternative is really epistemically relevant. So, the account in *On Folk Epistemology* highlights how some of the judgments that constitute the salient alternative effect amount to *false negative* judgments due to their being governed by the two principles (Gerken 2017, Ch. 10). That is, someone why *does* know may mistakenly be judged to *not* know when an epistemically irrelevant alternative is salient.

I will not repeat the details here although it will be important to note that according to the focal bias account of salient alternative effects, we may misjudge in different ways. In *Relevance Cases*, such as the one sketched above,the mistake consists in misjudging that a salient alternative (e.g., the schmelm one) is epistemically relevant and consequently we mistakenly regard S as not knowing that that the tree is an elm. In *Rebuttal Cases*, the mistake consists in failing to recognize that S has in fact ruled out the alternative and, again, the consequence is that we mistakenly regard S as a non-knower. (For more on the distinction between *Relevance* and *Rebuttal* cases, see Gerken 2017a: 70-74 and Ch. 10.2).

The *Principle of Contextual Salience* can be developed by specifying the factors that determine whether a proposition is salient to the relevant agent. Indeed, it will increase the principle’s predictive power to add specific claims about when an alternative is salient. For example, if a factor, X, is argued to be a determiner of salience, it will *ceteris paribus* be the case that when X obtains in the context of a knowledge judgment, the *Principle of Contextual Salience* will be operative and affect the judgment. Yet more specifically, if X is argued to be unrelated to the *epistemic* relevance of the alternative, we have a more concrete and, hence, more testable prediction about when a type of biased folk epistemological judgment obtains. As I will argue, this is important for diagnosing cases of epistemic injustice. So, I will conclude the section with a brief reflection on the determiners of whether an alternative salient.

**2.3: The determiners of salience.** What are the features that determine whether an alternative is salient in a context of epistemic assessment? This is a complicated question but an important one to understand the relationship between salient alternative effects, folk epistemology and epistemic injustice. On this occasion I focus on one kind of determiners – namely, social ones. But this focus should be initiated with recognition of more commonly discussed determiners of salient alternatives – namely, conversational and psychological ones.

Conversational determiners of salience may include simply what is explicitly mentioned as a defeater of knowledge in a conversational context as well as subtler linguistic features of conversational context. For example, evidence suggests that semantic, syntactic and further contextual features may bear on sentence processing by rendering various aspects of a given sentence more or less salient (Sanford and Sturt 2002; Sturt et al. 2004; I discuss in Gerken 2017a, Ch. 8).

I conjecture that psychological determiners of whether an alternative is salient include factors such as familiarity and surprise. Likewise, research on priming and framing effects would suggest that these are important psychological determiners of salience. Often it makes more sense to classify a determiner of salience as psycho-linguistic than to try to keep linguistic and psychological determiners apart. For example, priming may be semantic, and framing may be syntactic.

Psycholinguistic determiners of what makes an alternative salient should be explored further. But here I will consider the idea that social factors and social cognition may determine the salience of alternatives in judgments about knowledge. Such determiners of salience are highly relevant to understanding the interplay between folk epistemology and epistemic injustice. For example, I will argue that judgments about knowledge may be influenced by social stereotypes’ effect on the salience of alternatives. Likewise, whether someone is regarded as having ruled out a salient alternative may be affected by social stereotypes, social scripts and heuristics (for more on these notions, see Section 3).

If these factors bear on epistemic assessment, the assessed subjects may suffer epistemic injustices. Or so I will argue. My argument comes in two moves. In the next section, I consider some of the relevant social stereotypes and categories in relation to our general ability to *mindread* – i.e., to make judgments about other peoples’ mental and epistemic states. In the section thereafter, I consider epistemic injustice and how it may arise from misjudgments arising from social stereotypes.

**3: Salience and social stereotypes.**

In order to navigate the social world that we inhabit, we need to categorize it. However, we are cognitively capacity-limited and must make judgments about social groups and types on the fly. Since we cannot consider all the available information when we need to make a judgment, we rely on modes of social categorization that are cognitively cost-effective. Consequently, we rely on cost-effective but systematically fallible heuristics and imperfect social stereotypes in making judgments about our social reality (Hassin et al. 2005; Bargh 2007; Uleman et al. 2008, Ames et al. 2012; Spaulding 2018). Ascriptions of knowledge play an important role in our navigation of social life (Gerken 2017a). So, it is natural to suppose that they are interwoven with social stereotypes.

