Epistemic Injustice
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Abstract
There’s been a great deal of interest in epistemology regarding what it takes for a hearer to come to know on the basis of a speaker’s say-so. That is, there’s been much work on the epistemology of testimony. However, what about when hearers don’t believe speakers when they should? In other words, what are we to make of when testimony goes wrong? A recent topic of interest in epistemology and feminist philosophy is how we sometimes fail to believe speakers due to inappropriate prejudices – implicit or explicit. This is known as epistemic injustice. In this article, I discuss Miranda Fricker’s groundbreaking work on epistemic injustice, as well as more recent developments that both offer critique and expansion on the nature and extent of epistemic injustice.

1. Credible Testimony

The epistemology of testimony generally concerns itself with what features are required in order for a hearer to come to know, or at least justifiably believe, what a speaker tells them. For example, if I have evidence that Sarah committed a crime, what needs to be true about my telling you, ‘Sarah did it’ in order for you, as a hearer, to come to know that Sarah did it? On some views, at a bare minimum, I need to know what I’m saying; on others, I need to be reliable in saying true things even if I don’t happen to know it myself; on yet others, I need to be reliable and you have to have some reason to think that I’m reliable.

Jennifer Lackey (2006, 2008) is one prominent proponent of the latter view, which she calls dualism. In short, in order for a hearer to come to know something from a speaker’s say-so, three conditions are required: what the speaker says is true, the speaker is sufficiently reliable in their testimony (that is, when they assert some proposition, $p$, $p$ is probably true), and the hearer has some reason to think that the speaker is reliable. Another way of stating this reliability condition is that the speaker must be credible and that the hearer must make a credibility judgment about the speaker and her claim. So when a speaker is credible and a hearer properly judges that the speaker is credible, the hearer gains a justified belief. If the belief also happens to be true, then they have knowledge.

Whenever we hear a speaker assert something, we form credibility judgments both about the speaker and what they said. Sanford Goldberg (2013, 2015) argues that there are at least four primary sources of information that we use in forming credibility judgments about speakers and their claims: information about the speaker themself (such as their track record for saying true things), information about how the speaker said what they did (such as whether they were nervous or confident), background knowledge on the content of the assertion (e.g., whether it coheres with what we already know about the topic), and information about the structural features of the assertion (such as whether it’s an article from a reputable news source).

Taking an example from Audi (2006), suppose that you need to know what time it is and you ask the first person on the street that you see. They tell you that it’s 9:05am. Now, do you believe them? Should you? Part of the answer is based on how credible you judge the
speaker – and what they say – to be: does 9:05 am seem plausible? Did the person look at a watch or time-telling device, or did they immediately blurt out the time? What other (imperfect) markers of reliability were present? Was the speaker acting duplicitously? Were they well dressed? As Tim Kenyon (2013) argues, testimonial contexts are informationally rich, providing information (which we often process implicitly) on which we base credibility judgments.

However, this line of inquiry focuses almost entirely on what it takes for testimony to go right. What should we make of cases where testimony seems to go systematically wrong? Specifically, what if there are problematic patterns in who we tend to believe, and who we tend not to believe – that is, who we judge to be credible? For example, there’s ample evidence that we’re more likely to believe a statement if it comes from a white man than a black woman, even if both speakers are equally credible (and even if the latter is more credible).3 Judging the credibility of a speaker is a fraught task, rife with opportunities for prejudices and implicit (or explicit) bias to creep in.

There are a variety of ways that our credibility judgments can match or mismatch the actual credibility of a speaker. When we attribute less credibility than a speaker deserves, we call this a credibility deficit. Conversely, when we attribute more credibility than a speaker deserves, we call this a credibility excess. Miranda Fricker (1999, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013) focuses, partly, on what she calls the ‘credibility economy’: the ways in which credibility is unevenly distributed among different speakers. When we attribute too little or too much credibility to a speaker, the speaker suffers an injustice. In short, testimonial injustice, on Fricker’s view, is when a speaker suffers a credibility deficit due to an identity prejudice (perhaps arising from an identity stereotype) on the hearer’s part. And this kind of harm is epistemic in nature: the speaker is harmed in her capacity as a knower. Consequently, Fricker identifies testimonial injustice as a kind of epistemic injustice.

