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Epistemic exploitation in education

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ABSTRACT

'Epistemic exploitation occurs when privileged persons compel marginalised knowers to educate them [and others] about the nature of their oppression' (Berenstein, 2016, p. 569). This paper scrutinizes some of the purported wrongs underpinning this practice, so that educators might be better equipped to understand and avoid or mitigate harms which may result from such interventions. First, building on the work of Berenstein and Davis (2016), we argue that when privileged persons (in this context, educators) repeatedly compel marginalised or oppressed knowers, to not only to educate them, but indeed others, about the nature of their oppression, they risk subjecting them to further epistemic-moral harms. This is due to the likelihood that at least some of their audience will assign them less/more credibility than they deserve based on pre-existing identity-based prejudices. Second, though some of these requests to 'educate' or 'learn more' masquerade as seemingly virtuous or innocuous epistemic inquiries, privileged persons underestimate or remain ignorant of secondary harms which stem from internalized epistemic obligations, oppressive double-binds (Hirji, 2021), and attendant emotional burdens oppressed knowers carry in relation to the ever-present possibility of ameliorating oppressor mindsets. After surveying each context-specific harm briefly, we then turn to an applied reading of how these exploitative practices sometimes culminate in something we refer to as 'ontic burnout', a form of interminable explanatory fatigue brought on by repeated requests to educate the privileged about what it means to be oppressed.

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I. Epistemic injustice and epistemic exploitation

Epistemic injustice captures two key injustices along with related harms arising from corrupted epistemic practices through which we seek to convey knowledge to others and make sense of our own social experiences (Fricker, 2007). Analyses typically hinge on the hybrid epistemic/ethical dimensions and potential for harm underpinning two of our most basic social epistemic practices—conveying knowledge to others and making sense of our own social experiences (Dunne, 2020). Miranda Fricker labels these two forms of epistemic injustice, 'testimonial injustice' and 'hermeneutical injustice' respectively. Testimonial injustice typically arises when a speaker receives less credibility than she deserves when offering testimony, due to prejudices held by

her audience; hermeneutical injustice typically occurs when, 'a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences' (p. 1). What distinguishes epistemic injustice, broadly construed, from other garden variety kinds, is that the associated primary harms are principally discriminatory, and predominately, though not exclusively, cashed out in terms of their adverse impact on a given agent's epistemic agency, that is, someone's capacity to acquire, share, question, and meaningfully contribute to sense-making activities, to knowledge production, dissemination, and understanding.

Much work has been done since Fricker's original account of testimonial injustice to broaden analyses to include oppressive structures which move beyond individualism toward a broader characterisation: one which gives due weight not just to structural features animating injustices committed by a single perpetrator, but equally, structural injustices that do not necessarily involve prejudicial attitudes on the part of actors involved (Anderson, 2012). This grey area between agential and structural perpetuation is referred to by Kristie Dotson (2012) as, 'contributory injustice'. On her account, such injustice is 'caused by an epistemic agent's situated ignorance, in the form of wilful hermeneutical ignorance, in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm to the epistemic agency of a knower' (p.31).

At the core of this account of contributory injustice (and related accounts) are more sophisticated, socially-oriented and interpersonally-attuned appeals to cultivate a critical consciousness, to be critically vigilant about the world we live in (bell hooks, 1992), to resist systematic 'epistemic oppression' of all kinds, overcome pedagogies of oppression (Freire, 1970), and moreover, to systematically challenge 'persistent and unwarranted epistemic exclusions which obstruct individuals' or communities' contributions to knowledge production' (Dotson, 2014, p. 115). More precisely, Dotson's reconceptualised account of epistemic *oppression*—which is distinct-yet-related to Fricker's epistemic *injustice*—captures, 'a persistent and unwarranted infringement on the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources that hinders one's contributions to knowledge production' (p. 116). Unwarranted exclusion is but one form of epistemic oppression. But this does not tell the full story. There are many cases where marginalised or oppressed persons have 'joined the table, but are still on the menu' (Bilge, 2020, p.317) For this reason, we need to look at, not just how people are excluded, but rather how, and under what conditions, they are ostensibly 'included', as well as attendant harms which emerge from such avoidable and corrupted practices. Epistemic exploitation, the coerced inclusion of oppressed individuals to provide high-stakes emotional and testimonial labour, that is to say, 'painful knowledge', in pursuit of emancipatory epistemic ideals, is a case in point, and therefore worthy of further analysis.

