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EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

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Knowledge is central to societal advancement and flourishing but also to our personal well-being. In most current societies, universities are the primary institutions that produce, gather, and transmit scientific knowledge. Two of their main tasks, teaching and research, are practices that rely on the accurate perception and communication of knowledge. Research aims at gaining knowledge about the world. Teaching aims at transmitting knowledge and training students in methods of attaining new knowledge. Therefore, universities should be especially careful to avoid practices that obscure or distort knowledge or make it in any other way inaccessible for researchers, students, and users. Each discipline has their own research methodologies and guidelines that are supposed to ensure good research practices. However, in recent years, increasing attention has been paid to individual and institutional features that impede knowledge gain and exchange even if the official research methodologies are followed well. One concept that describes such features is the concept of epistemic injustice.

Epistēmē is the Ancient Greek word for knowledge and in particular scientific knowledge. Epistemic injustice describes phenomena in which members of certain groups are unjustly excluded from gaining, communicating, or contributing to knowledge. According to Miranda Fricker,[1] epistemic injustice harms people in their capacity as knowers due to group-specific prejudices and power imbalances. Epistemic injustices produce primary and secondary harms, both of which are a concern in university settings. The primary harm is towards those people who are wrongfully excluded from participating in knowledge practices as equals. For example, they might be seen as unable to gain certain knowledge and thus be denied access to specific places of knowledge. Here you can think of women having been denied university admission for centuries. The secondary harm concerns the wider knowledge community. By excluding certain people, potentially important contributions to knowledge are also excluded. If women, or members of

other minorities, are not seen as equals in their ability to have, gain, and express knowledge, a whole section of (potential) research and knowledge is wasted. Moreover, as epistemic injustices are group-based[2] and certain groups often have easier access to particular knowledge,[3] the exclusion of these groups from research makes knowledge inaccessible to the majority of people, and thereby accurate, in the sense of full, knowledge is prevented. For example, medical research has mostly focused on men's symptoms and illnesses. At the same time, women's reports of pain and symptoms have often been ignored or even dismissed as exaggerated. The denial of women's knowledge of their own bodies has led to serious gaps in how we understand the symptomatology, treatment, and causes of certain illnesses that manifest in gender-specific ways.[4]

The next section describes some, though not all, of the forms epistemic injustice can take in the university environment.[5] The hope is that these examples raise the sensitivity to the described as well as other kinds of epistemic injustice that harm the goals of and people at universities. Moreover, it is important to note that many forms of epistemic injustice are not committed on purpose and their ultimate causes can rarely be traced back to single agents. Instead, epistemic injustices often occur in the context of widespread prejudices, unreflected presuppositions, or ignorance. Therefore, even well-meaning members of the academic community might perpetuate such injustices. At the same time, one of the best cures for epistemic injustice seems to be a general awareness of the phenomenon, a willingness to question one's own stance towards other people as knowers, and an openness to register frictions between what we think we know and how others present themselves as knowers. All of these are general virtues in the field of knowledge gain. Epistemic justice only asks to extend and train these attitudes not just with respect to specific objects of research but also more widely with respect to our view of others with whom we teach, learn, work, and research.

Forms of epistemic injustice

The most general definition of epistemic injustice was given by Miranda Fricker who describes it as harming someone as a knower.[6] Even though Fricker introduced the term epistemic injustice, similar phenomena have been described for a long time by feminist and race scholars.[7] Since Fricker's coinage of the term, these discussions have started to specifically refer to the epistemic, that is knowledge-related, nature of the injustices, harms, and phenomena in question. Fricker herself distinguishes between hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. "Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences".[8] What does this mean in the academic environment?