**3.1. Social stereotypes, heuristics, scripts and categories.** Social properties such as gender, race and age are among the most salient ones in our social cognition. For example, we are extraordinarily fast in categorizing individuals according to such properties (Ito et al. 2004; Kubota and Ito 2007). However, evidence suggests that social categorization in terms of gender, race and age is interwoven with our ascription of personality traits. Importantly, for the present purpose, these traits include cognitive ones such as competence or trustworthiness (Porter et al. 2009; Rule et al. 2013; Todorow et al. 2015). It is debated whether such social attributions from faces is generally reliable. Some studies indicate accurate attribution of social categories such as sexual orientation from face perception (Rule et al. 2009). However, a recent literature review suggests that the accuracy has been overstated and that attribution of social categories is highly inaccurate and determined by a host of contextual factors (Todorow et al. 2015). So, even if some of the social judgments we form on the fly have some degree of reliability, it must be highlighted that they are highly and systematically fallible.

Examples of such fallibility include cases in which the individual is judged to be in the evaluator’s *in-group* or *out-group*. We are generally more inclined to trust and cooperate with in-group than out-group members (see Balliet et al. 2014 for a meta-analysis). We are particularly prone to rely on crude stereotypes in our assessment of out-group individuals whereas we are more inclined to extrapolate our own perspective to members of in-groups (Ames 2004; Robbins and Krueger 2005; Ames et al. 2012). Neuroimaging studies have indicated that neural responses associated with empathy for pain are significantly stronger when the observed pain is in racial in-group members than in racial out-group members (Xu et al. 2009). Furthermore, some evidence suggests that we tend to attribute achievements (including cognitive ones) of out-group individuals to circumstantial and environmental facts beyond the individual’s control whereas we tend to attribute (cognitive) achievements of in-group members to personality traits (Brewer and Brown 1998; Brewer 2001). All of these cognitive strategies serve important social functions. For example, they may help to ensure that one remains included in one’s in-group. Moreover, these cognitive strategies may be effective heuristics that allow us to make rapid social judgments and decisions. However, from the standpoint of accuracy, they are biased in various ways. In particular, the in-group/out-group dynamics may lead to overestimation of members of one’s in-group and underestimation of members of one’s out-group (Brewer 2001; Spaulding 2018).

Evidence for social stereotypes comes from a large body of work. For example, gender stereotypes are indicated by effect of gender in participants’ judgments about negotiators in strategic interactions (for a survey, see Kray and Thompson 2005). Similarly, studies on an ambiguity task provide evidence that racial stereotypes impact interpretations of whether an item is a weapon or a tool (Payne 2001). Evidence also suggests that more general social properties such as power affect social cognition. For example, power (as measured by asymmetric dependence) has been found to have an effect on social distance which affects the cognitive mode of mental state inference – roughly by reducing projection of one’s own mental states to high-power individuals (Magee and Smith 2013). Power may also affect overtly cognitive categories insofar as evidence suggests that power holders were found to have increased subjective certainty in their judgments (See et al 2011; Magee and Smith 2013). Moreover, high power individuals appear to rely on stereotypes on the condition that they are *available* (Chen et al. 2004). This is interesting for the present purpose given that availability is likely determined by contextual salience of the stereotype (see Taylor and Fiske 1979 and ensuing work).

The mentioned effects of social stereotypes and categories on social cognition are mere examples in the vast and complex area of social cognition research. Specific sources of evidence, such as the Implicit Association Test, have been challenged (Greenwald et al. 2009; Brownstein et al. 2017; Lai et al. 2017). Moreover, general methodological worries, such as replication failures, have been raised. These concerns are legitimate and call for caution. Nevertheless, converging evidence provides reason to assume that social stereotypes may bear on epistemic assessment. On the basis of this broad assumption, rather than specific instances of it, I will set forth some fairly generic descriptive principles of folk socio-epistemological judgments.

**3.2. Some principles of folk socio-epistemology:** I have only scratched the surface of the empirical work on stereotypes in social cognition and folk epistemology. However, even the selective survey provides reason to think that many folk epistemological assessments are impacted by social stereotypes and heuristics we use in navigating social life. This broad idea is widely recognized. For example, Spaulding concludes that “Simply in virtue of being part of a particular social category we may upgrade or downgrade a person’s knowledge or competence” (Spaulding 2016: 436). In *On Folk Epistemology*, I articulated a similar idea in terms of the following principle (Gerken 2017a: 104):

***Principle of Epistemic Stereotyping***

Normally, A judges that S knows that p (and otherwise that S does not know that p)

iff A represents S as possessing a p-relevant knowledge-stereotypical property and no stereotypically knowledge-defeating circumstances are salient to A.