When it comes to primary or secondary harms—context-dependent accounts, arising from systemic testimonial injustices, range from 'recognition failure' (see Giladi, 2018), 'othering' (Cusick, 2019; Pohlhaus, 2014; Davis, 2016), 'objectification' (Fricker, 2007; McGlynn, 2021), 'testimonial silencing and smothering' (Dotson, 2011), to name but a few. Our focus here is different. Taking the corrupt practice of epistemic exploitation as its starting point, this paper seeks to identify an as of yet unidentified harm, one in which already oppressed people face oppressive double-binds, triggered by unsolicited requests to educate their oppressors. Such requests (which are motivated in part by an unspoken sense of entitlement on the part of the oppressor) result in the exposure of oppressed persons to trenchant scepticism, in the form of credibility deficits or credibility excesses. These unjust mismatches between the credibility that a person is granted and the credibility that they merit, subsequently reinforce oppressive structures, and therefore, in the most extreme cases, can lead to 'ontic burnout'—a form of dissociative explanatory fatigue that oppressed knowers frequently experience due to the emotional and educative burden repeatedly placed upon them by privileged groups to explain the nature of their oppression to others.

II. Reframing epistemic exploitation

People subject to various oppressions are often expected to explain the nature of their oppression to others, so as to educate the non-oppressed: disabled persons are tasked with educating the able-bodied; women are tasked with educating men about patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny; people of colour are tasked with educating white people about racism. Intuitively it makes sense: those that are oppressed are uniquely positioned to know certain things that others who lack the same standpoint do not. For educationalists, this epistemic ‘insider perspective’ and authority which gives oppressed individuals the authority to speak about the nature, scope and consequences of their marginalization is typically the justification they draw upon when engaging in epistemically exploitative practices. There are two interrelated questions at stake here: *cui bono* and at *what cost?* The latter is the primary focus of this paper. To be sure—distinguishing epistemic exploitation from other forms of seemingly virtuous or well-meaning requests to engage in knowledge exchanges is not an easy task. That is why a normative theory is required to differentiate ‘between the exploitation of features and the exploitation of persons, or between morally innocuous and morally objectionable advantage-taking’ (Vrousalis, 2018, p. 2). As yet, extant literature fails to provide a conceptually robust account for theorists to accurately determine a meaningful distinction between the two phenomena (Vrousalis, 2013; 2018). Accordingly, for our purposes here, we reframe epistemic exploitation as:

a hybrid transactional-structural phenomenon, best characterized as a form of vulnerability-instrumentalization, whereby, A exploits B if A and B are embedded in a non-reciprocal relationship in which: (i) A instrumentalizes B’s vulnerability to (ii) appropriate the fruits of B’s emotional and epistemic labour for their own and/or others’ self-enrichment, without (iii) due regard for the harms, (impediments to well-being), that such oppressive triggered double-bind requests and subsequent further testimonial injustices may bring about.

Put in simpler terms, ‘to exploit another is to somehow use her dependence or vulnerability for your own benefit’ (Vrousalis, 2018, p.10), while being blind or ambivalent to further harms the oppressed suffer as a consequence of the expectation to educate *ad nauseam*. Epistemic exploitation is constituted by non-reciprocal relations of unchecked privilege and entitlement¹ (see Giladi & McMillan, 2022). Privileged persons, in certain contexts, wilfully engage in vulnerability-instrumentalization; they take the emotional labour, high-stakes testimony and painfully acquired situated knowledge of the oppressed to further their own or others’ self-enrichment. What is more, they do this without due regard for the burden that such ‘painful knowledge’ exacts on the oppressed, both in terms of what it costs to bear, how it was acquired, and finally, the toll it continues to take, especially when in all likelihood the oppressed person’s testimony and emotional labour will be met with a trenchant scepticism or credibility excess, both of which fail to track the nuanced, complex reality of their lived experience.

Consider the following example – Scenario I

Professor A wants to source a speaker for an international lecture series on Mental Health, Resilience and Education, to be held via Zoom. He has a professional acquaintance in mind, a first generation academic who has publicly suffered with mental health issues for most of her adult life. Shortly after he contacts her, she responds politely, thanking him for the invite but regrettably declines on account of the fact that she is exceptionally busy and cannot take on any new work. Slightly perturbed by this, the Professor responds, waxing lyrical about the high-profile ministers and various other leading figures from media and other state agencies who will be in attendance, and the opportunity it presents to have a first-personal account from an academic dealing with these struggles throughout their professional careers. He goes on to add that this is a vital opportunity to inform policy and make real changes in the lives of those affected. To conclude he adds that, even if she doesn’t feel she owes it to herself to accept such an opportunity, she at least owes it to fellow sufferers to tell their story, for without her presence, this vital perspective will be left out. Reluctantly, after much soul-searching, the academic agrees to give the talk, to what turns out to be an ambivalent, and in some cases, unreceptive audience, some of whom conflate mental health difficulties with a lack of resilience and positivity.