Testimonial injustice can influence how we judge the contributions of a person who belongs to a group that often is seen as having less knowledge, being less rational, or more likely to be untruthful.[9] For example, students' information might be discounted too fast due to their assumed lower level of education. Here,

educators are asked to be open towards the possibility that a student also has profound knowledge due to their own studies or experiences. Thus, students' contributions should be as carefully listened to and considered as contributions by more established members of the academic community. Nevertheless, while not ideal, educators dismissing student knowledge might still be excused on the basis that the assumption that students have less knowledge is correct. Testimonial injustice is especially pernicious, however, when the underlying assumptions are based on prejudice; that is, widely held but false assumptions. An example here would be the credibility that is accorded to women reporting sexual harassment or discrimination.[10] Many women do not report harassment, discrimination, and abuse because they fear that they will not be believed.[11] These women are aware of the widespread belief that women often lie about having experienced abuse or "overreact", that is, falsely interpret and thus falsely report what has happened. While the numbers on rape and false rape allegations disprove these myths, they also show that they nevertheless have an impact on how reports by women on these issues are perceived.[12]

In such cases, testimonial injustice expresses itself in a variety of ways. Women's reports might not be taken seriously and thus never followed up. Women might also be asked to prove their claims in ways that are hardly realistic. It is often hard to provide material proof of sexual harassment as it happens subtly and often discreetly. On the other hand, in cases of severe trauma, e.g., through abuse or rape, victim accounts might be dismissed because of their seeming irrationality (Why did you not report immediately? Why did you not fight back more? etc.) and emotionality. Instead of seeing these behaviours as natural signs of trauma,[13] they are interpreted as signs of "typical female" behaviour and as reasons to discount the reports as untrue. Thus, if receiving reports about harassment, discrimination, or other undesirable behaviour, one should always be sensitive towards one's own first reactions when hearing such information. Is one immediately suspicious about what one hears? Does one feel mistrustful towards the one sharing this information? Why? Often it might be useful to suspend one's judgement of a certain report and delay critical questioning to a later point.

In the meantime, one can research what good indicators for verifying such a report are and what can and cannot be expected from the one reporting in terms of proof, knowledge, and behaviour. Such temporary suspension of judgment, self-reflection, and research allows one to react more appropriately and avoid testimonial injustice. It might be especially helpful to seek data about the likelihood and forms of discrimination, harassment, abuse, etc., as well as accounts of such experiences. Moreover, reflecting about who one trusts, regards as credible, and shares (or does not share) experiences with can also lead to anticipating some of the reactions one might have upon receiving such reports and might equip one to accord them the appropriate amount of credibility.[14] Such research also helps to prevent another kind of epistemic injustice, namely epistemic exploitation.

Epistemic exploitation refers to situations in which "privileged persons compel marginalized persons to educate them about the nature of their oppression".[15] It occurs, for example, when women do not just need to provide proof that sexual

harassment has happened but also need to explain what sexual harassment is and why it is harmful to them, and thereby the affected women are burdened twice. First, they encounter an injustice, sexual harassment, that affects them negatively. Secondly, they need to spend time and emotional resources to make others understand that an injustice has actually happened. For example, the women might have to explain why certain kinds of "attention" are not welcome by exposing how this behaviour affects them personally. They thus have to disclose intimate information which might make them feel highly uncomfortable. If, in contrast, the personnel in charge of receiving and filing harassment complaints already have a good understanding of the concept of sexual harassment, they will know why it is harmful even without requesting that women explain how it has affected them personally.

The first burden is imposed by the sexual harasser. The second burden, however, arises when people have not informed themselves about common injustices in their social environment and expect that those suffering the injustice provide all the information necessary to understand the situation. Therefore, an easy way to avoid epistemic exploitation is to actively seek out information about the kind of injustices marginalised people are likely to encounter. Ideally, such self-education happens even before an injustice has been brought to one's attention. Sometimes, one only becomes aware of the existence of an injustice once it is brought up. In such situations, it is important to remember that turning to the affected person for an explanation of the nature of that injustice might impose further burdens on them. Instead, one should seek alternative resources that can provide the same knowledge. For example, while one has to ask women reporting harassment what exactly has happened, one should not require them to explain why this constitutes harassment and is creating problems for her. Epistemic exploitation can also occur when representatives of certain marginalised groups are always called upon to explain the injustices that they suffer. For example, students of colour might be treated as the primary and best source for explaining racism in the classroom.[16] While it is important to believe such students if they decide to share their point of view and experiences, thus avoiding testimonial injustice, one should abstain from expecting them to provide such explanations if alternative sources of information are available. Epistemic exploitation presupposes that there are concepts and accessible information about the injustice in question. However, there might sometimes also be gaps in knowledge about such injustices due to hermeneutical injustice.