As in the case of the previous folk epistemological principles, epistemic judgments governed by the *Principle of Epistemic Stereotyping* leads to systematically fallible judgments since the stereotypes may be inaccurate. Two corollary *non*-entailmentprinciples explicate this assumption (Gerken 2017a: 104-105):

***Stereotype Non-entailment I***

S is a stereotypical knower that *p* ↛ S knows that *p.*

***Stereotype Non-entailment II***

S knows that *p* ↛ S is a stereotypical knower that *p.*

The *Principle of Epistemic Stereotyping* and its two corollaries predict mistaken knowledge ascriptions. However, the more specific mechanisms by which someone is downgraded or upgraded as an epistemic agent remain to be explored. To begin such an exploration, I will set forth two pairs of more specific hypotheses concerning how social stereotypes may explain biases in knowledge ascriptions. These more specific hypotheses will help to integrate epistemological work on salience with empirical work on social stereotypes, categories, scripts and heuristics.

A broad lesson from the literature on social cognition is that important psychological mechanisms for epistemic assessment of others include scripts and heuristics that are integrated into mindreading and other forms of social cognition. For example, we may overestimate someone’s epistemic position if she is categorized as a member of our in-group or as belonging to a social category associated with epistemic competence. Conversely, we may underestimate someone’s epistemic position if she is categorized as a member of an out-group or as member of a social group associated with epistemic incompetence.

Given the variation in underpinnings of such socio-epistemic cognition, it will be instrumental to the following discussion to articulate these assumptions as a pair of principles. Here they are:

***Epistemic Overestimation***

*Both accurate and inaccurate social stereotypes may lead evaluators to overestimate a subject’s epistemic position.*

***Epistemic Underestimation***

*Both accurate and inaccurate social stereotypes may lead evaluators to underestimate a subject’s epistemic position.*

*Epistemic Overestimation* and *Epistemic Underestimation* concern the assessment of agents’ epistemic position based on the salience of social properties such as race, gender and age. However, it is plausible that social stereotypes may also bear on the salience of alternatives in the sense operative in relevant alternative epistemology. The surveyed empirical work on social cognition suggests that some alternatives will be more closely associated with some social groups than with others. Likewise, some social scripts that are only activated in some social contexts may involve alternatives that would otherwise be non-salient. I will, once again, articulate this hypothesis as a pair of general principles.

***Amplification of Salience***

*Both accurate and inaccurate social stereotypes may amplify, or even generate, the salience of some alternatives.*

***Diminishment of Salience***

*Both accurate and inaccurate social stereotypes may diminish, or even eliminate, the salience of some alternatives.*

The quartet of principles is *not* normative but rather empirically informed descriptive hypotheses about our folk epistemological judgments and presuppositions. While the principles are fairly generic, they are more specific than the overarching *Principle of Epistemic Stereotyping*. Hence, they have a good deal of predictive power. First, they predict that intuitive judgments about individuals’ epistemic position will align with how the individual is socially categorized. Second, the principles predict that our intuitive and quasi-intuitive judgments about epistemic position may come apart from our more reflective judgments. Finally, given that the principles have it that also *inaccurate* social stereotypes may affect epistemic assessments, they predict systematically inaccurate – that is *biased* – judgments about individuals’ epistemic position. Of course, even more specific predictions will require even more specific assumptions about the relevant stereotypes and cognitive mechanisms. But the present quartet of principles may be put to use in a more general explanation of why socio-epistemic cognition may lead to epistemic injustice.

However, before we are in a position to examine the relation between these folk epistemological considerations and epistemic injustice, a brief characterization of the latter is in order

**4: Salience and epistemic injustice.**

I begin my discussion of how epistemic injustice may be generated by the combination of the salient alternative effects on knowledge ascriptions and our reliance on social stereotypes with a brief discussion of epistemic injustice.

**4.1. Epistemic Injustice.** In her 2007 book on epistemic injustice, Fricker characterizes the phenomenon as “a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (Fricker 2007: 1). One species of it – *distributive* epistemic injustice – is a consequence of “the unfair distribution of epistemic goods such as education or information” (Fricker 2013: 1318). However, the species of epistemic injustice that I will consider here is *discriminatory* epistemic injustice which is paradigmatically explained by *identity prejudices* that pertain to gender, class, race or social power.