Though some of the particulars are no doubt different, some of the salient features of scenario I are probably familiar to many working in the field of education. Though not an empirical claim, we suggest that it is illustrative of a pervasive phenomenon. Indeed, most people can no doubt recall similar scenarios which share similar features to those described above. While the particulars may fluctuate, there is still a form of vulnerability-instrumentalization in play. The person who has experienced marginalisation or oppression for most of their lives is treated as a means to an end, often, but not always, by a person in authority. Responsibility to educate is placed squarely on their shoulders, and the particulars of their instrumentalization are systematically decided by the privileged. As Davis (2016, p. 8) writes, ‘epistemic exploitation’ involves:

Increased risk of becoming overburdened by requests to ‘educate’ others. When extra epistemic responsibilities are routinely allocated to members of underrepresented communities, these individuals find themselves confronted with higher volumes of epistemic labour than their dominant peers. Often, this labour is not compensated (or is inadequately compensated); sometimes the labour is not even recognised as labour.

Returning to our re-framing of epistemic exploitation, in each of the instances discussed, A and B are embedded in a non-reciprocal relationship, in which A instrumentalizes B’s vulnerability to appropriate the fruits of B’s emotional and epistemic labour for their own or others’ self-enrichment. At no point is sufficient care afforded to avoid or mitigate harms that such oppressive double-binds and resultant further testimonial injustices may bring about. One can see as much in scenario I above. In some cases, remuneration is in no way reflective of the human, cognitive and emotional costs of the labour; in others, the work is not even recognised as such. Equally, the knowledge conveyed, in some instances, tends to be legitimized only in terms of how well it is received, rather than according to what sort of meaningful challenge or change in view it invokes.

At this point, however, we need to be clear about the claim under scrutiny: it is not the case that privileged people can never ask marginalised knowers to explain the nature of their oppression. Not at all. A clear argument could be made that such requests are *bona fide* examples of combatting testimonial injustices through the incorporation of relevant polyvocal perspectives. What makes a request exploitative is the privileged person’s unchecked expectation that already overburdened marginalised or oppressed knowers bear the obligation or responsibility to educate others. This expectation hinges on the presupposition that the painful knowledge of the oppressed, their relived trauma, is somehow a public educational good. Their traumatic knowledge is regarded as public property—a fair price to pay to ameliorate ignorance—something time and time again to be willingly offered without question, in service of the public good. On this view, the educative power and currency of their epistemic and emotional labour interprets such labour as a vital public service. Cost-benefit metrics in the eyes of educators place the pedagogical value of the intervention above the ontological cost for the Speaker.

In situations of epistemic exploitation, educators see the possibility of combatting ignorance, and lose sight of the potential for further testimonial injustices and impediments to well-being. They knowingly or unknowingly trigger oppressive double-binds in service of what they perceive to be the greater educational good. To limit the scope of our inquiry, we focus on the agent-specific tolls which one-off or repeated requests to engage in epistemic labour of this kind exact on oppressed knowers. On our account, then, (which is by no means a list of necessary and sufficient conditions), requests bear the hallmarks of being exploitative when:

1. they are formal or informal requests to educate (one-off or repeated) which fail to accord due sensitivity/understanding to: oppressed standpoints; the reasons an oppressed person might have to decline such requests; or the opportunity cost which accompanies such oppressive double-binds, together with the possible harms which may result from being

- put in hostile situations, where once again the oppressed person has to defend their testimony and explain themselves ad nauseam
2. the privileged person placing the request does so, (either knowingly or unknowingly) based on an unchecked sense of entitlement, whereby they mistakenly believe that the person owes it to their kin, and indeed others, to engage in this sort of potentially emancipative educative exchange, (itself a form of unreasonable expectation borne from privilege); where it's largely seen as 'their problem to fix', 'your truth to prove', 'your golden opportunity', 'your responsibility', 'your reality', so to speak, since oppressed testimony is key to unlocking the prejudices of target audiences.
 3. some of the success or 'value-added' of the exchange is determined by the privileged in terms of how well the testimony is received, rather than what sort of measurable learning/change of view it elicits; where the potential for value-added is estimated to be directly proportional to pre-existing levels of individual and group ignorance or scepticism. We like to think of this as akin to gambling with someone else's money—gamblers are more than happy to take long odds (potentially higher yield) since they won't suffer directly from any losses incurred. Whereas, if we think of marginalised or oppressed people as the human currency used to place the bet, and consider the lengthy odds of their testimony/emotional labour being accepted as true, we quickly see the problem more clearly, and accurately determine why it is exploitative.
 4. the possibility of ontic burnout—a form of dissociative explanatory fatigue—an erosion of self—is routinely dismissed because privileged persons fail to understand the emotional burden 'painful knowledge' propagates, in terms of how it was acquired, what it costs to bear, and finally, the toll it takes (one-off and cumulative) when transmitted in situations requiring repeated explanations to what are sometimes potentially hostile or over-zealous audiences.