Hermeneutical injustice refers to situations in which people cannot interpret and communicate their experiences and knowledge because they or the people around them lack the concepts needed to articulate and understand them.[17] Hermeneutics is the study of interpretations that allow us to make sense of human experiences, intentions, and actions. The concept of hermeneutical injustice relies on the notion that there is a certain set of concepts that are widespread in a social community which members draw on to both make sense of their own experience and communicate it to others. Concepts allow us to put into words what we are feeling and experiencing – and if others share these concepts, we can easily make them

understand what we experience or know. For example, we all have a concept of love. Without that concept we could probably still describe what we feel towards our partner, child, parents, or friends. However, as love is different yet similar in all of these cases, and from person to person, we might struggle to make others understand what exactly it is we experience as there is no shared concept to draw on. Nevertheless, if we have the concept of love, everyone immediately understands what we mean when we say that we love someone. The concept bundles all the different experiences into something that everyone can understand even if they are not told the specifics. Concepts are so useful that it is difficult to articulate an experience for which there is not yet a (widespread) concept.

For example, women experiencing sexual harassment often struggle to put into words why they felt so uncomfortable with certain workplace interactions. After all, it was "just" a "man's joke" or "just" a "friendly" pat, etc. While some women were sure that these things were inappropriate but had difficulties explaining to others what exactly it was, others even doubted that their feelings in these situations were correct. However, once the concept of sexual harassment was coined, it had a three-fold effect. First, it bundled the experiences of many women and thereby assured them that what they experienced was real, and had certain features and causes. It gave them an explanation for what was happening to them. Second, it allowed them to introduce this concept into mainstream society. As more and more people became familiar with the concept, it became easier for women to talk about it and to communicate when they were sexually harassed. Third, as the concept of sexual harassment took hold, the image of women and their social position in the workplace also changed. Before, women were expected to tolerate sexual harassment and were seen as overreacting or uptight if they objected, but once lewd jokes and groping were not seen as normal or even benign anymore, it became acceptable for women to react negatively to this treatment. Thus, a lack of concepts does not just deprive everyone from understanding and being aware of specific phenomena. It is also an injustice insofar as it disadvantages a certain group and is caused by unjust exclusions or power relations.

Hermeneutical injustices disadvantage groups because they lack the resources to understand, articulate, and thereby challenge practices that harm them. At the same time, perpetrators are shielded from being called out on what they are doing, and this allows them to continue their harmful behaviour. The lack of certain concepts is also unjust insofar as it is caused by unjust exclusions or power relations in the social sphere. Hermeneutical resources are usually formed by social processes in which different actors shape and develop the concepts necessary to talk about the current social reality. Such processes often take place in the spheres of politics, law, academia, and public discourse. Some of the relevant actors that develop, spread, and legitimise new concepts are thus researchers, journalists, courts, and policy-makers. If certain groups have less access to these spheres, there is a danger that there will be no concepts and hermeneutical resources developed and introduced into public debate that pertain to this group's specific (social) experiences. The reasons why certain groups might be excluded from these spheres are manifold.

Material inequality or legal discrimination can be the cause, yet other more subtle causes like testimonial injustices also often play a role.