While the history of epistemology has largely focused on the individual knower in isolation, recent decades have seen a shift toward anti-individualism and the recognition that knowledge is social. No knower is an island: we depend on social structures and other people for the acquisition, creation, and dissemination of knowledge. The relatively recent focus on the epistemology of testimony is just one instance of this. Furthermore, access to knowledge creation and dissemination (via testimony) is inherently political.4 For example, it turns out that asking who the knower is – their identity – matters to our epistemologies. As Collins (2000, p. 270) notes, ‘far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why.’5 And since testimony is, as Code (2014) notes, inherently interactive, the identities of both speaker and hearer are relevant to our epistemic evaluations. As she writes, ‘for many social epistemologists, feminists prominently among them, ethical–political questions about trust, power, epistemic negotiation, advocacy, credibility, communities of inquiry and the ethics of belief enter and shape the discourse….’6 Social and individual biases can come in during our evaluations of who to believe – and who to ascribe knowledge to. Collins (2000) and Dotson (2012b) discuss our epistemic validation practices: which ways of forming and sharing knowledge are sufficiently trustworthy? And what ways of knowing we deem adequate may be biased. If so, this becomes an issue of justice, and is thus a political matter.

It’s important to note, though, that while Fricker is widely acknowledged as the first to name and circumscribe epistemic injustice in these terms – and there’s been remarkably wide uptake of her view – there’s a long history in black feminist thought, and other feminists of color, that should be seen as also working on issues of epistemic injustice.7 I think it’s important to note that who secures uptake of ideas is also a matter of epistemic justice: when feminist women of color argue for issues we’d clearly describe as epistemic injustice (in Fricker’s terms), but that work only secures wide uptake when a white woman articulates the concepts, then this is an instance
of epistemic injustice. So in a deep irony, while Fricker’s work is extremely important in
detailing the concept and structure of epistemic injustice, this topic finally achieved wider
uptake with Fricker’s work, largely with her 2007 Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of
Knowing, but the large body of, primarily, black feminist thought isn’t acknowledged.
Moreover, moving forward, whose work we engage with is a matter of epistemic justice: much
of the work on issues of epistemic injustice by women of color often isn’t cited or engaged with
significantly.

2. Testimonial Injustice

Fricker distinguishes between two kinds of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and
hermeneutical injustice. I’ll discuss the latter in the following section. Both forms of epistemic
injustice are ways that agents are harmed qua epistemic agent. As she says, testimonial injustice
is ‘a kind of injustice in which someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower.’ And since
humans have a centrally important epistemic life, being harmed as a knower is also a moral
harm. Moreover, being harmed as a knower has important political implications. But what
exactly is the epistemic harm, and what produces it?

For Fricker, identity prejudices – based on stereotypes – create the credibility deficits that
produce testimonial injustice. While she notes that a speaker ‘enjoying’ a credibility excess
may produce some forms of epistemic injustice, her focus is exclusively on credibility deficits. As she says, ‘The primary characterization of testimonial injustice … remains such that it is a
matter of credibility deficit and not credibility excess.’ Her two central cases come from
Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird and Anthony Minghella’s screenplay of Patricia Highsmith’s
The Talented Mr. Ripley. I’ll focus for now on the latter. It’s important to discuss the cases in
some detail, at least partly, because much of subsequent discussions of epistemic injustice have
centered on providing deeper or even alternative analyses of these principal cases of Fricker’s.

In The Talented Mr. Ripley, Tom Ripley is a con man, caught in a web of lies and deception,
as well as finding himself attracted to Dickie Greenleaf (who is wealthy and engaged to
Marge Sherwood). Tom ends up murdering Dickie (as well as Dickie’s friend, Freddy). Since
Tom is skilled at deception, he leaves a trail of evidence leading almost everyone (including
Dickie’s father, Herbert, and a private investigator Herbert hired) to think that Dickie
committed suicide. Tom wrote a suicide note, scratched out Dickie’s passport photo, and while
dressed as Dickie, happened to be seen carrying off a dead Freddy (although Tom wasn’t aware
that he was seen until long afterwards).