Since Fricker’s initial work, the characterization of epistemic injustice has been broadened to consider epistemic agency generally. Indeed, Fricker herself has now substituted the knowledge-centric formulation to a broader one (Fricker 2013: 1320, 2017).[[3]](#footnote-3) While knowledge is central to epistemology and folk epistemology, it is not the only epistemic phenomenon that one may be wronged with regard to.[[4]](#footnote-4) Discriminative epistemic injustice sometimes concerns the comparison between degrees of epistemic competence, trustworthiness or reliability and it is implausible that all of these phenomena can be reductively analyzed in terms of knowledge (Gerken 2017b). So, here is my favorite generic characterization of discriminatory epistemic injustice (‘DEI’ for short (via Gerken 2019)):

***Generic DEI***

S suffers a discriminatory epistemic injustice if (and only if) S is wronged specifically in her capacity as an epistemic subject.

This is not the place to pursue a taxonomy of the kinds of “epistemic wronging” that may constitute discriminatory epistemic injustice. The main assumption that I will rely on is that social stereotypes, scripts, categories and heuristics may constitute epistemic wronging and, thereby, discriminatory epistemic injustice. Varieties may be more or less direct. I will assume that the wronging is *direct* if it pertains to the epistemic evaluation or treatment of S herself or himself. Hence, I will work with the following sufficient condition for direct discriminatory epistemic injustice (following Gerken 2019).

***Direct DEI***

If S is systematically and distinctively judged or treated as being in a weaker epistemic position than S is in fact in and paradigmatic unjust features explain this, then S is wronged specifically in her capacity as an epistemic subject.

The second conjunct of the antecedent of *Direct DEI* ensures that it is paradigmatic unjust features such as prejudice, bias and stereotyping that explain the epistemic misjudgment or mistreatment of S. The directness of this type of wronging lies in the fact that it is the *subject* that is misjudged or mistreated. Note, however, that *Direct DEI* is only a sufficient condition for epistemic injustice. So, although it captures a central case of direct discriminatory epistemic injustice, there are arguably several other varieties it. Moreover, discriminatory epistemic injustice may also occur indirectly. For example, someone else, S\*, may be systematically and distinctively judged or treated as being in a *stronger* epistemic position than S\* is in fact in. (Cf. the discussion of credibility excess in Fricker 2007: 17ff). However, it may be paradigmatic unjust features that explain this as phenomena such as white male privilege exemplify (McIntosh 2007). S\* and an accurately assessed epistemic subject, S, may be competitors in what Fricker calls ‘the credibility economy’ (Fricker 2007, Ch. 2).

So, in some cases, I think it is reasonable to say that S suffers an indirect epistemic injustice in virtue of the fact that S\* is epistemically favored due to paradigmatically unjust factors such as white male privilege.[[5]](#footnote-5) This idea of indirect discriminatory epistemic injustice calls for further discussion than space permits. For example, it is unclear what to say about cases where S\* is unaware of the epistemic advantage he enjoys. My initial sense is that it does not matter much. S can still suffer a discriminatory epistemic injustice even though S\* is not culpable for it. However, such cases merit discussion. Likewise, the notion that S\* and S are competitors in the knowledge economy calls for further specification. Despite such complications, I hope that the basic provisional idea of indirect epistemic injustice is sufficiently clear to relate to the cases I will discuss.

A fuller account of the varieties of epistemic injustice requires an account of the harm it involves. Since providing such an account is an immense task, I will only make some modest assumptions. In the examples of epistemic injustice that I will focus on, the epistemic injustice has negative consequences for the wronged individual. For example, there are often tangible negative consequences of not being taken seriously as a testifier, and these are part of the harm of testimonial injustice. However, I do not think that such consequences exhaust the distinctive harm of epistemic injustice. Humans are social creatures and an important part of our social life is epistemic. It is valuable to tell and be told. It is valuable to trust and be trusted. It is valuable to question, inquire and justify. This is not merely because of what we can achieve by these acts. Rather, epistemic agency is a valuable part of human nature in its own right. So, constraining or devaluing someone’s epistemic agency is a distinctive harm associated with epistemic injustice. It is well beyond this essay to defend this assumption or to provide a deeper explanation for it (but see Fricker 2007; Maitra 2010). But I note this dimension of epistemic injustice to indicate that practical consequences are only one dimension of the overall harm in wronging someone in their capacity as an epistemic subject.

Let’s sum up: I will mainly be concerned with *discriminative* epistemic injustice and, like Fricker herself, I reject the knowledge-centric conception of epistemic injustice in favor of the more inclusive formulation, *Generic DEI*. However, to avoid begging any questions against reductive knowledge-first theorists, I will focus the discussion on cases in which someone is unjustly treated as a non-knower although she or he is in fact a knower. Finally, I will consider both cases of direct and indirect epistemic injustice. Given these remarks about epistemic injustice, I will turn to how each member of the new quartet of principles may lead to discriminatory epistemic injustice.