For example, women might be less likely to work in academia because they are still most often the primary caretakers for children and, together with a lack of childcare structures, might not be able to work full-time.[18] Moreover, they might also be kept from participating in academic research equally because there are still prejudices either towards women's ability to do good research or towards research that focuses on "women's topics".[19] In all these cases, women are excluded from shaping the conceptual and hermeneutical resources that are available in a society. Often such exclusion leads not just to an incomplete description and understanding of (social) reality for all, but also negatively impacts the well-being, equal opportunity, and freedom of the marginalised group. How then can such hermeneutical injustice be prevented in the university setting? A first step is to ensure that all groups have equal access to the places in which hermeneutical resources are created. This means that material and legal obstacles as well as epistemic injustices must be removed. Once members of such groups have entered the academic system, it is equally important to ensure that they and their work are equally included and respected.[20] For example, while the percentage of women in academia is on the rise, they are still not equally represented in conferences, publications, and as recipients of research funding[21] – yet these are exactly the venues in which research is communicated and new research directions and concepts are brought forward.

Thus, it is important to enable equal representation and participation on all levels of academia to counter hermeneutical injustice. Another important step in reducing hermeneutic injustice lies in providing access to hermeneutical resources about their own experiences to members of marginalised groups. The concept of epistemic injustice can serve as an example. While the experience of unjustly being accorded lower credibility (testimonial injustice) or not being able to draw on existent concepts to explain one's experience (hermeneutical injustice) has been discussed in feminism and race theory, the concept of "epistemic injustice" has been coined only recently. Before this coinage, texts that discussed the phenomena in question were usually missing from research debates and syllabi. Thus, students and researchers experiencing epistemic injustice did not have access to the texts that would have been important to their understanding and interpreting of what happened to them, unless they had studied feminism or critical race theory. By now, epistemic injustice has become a well-known concept in the humanities and social sciences. Thus, the topic is found in many syllabi, and it is becoming more accessible to students and researchers for whom it has not just academic, but also personal value. Nevertheless, this access would have been possible even earlier through a diversification of the syllabi. Diverse syllabi include work by members of marginalised communities and from disciplines that themselves have been marginalised because of representing these communities. They thereby not only combat the testimonial injustice that often keeps this research from receiving attention, but also hermeneutic injustice as they give marginalised groups more resources to draw on and interpret their own situation.

Wilful or motivated ignorance is a concept that focuses on one specific cause for epistemic injustices, namely the preservation of advantages. It describes the unwillingness to become aware of or learn about injustices – even if information is easily accessible – because it is advantageous for oneself to remain ignorant.[22] "Ignorance protects us from painful truths, insulates us from responsibility for our actions, and sustains the relationships that we depend upon for meaning and belonging".[23] For example, remaining ignorant about sexual harassment, implicit bias, or epistemic injustice might protect one's self-image as a good and just person. It might also allow one to continue practices that are beneficial to oneself or one's social group, e.g., lowering competition for jobs by excluding certain groups from the academic discourse, or ensuring one's good standing in one's primary community. For instance, if reports about discrimination are taken seriously, it necessitates a reaction that might produce conflict with one's colleagues. Thus, it might be more advantageous to remain ignorant of all but the most egregious forms of discrimination and thus avoid having to confront one's colleagues. Wilful ignorance often is driven by unconscious urges that are not immediately visible to us and that we might have no interest in further examining. Nevertheless, to avoid epistemic injustice – be it in the name of justice or in the name of participating in knowledge-building instead of knowledge-obscuring practices – it is important to question how one might benefit from not seeking more detailed knowledge about certain justice-related concepts or from discounting the testimony and concerns of a certain group of people.

Summary and recommendations

Epistemic injustice occurs when certain groups are hindered from equally participating in knowledge practices. Two prominent forms of epistemic injustice are testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice describes cases in which someone is unjustly assigned low credibility because of their group membership. They are thereby excluded from contributing to discussions and research or, if they are admitted, are not believed or believed less. Hermeneutical injustice refers to a lack of interpretational resources, e.g., in the form of concepts, which keep certain groups from understanding part of their own experiences as well as from making themselves understood by articulating these experiences with reference to shared concepts and meanings. Epistemic injustices are often systemic, that is, they appear in many, if not all, spheres of a person's life. For example, if women's statements are believed to be less credible, it impacts their chances to participate in research (academic sphere). Moreover, it will make them less likely to be interviewed about their opinions and experiences (public sphere) and give their word in court less weight (legal sphere). Correspondingly, the harms of epistemic injustice often go beyond the direct harm of not being recognised as an equal knower. They also affect employment chances, equal democratic participation, and the possibility to defend oneself against mistreatment and injustice.