III. Credibility deficit/excess and choreographed testimonial injustices

Having looked at a reconceptualised account of epistemic exploitation based on vulnerability-instrumentalization, this section looks to harms deriving from educative exchanges choreographed by educators involving marginalised and privileged persons. Very briefly, there are two harms worthy of further attention: (i) credibility deficits and (ii) credibility excesses, both of which can arguably be found in the phenomenon of typecasting (see Davis, 2016). My focus here is more on the former, though the latter is also important.

As is the case with all forms of testimonial injustice, prejudice is a motivating epistemic vice leading to a prejudgment which 'displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence, owing to some affective investment on the part of the subject' (Fricker, 2007, p. 35). Put another way, a Hearer is influenced by identity-based prejudices, characterized as the type of closedmindedness (which might operate below the level of belief or motive) that accompanies an inability to get out of one's own way of thinking, questioning, reasoning or communicating. These prejudices cause the Hearer to accord insufficient credibility to a Speaker. This can lead people to underestimate or indeed overestimate others' credibility, to expect knowledge and truth to 'sound' a certain way, to supercharge confirmation biases; or in some cases, to expect knowledge and truth to come from a certain type of person (Dunne, 2020). While this leads to error on the part of the hearer, the implications for the speaker are far more serious: when someone suffers a testimonial injustice, according to Fricker (2007, p. 44), 'they are degraded *qua* knower, and symbolically degraded *qua* human'.

Educators want to ameliorate oppressor mindsets (Freire, 1970). Consistent with veritist principles, they seek to contribute directly to belief revision, to align students' credences and

understandings with the very best available evidence at time *t*. In many cases, they operate in accordance with the principle: ‘the greater the risk, the greater the reward’. To avoid putting marginalised knowers in situations where they are ‘preaching to the choir’, they occasionally therefore place them in more hostile epistemic environments, situations in which the exchange of ideas and testimony fail to be (as they should be) on the terms of the oppressed, and instead embody a microclimate of the oppressive structures and harmful credibility deficits that marginalised and oppressed knowers already battle and resist on a daily basis. This ‘pedagogical risk’ is emblematic of a bigger problem in education, that being, a perhaps well-meaning, yet still harmful reproduction, of the very pre-existing oppressive structures that the speaker wishes to challenge and overcome.

Let me give an example. Some time ago we were involved in organising a guest speaker for a module on development education. The speaker was a member of the travelling community, a marginalised group in Irish society. After talking to the speaker for some time, she shared with us her worries about the harms which follow from being typecast—a ‘presumption that marginalised knowers possess knowledge regarding topics stereotypically associated with their social group’ (Reyes & Halcón, 1988, pp. 304–305). Almost every audience she speaks to asks her about family feuds in such and such a place, disproportionate rates of suicide, addiction stories, school suspensions and expulsions, incarceration rates, weddings/courting customs and practices, gangland violence and bare-knuckle fights. Occasionally she is asked about traveller culture and parallels with other marginalised groups such as Roma communities and so forth. The pressure to be expert in the statistical aspects of myriad issues her audience picks out, animated by wide-ranging stereotypes, is almost too much to bear, especially when some of these data, while important, are *all* that her intended audience want to hear about. She further recounted her unease with being a nominated spokesperson for her group; a group that is by no means homogeneous. She relayed instances where she suffered credibility deficits after drawing attention to the fact that educational systems in Ireland are not always hospitable to members of the travelling community, specifying that this is one reason (among many) why educational attainment is so low in this population, all because she is one of three members of her community who have PhDs. Audience members have questioned her on this, in some cases interrogatively and disbelievingly, gesturing at sentiments like, ‘surely it isn’t so oppressive, you have a PhD’. Even though she explains how she left school early and went back to education, this does little to assuage the deeply entrenched prejudices some of her audience hold. She leaves these exchanges, she confesses, tired, wrung-out, gaslit...a token spokesperson people lean on to confirm their pre-judgements, based on a superficial restructuring of pre-existing prejudices.