**4.2: How *Amplification of Salience* may lead to epistemic injustice.** Assume that Tyra has calculated that her and her partner can afford to rent an apartment on just one of their salaries and concluded that they can afford to rent an apartment. However, Tyra and her partner belong to a particular social group, X, which is stereotyped as unreliable. This stereotype may render the remote possibility that they simultaneously lose their jobs a salient alternative. Assume that this alternative is epistemically irrelevant since both S and her partner are reliable employees in fields where there is strong evidence of job security in the foreseeable future. So, we have a *Relevance Case* on our hands: Tyra knows that *p* even though she properly ignored an epistemically irrelevant alternative, *q*.

However, due to a social stereotype, the epistemically irrelevant alternative (simultaneous job loss) is rendered contextually salient to someone evaluating whether Tyra really knows that they will have the means to pay rent. So, according to the *Principle of Contextual Salience*, it is processed as epistemically relevant. By the *Principle of Satisficing*, a knowledge-judgment is then made on the basis of the presumption that Tyra has not ruled out an epistemically relevant alternative. So, Tyra is mistakenly judged as not knowing that they can afford to rent the apartment.

Such a situation often exemplifies discriminatory epistemic injustice although it does not invariably do so. Perhaps it would be an alleviating circumstance if the social stereotype were accurate of members of Tyra’s group and Tyra and her partner were exceptions to it (Gendler 2011). But it is highly controversial that this would alleviate the epistemic injustice. For example, Puddifoot has argued on empirical grounds that the epistemically best judgment does not come apart from the ethically best one (Puddifoot 2017). Moreover, it may be argued that even if the members of the group that Tyra belongs were in general unreliable, Tyra still deserves to be judged on her own merits. So, I am inclined to think that even if it is an accurate social stereotype that renders the epistemically irrelevant alternative salient, discriminatory epistemic injustice may still occur.

However, a more clear-cut case of a *Relevance Case* that generates discriminatory epistemic injustice is one in which an inaccurate social stereotype renders an epistemically irrelevant alternative salient. In such cases, someone belonging to the social group in question is mistakenly regarded as a non-knower and this may be epistemically unjust. After all, unjust social prejudices encoded in social stereotypes and social scripts explain why Tyra is mistakenly deemed a non-knower. Thus, Tyra is mistakenly deemed a non-knower in a systematically and distinct manner that is due to paradigmatically unjust features. So, by *Direct DEI*, Tyra suffers a discriminatory epistemic injustice. An important aspect of her agency – namely, her epistemic agency – is violated. Moreover, being regarded as not knowing that one can afford to rent the apartment may have severe consequences – for example if the landlord concludes that Tyra might have the cash now but not later.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moreover,

Perhaps, inaccurate social stereotypes may amplify the salience of an epistemically irrelevant alternative without leading to discriminatory epistemic injustice. For example, the evaluator may have strong misleading evidence that the stereotype is accurate, or the evaluator may be excused from relying on the inaccurate social stereotype. However, S may still suffer a discriminatory epistemic injustice even if the evaluator should not be blamed for making it. Moreover, it is important to be cautious in exculpating the evaluator. He might be *culpably ignorant* of the inaccuracy of the social stereotype that he relies on. Moreover, the very reliance on stereotypes in assessing individuals may be problematic.

**4.3. How *Diminishment of Salience* may lead to epistemic injustice.** When social stereotypes lead to diminishing or eliminating the salience of epistemically relevant alternatives, the consequence may be that someone who does not in fact know may be regarded as a knower. Assume for example, that a white male, Christian, is interviewing with a landlord in order to rent an apartment. Our protagonist confidently asserts: “I’ll get my Ph.D. in philosophy this spring. So, I know that I will be able to pay the rent for years to come.” In fact, it is a highly relevant epistemic alternative that Christian will not get a job and, hence, be unable to pay rent in the years to come. It may be far more likely that Christian will have to move home to his parents awaiting referee number two’s rejection of his journal submission. Nevertheless, the landlord may be so impressed by the combination of male, white confidence and the pedigree of a PhD that the epistemically relevant alternative does not occur to her. Thus, social stereotypes may render an epistemically relevant alternative non-salient. So, by *The Principle of Contextual Salience*, the epistemically relevant alternative is not processed as such and the Christian may be deemed a knower of something that he does not in fact know. Note that this case exemplifies how *Principle of Epistemic Stereotyping* (and its corollary *Stereotype Non-entailment I*) is integrated with epistemic focal bias: The social stereotypes explain the lack of salience of a relevant alternative whereas the focal bias account explains why the consequence is a mistaken judgment about knowledge.