The academic environment should be especially concerned with epistemic injustice for a variety of reasons. First, universities are a core institution in the production and

transmission of knowledge. Epistemic injustices in such institutions do not just harm the persons experiencing them but also keep universities from fulfilling their primary tasks well. Epistemic injustices obscure certain fields of knowledge and thereby distort how we understand the world, ourselves, and our place in it. Second, epistemic injustices are especially harmful in universities as they are institutions of knowledge. Thus, inequalities in access to knowledge and shaping that knowledge permeate every aspect of academic life and often also have external effects, e.g., by shaping public discourse. Third, universities are often still characterised by hierarchies. Such power imbalances tend to exaggerate epistemic injustices or might even cause them. Unless people in leadership functions are aware of epistemic injustices and actively work to eradicate them, it is hard for the concerned to even bring up their complaints as they are literally neither heard nor understood. Therefore, it is imperative that universities strive to create a diverse and equal environment that is characterised by epistemic virtues such as openness, respect, and sensitivity towards prejudices. This chapter has provided some suggestions for how this can be achieved. Ultimately, however, it lies in the hands of all university members to identify where they might be susceptible to committing epistemic injustices and to reflect on ways to treat all as equals, including with respect to epistemic matters.

Questions for discussion

- About which groups of people do you hold certain beliefs about what they know, how good their knowledge is, how reliable their testimony is, etc.? What leads you to have these beliefs and are they verifiable beliefs?
- Which groups are underrepresented in your work environment? How might this affect the kind of questions that are asked and topics that are considered important?
- Can you think of an example of an epistemic injustice in your field of work that was identified and overcome? What led to the successful recognition and eradication of this injustice?
- Which social groups do you know little about? How might this affect how you (fail to) understand certain contributions by members of that group?
- How might epistemic injustices affect how contributions by members of marginalised groups are evaluated, e.g., in the form of scientific excellence, teaching assessments, etc.?

Suggestions for further reading

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Notes

1 Fricker 2007
2 In the following, examples will mainly draw upon the situation of women in academia. However, the phenomena described as well as the suggestions as to how to counter epistemic injustices equally apply to other marginalised groups such as members of the LGBTQ+ community or ethnic minorities. For more information, the suggestions for further reading contain articles that specifically discuss these cases. See also Vitikainen, this volume, and Sagdahl, this volume
3 Halpern 2019; Toole 2019; Anderson 2020; Pohlhaus 2012
4 Ventura-Clapier et al. 2017; Jackson 2019; Dusenbery 2018
5 Cf. Pohlhaus 2017
6 Fricker 2007
7 The Combahee River Collective 2012; MacKinnon 1982; Fanon 2001; Du Bois 2016; Tuana 2017
8 Fricker 2007, 1
9 Fricker 2007, Ch.1
10 See Antonsen, this volume
11 Murphy-Oikonen et al. 2020; Sable et al. 2006
12 Hänel 2021
13 Herman 2015
14 Cf. Frost-Arnold 2020
15 Berenstain 2016, 569
16 Davis 2016
17 Fricker 2007, Ch.7
18 Ansel 2016; Parker 2015; Goulden, Mason, and Frasch 2011
19 Cislak, Formanowicz, and Saguy 2018; Knobloch-Westerwick, Glynn, and Huge 2013; Murrar et al. 2021
20 Bhakuni and Abimbola 2021
21 Ferber and Teiman 1980; Preidt 2019; Dion, Sumner, and Mitchell 2018
22 Williams 2020
23 Williams 2021

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