Several harms which stem from the corrupted practice of epistemic exploitation are worth briefly mentioning, since some of them lead to the ‘ontic burnout’, a topic we discuss later. First, when marginalised individuals are assigned spokesperson status, they often suffer credibility deficits, not just from recalcitrant audiences whom they are brought in to educate, but also sometimes amongst their own constituency. For instance, a feminist of colour might be subjected to unjust credibility deficits by her predominately white, male audience when she talks about male entitlement. By contrast, when addressing fellow feminists, it’s quite conceivable they affix a credibility excess when she makes generalised pronouncements on feminist thought, an area that is by no means homogenous. Second, spokespersons are restricted by oppressive double-binds in which their own prudential good is bound up with their ability to resist oppression—they thus face choices, wherein, no matter what they choose, they directly or indirectly grease the wheels of their own oppression (Hirji, 2021, p.650). This is a point we return to in the next section.

What is more—the weight of responsibility to educate others about the nature of oppression exacts a heavy toll. High-stakes testimony is a burden the oppressed carry throughout their lives and a responsibility the privileged too often abdicate or pass off to them. Relatedly there

is also the associated pressure to change hearts and minds, to deliver on behalf of their constituency. Success, on this view, is directly proportionate to the change of mind the interlocutor obtains during the testimonial exchange. Should we define epistemic injustice as a harm done to one in one's capacity as an epistemic agent (Gerken, 2019, p. 2), it is easy to see how the above qualify as harms. Identity-based prejudices have led to credibility deficits/excesses, and corrupted vital epistemic practices. These are the practices which animate the processes underpinning how agents marshal evidence, acquire and share knowledge, obtain justification for their beliefs, and later share that justification through testimony to generate shared understandings.

Arguably what epistemologists sometimes forget is: human harms later become epistemic harms. But they are human harms first. Anxiety provoked by testifying about sexual assault might result in long pauses, inconsistent factual recall, tentative tones and so on. This might affect how audiences evaluate the veracity of testimony. But the trauma of the assault, the 'undoing of the self', (p.68) is what is directly impacting the survivor's ability to transmit knowledge, to share her experiences with others (see Brison, 2003). Assault as a human harm has led directly to epistemic harms which adversely affect her capacity as an epistemic agent. Those who experience forms of testimonial injustice like this can feel dehumanised, othered, gaslit, retraumatized and unworthy—all of which, individually or collectively, can lead them to refuse offering testimony or distance themselves from future epistemic engagements.

Related to this example is a type of credibility excess which we call the 'silver-bullet' harm. This is a form of credibility excess affecting direct epistemic exchanges between educators, their students, and oppressed knowers. On this view, educators who compel marginalised knowers to explain the nature of their oppression to others via testimony, are inclined to inflate the credibility affixed to such testimony. This results in them being ignorant of the harms befalling oppressed groups in these types of exchanges. Motivated by this silver-bullet pedagogical intervention and the allure of potentially emancipatory learner outcomes arising from such interventions, educators tend to overestimate the power of first-personal testimony, seeing it as a way to change hearts and minds—perhaps even a step on the road to dismantling oppressive structures. They perceive the situated knowledge and painful experience of the oppressed as key to unlocking the prejudices of epistemically recalcitrant audiences, without ever considering, in any sort of meaningful way, the emotional and epistemic labour costs incurred by such vulnerable groups.

In some respects, educators see vulnerable populations as akin to human libraries, much like the much-lauded human library 'learning platform', where at the click of a button, 'people become books that you can borrow for an hour'. Now you can hear directly from an alcoholic, an immigrant, a refugee, a schizophrenic person, a depressed person, a psychotherapist, a divorcee, an army vet and so on. On our view, human libraries are tantamount to large-scale forms of objectification. This dovetails neatly with McGlynn's (2021) Nussbaum-inspired (Nussbaum, 1995) account of epistemic objectification and the related notion of fungibility. For McGlynn, 'epistemic fungibility involves treating members of a certain social group as interchangeable for epistemic purposes; testimony from one member of the group (on the subject at hand, at least) is as good as any other'. He goes on to say, '[i]t's also natural to think that there is a kind of instrumentality here (and perhaps this is true in general of fungibility); one is treating the person as fungible relative to one's own epistemic goals and projects' (p.13).