In some cases, Christian’s competitors may suffer an *indirect* discriminative epistemic injustice, if Christian enjoys a competitive advantage due to a judgment explained by paradigmatic unjust features. Christian who is mistakenly regarded as a knower may have an unfair advantage in the competition for fairly abstract goods such as trust and attention as well as fairly concrete ones such as jobs and apartments. More concretely, another wanna-be tenant who does in fact know that she can pay the rent might not get the apartment.

**4.4: How *Epistemic Underestimation* may lead to epistemic injustice.** Underestimation of an individual’s epistemic position may occur when he is represented as belonging to a social stereotype that is associated with ineptness at some cognitive task. Assume that Hilary is represented as belonging to stereotype X and that members of X are presupposed to be inept in matters botanical.[[7]](#footnote-7) When the fact that Hilary belongs to X and Xers’ botanical ineptness is salient, the result may well be that he is represented as botanically inept simply due to the fact that he is represented as belonging to X.

Assume that Hilary sees a beech and the alternative that the tree might be an elm is rendered salient. Assume moreover that this is a *Rebuttal Case* – i.e., one in which Hilary has successfully ruled out that the tree is an elm. However, due to the stereotyping, Hilary is mistakenly judged to be unable to rule out that the tree is an elm. So, by *The Principle of Contextual Salience* and *The Principle of Satisficing*, Hilary is mistakenly deemed a non-knower.

According to *Direct DEI*, this situation will be epistemically unjust insofar as Hilary’s systematically and distinctively judged as being in a weaker epistemic position than she is in fact in and paradigmatic unjust features explain this. This will be so in some but not all cases in which her epistemic position is underestimated. For example, one brand of *Rebuttal Case* is one in which the subject’s evidence is not salient to the evaluator because it is not even available. So, the resulting misrepresentations of the subject’s epistemic position may be unfortunate without being epistemically unjust. Cases in which the subject is regarded as in a poor epistemic position due to belonging to an accurate stereotype are more debatable (Gendler 2011; Puddifoot 2017). But I have sympathy for the view that at least some such cases represent discriminatory epistemic injustice. For example, it strikes me as unjust to treat an individual as sharing negative traits of a group that she belongs to solely on the basis of belonging to the group.

However, for the present purpose, I will highlight more clear-cut cases of epistemic injustice. Those are cases in which Hilary’s epistemic position is underestimated due to his being represented as belonging to a social group which is inaccurately stereotyped as epistemically deficient. Such cases typically exemplify discriminatory epistemic injustice. This is most clear when the evaluator actively disregards, or is culpably ignorant of, evidence that the stereotype is inaccurate. However, even if the evaluator is excused from or even reasonable in relying on the inaccurate stereotype, *the subject* might still suffer a discriminatory epistemic injustice. Generally, epistemic injustice may not be explained by specific individuals as much as by unjust social structures.

**4.5. How *Epistemic Overestimation* may lead to epistemic injustice.** As in the case of *Diminishment of Salience*, the principle *Epistemic Overestimation* may lead to occasions of discriminatory epistemic injustice when the consequence is that a subject, Matthew, who does not in fact know something may be mistakenly regarded as a knower. Hence, Matthew will have an unfair competitive advantage in the credibility economy (Fricker 2007). Matthew’s competitors may suffer an indirect discriminatory epistemic injustice even if they themselves are epistemically assessed in an accurate manner.

More specifically, *Epistemic Overestimation* leads to discriminatory epistemic injustice in cases where Matthew’s epistemic position is overestimated because he belongs to a certain social category that is associated with epistemic competence or to the evaluator’s in-group. The upshot of such overestimation may be that Matthew is mistakenly regarded as having ruled out an epistemically relevant alternative that he has, in fact, not ruled out. So, even if this epistemically relevant alternative is salient, the evaluator will have a reason to regard Matthew as knowing that *p*. According to *The Principle of Satisficing* a judgment that Matthew knows that *p* will be made on this basis. Typically, an evaluator will rely on the relevant stereotype in a non-reflective and, hence, uncritical manner. However, being inaccurately represented as a knower gives Matthew a significant competitive advantage over his competitors. Insofar as this advantage is explained by systematical and distinctive due paradigmatic unjust features, Matthew’s competitors may suffer an *indirect* discriminative epistemic injustice. This is so even if Matthew is faultless with regard to the competitive advantage he enjoys. Central instances of this phenomenon involve phenomena such as male privilege and white privilege.