The only person who isn’t convinced is Marge. She knows Dickie well, as his fiancée. She
simply doesn’t believe that Dickie would kill himself. When she says this, in objection to
Herbert’s claim that evidence points to Dickie having committed suicide, Herbert dismisses
her: ‘Marge, there’s female intuition, and there are facts.’ Elsewhere, she’s told that she simply
doesn’t want to believe that Dickie killed himself. In one important scene she finds what leads
her to plausibly know that Tom killed Dickie (and thus that Dickie’s death wasn’t a suicide):
Tom has Dickie’s rings, which Dickie had deeply promised Marge never to take off. This is
the final straw for Marge: she knows Tom did it, but no one will believe her. Moreover, in
her absence, another character says to Tom that Marge ‘just needs someone to blame’, and so
she blames Tom. Everyone is discounting Marge’s reasons – her evidence – for believing that
Dickie’s death wasn’t a suicide, and they’re completely rejecting her claim that Tom murdered
Dickie. Moreover, the reasons they’re discounting her are gendered: she’s a woman relying on
emotion and ‘female intuition’, not ‘facts’.

This is a paradigm case of testimonial injustice. We have someone asserting something – that
Dickie wouldn’t have committed suicide, and later that Tom murdered Dickie – for which she
has good evidence, the assertions are true (and plausibly known), but her claims are dismissed. But why are they dismissed? Largely, it’s because Marge is a woman, and the identity prejudice, based on a stereotype, is that women are emotional and that emotionality is at odds with rationality. She doesn’t ‘want’ to believe what the men take to be the truth, and she doesn’t want to because of her emotions; she just ‘needs someone to blame’ and that’s why she blames Tom – it couldn’t possibly be because she has evidence (such as Tom having Dickie’s rings, along with a lot of suspicious behavior on Tom’s part). So she suffers a credibility deficit due to an identity prejudice: we have testimonial injustice.

When emotion-based identity prejudices and stereotypes are in play, particularly I think, we should see how this creates a vicious cycle of testimonial injustice. Consider what it feels like to experience the testimonial injustice that Marge does: it’s infuriating. It makes people angry. And that anger gets used as further reason to dismiss her claims, which makes her even angrier. And so on. In fact, her last exchange with Tom involves her hitting him and repeatedly yelling, ‘I know it was you! I know it was you!’ But she’s carted off as a distraught woman. This is treated as further evidence that she’s merely emotional, not rational. And it’s thus treated as further reason to discount her testimony. So the experience of testimonial injustice – in this case due to emotionality – produces emotions which lead to increased testimonial injustice, in a vicious cycle.

Fricker’s second central case of testimonial injustice comes from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which focuses on the trial of a black man, Tom Robinson, in 1935 Alabama. He’s falsely accused of raping a white girl, Mayella Ewell. Her house is rundown, and Tom has offered to help her in the past (largely out of pity). When Tom is on trial, after Mayella’s testimony, it comes down to his testimony against that of Mayella’s. During the prosecution’s examination, Tom testifies that he would often help Mayella with repairs and work around the house. When asked why he would help her so much, and for free, Tom admitted, ‘I felt right sorry for her, she seemed to try more’n the rest of ’em—.’ Immediately interrupting him, the prosecutor incredulously says, ‘You felt sorry for her, you felt sorry for her?’ In a deeply racist culture, this is inconceivable: how could a black man feel sorry for a white woman? As Fricker diagnosis things, a black man admitting that he felt sorry for a white woman is a ‘taboo sentiment’, and the white prosecutor, white judge and jury, and white onlookers at the trial completely discount Tom’s assertion. He thus suffers a credibility deficit due to an identity prejudice: another classic case of testimonial injustice.

Earlier, I noted that Fricker only focuses on credibility deficits in the production of testimonial injustice. José Medina (2011, 2013) has taken Fricker to task on this. He argues that we shouldn’t ignore the role of credibility excesses for some people in producing credibility deficits in others. He focuses primarily on Tom Robinson’s trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Tom’s credibility deficit doesn’t come out of nowhere: it’s partly produced by Mayella’s testimony – as a sympathetic white girl in a deeply anti-black racist culture. She enjoys a credibility excess which produces, in part, Tom’s credibility deficit. Critical to Medina’s view is that credibility is not a distributive good, as it is for Fricker; rather, we ‘should conceive of credibility as interactive and as involving implicit comparisons and contrasts (potential comparison and contrast classes that operate counterfactually)…. Accepting that credibility has no distributive nature, there is nonetheless an intimate relation between credibility excesses and credibility deficits.’