Treating human experience as an interchangeable means to an end (pedagogical tool), especially where there is trauma involved, captures the commoditization of educative exchanges, and emphasizes the risks associated with losing out on non-essentialized accounts (see Appiah, 2005). Such accounts appropriately factor in first-personal richness, together with carefully contextualised lived experience (bell hooks, 1992). In commoditized exchanges, painful knowledge is reduced to a series of de-personalized propositions, wherein the dancer is divorced from the dance, each and every dancer is fungible, and all dances share common essentialist

features. It also perpetuates the myth that members of these ‘social groups’ thematically grouped in crude and heavily reductionist ways, share one monolithic experience (see Davis, 2016). Now, at the end of a keyboard, educators can lean on the testimony of a recovering drug or porn addict while endeavouring to teach students about specific phenomena. This in turn ends up being testimony to which educators mistakenly attach too much credibility, mostly because the person in question has direct experience of the phenomenon the educator seeks to teach others about.

IV. Oppressive double-binds and associated harms

Oppressive double-binds are choice situations, in which, pervasive oppressive norms leave individuals from oppressed groups facing a distinctive type of imperfect choice (Hirji, 2021—see also Frye, 1983; Giladi, 2022). They have a choice between pursuing their short-term prudential good by co-operating with an oppressive norm that is bad for them in the long run, or resisting the oppressive norm and suffering some harm and/or punishment which undermines their long-term ability to resist oppression. Therefore, irrespective of the agent’s choice, the end result is the same: they end up strengthening oppressive structures; they become ‘a mechanism in their own oppression’ (Hirji, 2021, p. 653).

Consider, for instance, the following example:

Imagine you are the only non-binary student in the school. Teachers and other students seem to respect your gender identity. As a matter of fact, because you are the only non-binary student in the school, you are often being asked to educate others on what it means to be a non-binary individual. Although you recognize the value of this, you find the process of educating others on this topic time-consuming, emotionally exhausting, and, in all honesty, not your responsibility. On the one hand, if you were to accept this task, you could help reduce stereotyping and promote awareness. However, because this involves a lot of work, you would have less time to study and would most likely fare worse than your peers in final exams, etc. On the other hand, if you were to refuse to educate others on the non-binary gender identity, you miss an opportunity to change the status quo.

The above example highlights that there is often extra burden placed on members of oppressed groups to educate their oppressors. If the oppressed accept this extra burden, they are left lagging in their personal and professional life and, most importantly, justify and consolidate a system in which disproportionate burdens are placed on the oppressed. If they refuse, they still help maintain the status quo by choosing not to seize the opportunity to change it.

However, it should be noted that, in the majority of cases, oppression and its relationship with oppressive double-binds are not as straightforward as the above example makes them out to be (Young, 2005). For instance, it could be the case that one accepts some requests to educate the oppressors (hence, does their part to combat prejudice and stereotyping) while refusing others so as to safeguard their personal and professional life. But even in this case, the agent is once again a mechanism in their own oppression. It still remains the fact that on those occasions they choose to educate their oppressors, they justify a system which puts extra burden on the oppressed, and on those occasions where they refuse to educate them, they miss an opportunity to change the status quo. That is why we need to be clear about the nature of our claim: educators must learn about the nature of oppressive double-binds and exploitative practices, so that they avoid triggering or engaging them in service of what they perceive to be the greater educational good—where sacrificing painful knowledge in pursuit of ameliorating ignorance is considered a worthwhile and harmless educational practice.

Oppressive double-binds create the illusion that the oppressed are free (Frye, 1983, pp. 7-8). They are free to choose their own prudential good, to resist oppression, or some kind of mixture of the two. However, the reality is that they are not free of these oppressive double-binds. Whatever they do, they cannot escape them. They have to make a choice. But as already noted,

the choice is not there in the sense that, whatever they choose to do, they cannot avoid strengthening oppressive structures (Hirji, 2021). The student who is given the choice to educate their peers and teachers on what it means to be a non-binary individual is trapped in this double-bind: whatever they choose, they ultimately end up reinforcing the structures of their own oppression.

V. Ontic burnout

So far, we have looked at the epistemic-moral harms arising from epistemically exploitative practices orchestrated by educators. As mentioned, though some of these attempts are well-intentioned, they are still nonetheless harmful to members of oppressed and marginalised groups. Drawing on the field of epistemic injustice, we examined how such corrupted practices damage people in their capacity as epistemic agents (Gerken, 2019). Testimonial injustices arise in orchestrated educative exchanges designed to bring students from *doxa* (opinion) to *episteme* (knowledge). Both credibility deficits *and* excesses can be found in such interactions. We have also examined how educators wrongly (either knowingly or unknowingly) trigger oppressive double-binds in service of what they perceive to be ‘the greater educational good’. Treating ‘painful knowledge’, as we have seen, and moreover, vulnerable situated knowers, as something to be traded without harm or consequence in the pursuit of understanding or belief revision, is yet another way of instrumentalizing the hybrid epistemic-emotional labour of oppressed groups. In this final section, we look to how one-off or cumulative harms contribute to a harm we refer to as ‘ontic burnout’ in oppressed populations.