**4.6. In-group and out-group scripts and epistemic injustice.** In the previous four sections, I have focused on social stereotypes. In this section, I will briefly consider how in-group/out-group psychology may interact with folk epistemology in a manner that results in discriminatory epistemic injustice. There may be important interaction of in-group/out-group cognition and diminishment and amplification of salient alternatives. But here I will focus on how these aspects of social psychology interact with *Epistemic Underestimation* and *Epistemic Overestimation* and epistemic focal bias to produce discriminatory epistemic injustice.

Compared to in-group members, we are more inclined to regard the cognitive success (true belief) of an out-group member as explained by circumstantial factors. So, alternatives that are salient in the description of an out-group member who holds a true belief may be more likely to negatively impact our epistemic assessment of her than when alternative is salient in the description of an in-group member holding a true belief. In particular, is may be more likely that the out-group member’s true belief is explained in terms of epistemic luck. Similarly, a salient alternative may be more likely to be regarded as epistemically relevant when environmental factors are judged to be more important that individual competencies. So, according to the epistemic focal bias account of relevant alternative effects, out-group members may be deemed non-knowers in cases where in-group members are judged to know. Many such cases will, in accordance with *Direct DEI*, amount to discriminatory epistemic injustice since the relevant judgments often manifest a systematically and distinct pattern that is explained by paradigmatically unjust features of our social cognition. As above, there are complex questions about whether blame should be ascribed to the misjudging evaluator of out-group members. But even in cases where no blame is ascribable to the specific evaluator, the subject may suffer a discriminatory epistemic injustice.

The flipside of the in-group/out-group social cognition is that we are inclined to attribute cognitive achievements of in-group members to their cognitive traits. Therefore, we may be inclined to overestimate their epistemic position whenever they have formed a true belief. Likewise, we are more inclined to extrapolate our own awareness that the salient alternative is a non-obtaining possibility to in-group than to out group members. Hence, we may be likely to mistakenly regard an in-group member as having ruled out salient alternatives. Such a judgment would be an instance of *Epistemic Overestimation* arising from in-group/out-group social cognition. Consequently, we may be more inclined to mistakenly take a *Rebuttal Response* to be applicable to an in-group member than to an out-group member. That is, we may be more likely to regard in-group than out-group members to have ruled out salient alternatives that they have not in fact ruled out. According to the epistemic focal bias account, we are in such cases more likely to regard in-group individuals as knowers than out-group individuals in the same epistemic position. Many such cases exemplify discriminatory epistemic injustice of the indirect kind in which the out-group individuals are unjustly suffering a comparatively unfavorable epistemic assessment. So, instances of *Epistemic Overestimation* that are caused by thein-group/out-group dynamic may, according to the epistemic focal bias account, lead to discriminatory epistemic injustice.

**4.7. An epistemological corollary.** The present accounts exemplify how the epistemic focal bias accounts may be interrelated with social cognition. In particular, I have exemplified the impact of specific instances of the general *Principle of Epistemic Stereotyping* according to which ordinary judgments of whether S is a knower tend to depend on whether S has salient knowledge-stereotypical properties. In fact, the present accounts make for specific examples of both *Stereotype Non-entailment I*, according to which the stereotypical knower does not always know, and *Stereotype Non-entailment II*, according to which not all knowers exhibit knowledge-stereotypical features*.* Thus, the present development integrates various independently motivated principles of folk epistemology. This is valuable, in part, because the accounts sketched above are far more specific than the general *Principle of Epistemic Stereotyping*.

A further epistemological corollary of the discussion is worth highlighting. According to the present analysis, both *Diminishment of Salience* and *Overestimation of Epistemic Position* may cause *false positives* – that is, knowledge ascriptions to someone who does not know. This marks an important development of the discussion in *On Folk Epistemology* (Gerken 2017a). Here salient alternative effects were argued to be false negatives (Chapter 10). However, the present discussion indicates a novel type of salient alternative cases while generate false positives.[[8]](#footnote-8) These include cases where the subject of evaluation, S, belongs to a certain social category that is associated with positive epistemic stereotypes or in which S belongs to the evaluator’s in-group, S may mistakenly be deemed a knower. So, salient alternative cases may, in conjunction with heuristics operative in social cognition, lead to both instances of false negative and false positive knowledge ascriptions. It turns out, then, that applying the epistemic focal bias to the phenomenon of epistemic injustice yields a novel insight concerning the epistemic focal bias account itself. How nice![[9]](#footnote-9)

**4.8: Further interrelations between folk epistemology and epistemic injustice.** I have sought to distinguish between importantly different ways in which judgments affected by salience of alternatives and epistemic competence may lead to epistemic injustice. If the proposals are on the right track, they explain some of the mechanisms underlying familiar examples of discriminatory epistemic injustice that arise from epistemic underestimation and overestimation. This deepens our understanding of the sources of epistemic injustice. Moreover, the present investigation also reveals some less recognized routes to discriminatory epistemic injustice that arise when social stereotypes amplify or diminish the salience of alternatives. This widens our understanding of the sources of epistemic injustice.

That said, I have not provided a full map of this complex territory. As mentioned initially, salience is not merely a property of alternatives to someone’s knowledge. Salience may also be a property of competence, stakes and environmental factors etc. Thus, there is reason to suspect that folk epistemological judgments mediated by salience of these things may also bias judgments about knowledge and that the consequence may, in some cases, be epistemic injustice of various kinds.

Moreover, the interaction between social cognition and folk epistemology does not stop with ascriptions of knowledge. Judgments of reliability, trustworthiness, epistemic competence, sincerity and so on may also be biased in very similar manners. Neither epistemology nor folk epistemology begins or ends with knowledge. However, I have focused on intuitive knowledge ascriptions because they are central to folk epistemology (Gerken 2017a). However, other cases are very important. For example, Spaulding has argued that social cognition may bias assessments of epistemic peerhood in a manner that is highly relevant to the epistemology of disagreement (Spaulding 2016, 2018). Another extremely important case is laypersons’ selective uptake of scientific experts’ testimony (Gerken forthcoming a-b; Kovaka forthcoming). In general, the intersection between social cognition and folk epistemology is an extremely rich and complex area.

**5: Concluding remarks.**

I have explored some aspects of the complex interface between folk epistemology and social cognition. However, I have not approximated anything like a survey of such intersections. Rather, I have selectively considered the role of salience in ordinary judgments about knowledge and how such judgments may be affected by social stereotypes, scripts and categories. In doing so, I have argued that the heuristics that we rely on in navigating the social world we inhabit may cause biased judgments about who knows and who does not. However, since the concept of knowledge plays a central role in our social life, such judgments have very significant consequences. Indeed, I have argued that they may lead to severe and tenacious types of epistemic injustice. In consequence, the present considerations should encourage attempts to consider debiasing measures (Devine et al. 2012; Lai et al. 2017).

Thus, I hope that the present paper exemplifies how foundational work on something as abstract as salient alternatives in foundational epistemology may contribute to more concrete empirical and philosophical work on issues of considerable societal consequence.[[10]](#footnote-10)

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1. The precise meaning of ‘ruling out’ is debated. The idea may be taken to concern S ability to discriminate between beeches and elms but – you guessed it – the precise meaning of ‘discriminate’ is also debated. Here I’ll steer clear of these epistemological debates (but see Gerken 2017a: 13ff [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Kaplanese, contextualists claim that ‘knows’ has an unstable character whereas strict invariantists argue that it has a stable character (Kaplan 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thanks to Fricker for helpful correspondence on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I argue for this specific point in Gerken 2019. I argue against knowledge-first epistemology in Gerken 2011, 2012, 2014, 2017a-b, 2018, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fricker discusses whether credibility excess may generate (discriminatory) epistemic injustice but she mainly considers whether it may incur to the subject who is epistemically overestimated – for example, because that subject has to carry unreasonable cognitive or emotional burdens (Fricker 2007: 18-21). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This would be an instance of implicit discrimination that would add to the explicit racism involved in apartment rental funkily described in (Wonder 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. X might be philosophers who are, sadly, in unfair disrepute as tree categorizers due to (Putnam 1974). Thanks Putnam… [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In previous work I argued that another type of case involving non-salient alternatives – so-called *contrast cases* – yield false positives (Gerken 2013, 2017 Ch. 11). But this case type differs from the ones discussed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There is a methodologically interesting aspect to this. At least it is striking that reflecting on more empirically inspired cases than the thought-experiments that are usually the input to reflection about salient alternatives has led to the novel insight. Just as meta-ethics and normative ethics have benefitted from the rise of applied ethics, I believe that foundational epistemology may benefit from the development of applied epistemology. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The paper was presented at the International Network for Danish Philosophers, University of Copenhagen (Sep. 2018), University of Uppsala (Nov. 2018) University of , Stanford’s Variety of Agency workshop (Jan. 2020) where Jared Parmer provided helpful comments. I am grateful to the audiences at these occasions for very helpful feedback. Sophie Archer provided very helpful substantive and editorial comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)