Ontic burnout is a concept we use to capture dissociative explanatory fatigue—a specific subset of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion (harms) triggered when privileged persons (in this case, educators) repeatedly or otherwise compel marginalised or oppressed knowers to educate them [and others] about the nature of their oppression. This dissociative fatigue leads to oppressed persons dissociating themselves (itself a protective measure) from being members of a certain kind. Parallels can be drawn with the concept of ontic injustice, where ‘an individual is wronged by the very fact of being socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind, where that construction consists, at least in part, of their being subjected to a set of social constraints and enablements that is wrongful to them’ (Jenkins, 2020, p.191). Burnout, either inside or outside the Academy, then, stems from the human need for meaning, the need for what we do to matter. To be sure, burnout is not to be conflated with ‘work stress, depression from overwork, or alienation, though it usually involves all these’ (Bartlett, 1994, p. 281).

What we seek to argue here is that ontic burnout, characterized as a specific form of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion, is a subset of burnout *simpliciter*. Ontic burnout is ontic in the sense that it captures the situationally triggered dissociative erosion of the sufferer’s sense of self. Under these oppressive conditions, they suffer because of who they are, and the chronic situational stress they systematically experience as a result of just being them in a world characterized by unjust structural and transactional dynamics. Time and again, this is perpetually exacerbated by means of requests to educate others about what it means to be them, what it means to be oppressed, what it means to carry and continuously be asked to share their painful knowledge. This culminates in feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment.

These eudemonic harms lead them at times to even wish away part of their identity, to fantasize about not being *the spokesperson*, not being the 24/7 personal tutor to the privileged, not being the go-to for all things inclusive, not being the person of colour, the objectified spokesperson whose primary function in the eyes of educators lies in the exchange value of the projected shared understandings expected to come on foot of their painfully shared situated knowledge. In short, they are, and always will be, more than the sum of your prejudices. And yet—they are tired of carrying the weight of what it means to be them—in reality—this is hard

enough as is without the added expectation they carry others and their fleeting causes too. They do not want to be the poster boy or girl for your 'diversity week'. Long after they've given their talk, educators and students will be back living their lives. And they will be back to living theirs. The difference is that the lives to which you each return remain worlds apart. The expectation to educate the privileged about the nature of oppression is more or less a Sisyphean task. There is no end to it; no glory when you reach the top of the hill. It does not stop. Unlike Sisyphus, they may choose to lay aside the boulder. They need not agree to educate; but to refuse, to resist that which is expected of them, they must turn down the opportunity to resist oppression. Should they choose to 'accept' the request to educate, they then carry an even bigger burden to represent their constituency well and somehow bring about a *metanoia* of sorts in their audience, some of whom will affix to them a credibility deficit or excess. This is why we coin the phrase 'ontic burnout'.

The term 'burnout' was first used in the 1970s by the psychoanalyst Herbert Freudenberger to capture the phenomenon of impairing exhaustion. His pioneering article 'Staff Burn-Out', in which he describes the condition and considers prevention and treatment, is often identified as the birth of forensic research on the phenomenon of burnout (Freudenberger, 1974, pp. 159-65). More recently, the term is used for describing a syndrome as well as a process (to burn out). Burnout, according to Pines and Aronson (1988, pp. 9-10) is:

subjectively experienced as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally [draining] and demanding. The emotional demands are most often caused by a combination of very high expectations and chronic situational stress. Burnout is accompanied by an array of symptoms including physical depletion, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness [and] disillusionment.

The emotional demands which engender ontic burnout, as we have seen, are most often caused by a combination of unrealistic expectations, non-reciprocity, recognition-failure (failure to see you as a knower), explanatory fatigue, educator induced oppressive double-binds in epistemically hostile environments, and chronic situational stresses. Turning yourself inside out for testimonial exchanges is ultimately a painful reminder that you are different. Every educative encounter in this context is an exercise in asymmetrical expectations. The educator expects too much from the marginalised person; the marginalised person too much of themselves. Explanatory fatigue, for those affected, kicks in when you spend your life explaining yourself to others. Trying to get others to see the world through your eyes is tantalising: the very possibility of 'shared perspectives' or 'belief revision' can move mountains, but it comes at a cost to those who spend an inordinate amount of time investing in others' epistemic formation. What is sensible and reasonable to one person might very well be incoherent, fatuous or unreasonable to another.

Next we have educator induced oppressive double-binds. We have argued throughout that educators need to take care not to instrumentalize the vulnerability of marginalised knowers in service of what they perceive to be public educational goods. The commodification of painful knowledge —and often of trauma —is a deeply corrupt practice and needs to be looked at carefully, so that we make every reasonable attempt to avoid eudemonic harms. Here we interpret eudemonic harms to be a conjunction of the necessity and sufficiency view. According to the sufficiency view, necessarily, any impediment to someone's well-being qualifies as a harm, while the necessity view stipulates that all harms are impediments to well-being. Further, we take well-being to be the currency of harm, and the measure of harm to be best captured by means of a causal account of harming (see Gardner, forthcoming). Should we look critically at 'opportunities' to educate about the nature and source of oppression in terms of inviting a vulnerable person into an epistemically hostile environment with chronic situational stressors, it quickly becomes clear what sort of harms befall the speaker.

Both individually and collectively, these stressors contribute to what can culminate in ontic burnout. Being exploited in such a way that you expose yourself to environments where you suffer testimonial injustices because of a triggered internalized duty to ‘fight the good fight’, and ‘finish the race’, so to speak—especially in situations when you are continuously fatigued—is a recipe for burnout. Carrying other people’s unrealistic expectations to emancipate the ignorant or the prejudiced is also a recipe for burnout. Soon enough being a go-to spokesperson leads to inescapable frustration. You cannot outrun credibility deficits and/or excesses. The need for meaningful educative exchanges—for your work and testimony to matter, to be valued, not just by those who receive it positively, but more so by those that don’t—erodes your spirit, and soon your work as spokesperson offers negligible personal reward. Your need for meaningful work is thwarted by virtue of your being put in positions where you have to explain yourself *ad nauseam* to largely unreceptive audiences, many of whom seek to be *in-the-world* but are rarely, if never, of *your world*. This is painful and unreciprocated epistemic labour which you have been exploited into performing at the behest of the privileged, and it brings you to a point where such work has little or no meaning. Soon enough, the stresses associated with such activities far outweigh the rewards. Burnout, on this basis, becomes inevitable (Jenkins, 2020).

There is one final point worth briefly mentioning. Ontic burnout is not a characterological weakness or defect. The principal causes of burnout reside in the toxic environment and blame-worthy epistemic practices themselves—in marginalised knowers being compelled to educate others about the nature and source of oppression. And so, it is the corrupted practice itself—of educators engaging in epistemic exploitation—that must be cast aside, rather than misguided attempts to lay fault or blame at the feet of spokespersons. Blaming the oppressed for suffering ontic burnout would be yet another injustice inflicted on them, albeit a non-epistemic one. As we have argued in this section, the term ‘ontic burnout’ captures some of the avoidable harms which educators inflict on oppressed groups. And so, on this basis, it is educators who have a moral duty to exercise extreme caution and moral sensitivity to safeguard against such corrupted practices (both on a structural and interpersonal level) from infiltrating pedagogical settings, both formal and informal.

VI. Concluding remarks

This paper sought to reframe the phenomenon of epistemic exploitation by enumerating some of the eudemonic harms which result from the operationalisation of such epistemic practices in educational settings. We argued how best to understand this complex harm; what to do instead or how to fix the harm is beyond the scope of the paper. Further, we claimed that orchestrated epistemic exchanges carried out in accordance with exploitative principles instrumentalize the vulnerability of oppressed knowers and frequently lead them to experience further testimonial injustices in the form of credibility deficits and excesses. These injustices represent eudemonic harms because they negatively impact on the well-being of oppressed or marginalised knowers. We then examined the nature of oppressive double-binds in an attempt to show educators the importance of understanding, and where possible, avoiding triggering such binds, so as to avoid doing or allowing harm to vulnerable groups. Finally we concluded with a survey of what we refer to as ‘ontic burnout’, charting the one-off and/or cumulative harms emerging from a life of being exposed to exploitative practices.

Note

1. Here we characterize entitlement as a vicious attitude/personality trait animating an unfettered sense or feeling of unmerited deservingness and demandingness (see Grubbs & Exline, 2016 pp.1204-1226 for an overview of the phenomenon). In simpler terms—it captures the feeling that one deserves better or more

than others’—that being a member of a certain social kind authorises them to access, exploit and appropriate others’ epistemic and emotional labour for their own ends.

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