3. Hermeneutical Injustice

One way to understand Fricker’s project is that it’s about the unjust ways that we distribute credibility, in what she calls the ‘credibility economy.’ Much like a regular economy, the distribution of resources is not uniform: some have more, while others have less. When speaking
of epistemology and knowledge, the unevenly distributed resources are concepts, credibility, and knowledge. This differential can—and does—lead to what Fricker calls *hermeneutical marginalization*. This is where a socially disadvantaged group is blocked—whether intentionally or unintentionally—from access to knowledge, or access to communicating knowledge (to those in more socially privileged locations) due to a gap in hermeneutical resources, especially when these resources would help people understand the very existence and nature of the marginalization. For example, there’s tremendous resistance to the concept of ‘white privilege’ by white people, particularly in US contexts (for example, Mills, 2007).

By ‘hermeneutical resources’, she means concepts shared in the ‘social imagination’: concepts widely known and available for use in understanding oneself and communicating with others; or, as Fricker puts it, ‘our shared tools of social interpretation’ (2007, p. 6).14 We all tend to understand what someone means when they say that they have a headache: we’ve named a phenomenon in a way that allows us to understand what a particular feeling in one’s head is, and this naming gives us a resource for communicating about our experiences.

Fricker defines *hermeneutical injustice* as ‘the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experiences obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.’15 More specifically, hermeneutical injustice is the result of hermeneutical marginalization. Fricker’s central example is *sexual harassment*. Prior to the naming of a wide range of—particularly workplace—behaviors, women were unable to understand their own experiences and the discomfort they felt with the associated behaviors of men in terms of *harassment*. Groping, leering, following, lewd comments, and such in the workplace didn’t typically rise to meet the standard for criminal harassment, so referring to them as harassment was unavailable. Moreover, such behaviors were often dismissed as ‘harmless flirting’. However, with the consciousness-raising movement of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, these behaviors were finally understood, and named, as a form of harassment: *sexual harassment*. Indeed, ‘sexual harassment’ as a phrase and concept was wholly absent from the social imagination prior to this. However, once named, women were able to understand their own experiences, and they were able to communicate their experiences to others: hermeneutical injustice was overcome.

4. Developments on Epistemic Injustice

There’s been an explosion of research on epistemic injustice lately, and it seems to be accelerating. One important area of research connects epistemic injustice to issues in the epistemology of ignorance.16 Rebecca Mason (2011), for example, notes that there are two kinds of ignorance resulting from hermeneutical injustice: marginalized persons may lack the hermeneutical resources to understand their own experiences or oppression, and persons in dominant social groups may remain ignorant of the oppression of marginalized groups. As Mason puts it, these two types of unknowing are ‘an unknowing to which members of non-dominant social groups are subject by virtue of their systematic hermeneutical marginalization and an unknowing to which members of dominant groups are subject by virtue of their ethically bad knowledge practices’.17 While it’s certainly important to focus on how marginalized persons are harmed by lacking access to hermeneutical resources to help them understand their own experiences, Mason reminds us that one way that structural oppression maintains itself is by dominant group members also not knowing about the systems of oppression in which they operate, participate, and perpetuate (even unintentionally).

What’s important is that sometimes marginalized persons may have access to the necessary hermeneutical resources to understand their own situations, but dominant group members remain ignorant of these concepts in a way that perpetuates non-dominant group
marginalization. In some cases, non-dominant group members even have named concepts – access to important hermeneutical resources – but dominant groups are resistant to providing uptake. This is a central topic of Collins (2000): there’s a long history of black women’s knowledge claims being rejected because their hermeneutical resources weren’t deemed acceptable by dominant groups (particularly white men). In this vein, Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (2012) connects hermeneutical injustice to the epistemology of ignorance by naming this phenomenon **willful hermeneutical ignorance**.

Pohlhaus Jr. defines willful hermeneutical ignorance as when ‘dominantly situated knowers refuse to acknowledge epistemic tools developed from the experienced world of those situated marginally. Such refusals allow dominantly situated knowers to misunderstand, misinterpret, and/or ignore whole parts of the world.’

Recall that for Fricker, once a hermeneutical resource is developed and spreads widely enough in the social imaginary, hermeneutical injustice is overcome and thus ceases. However, if dominant groups refuse to grant uptake to the legitimacy of the hermeneutical resource, then the conceptual tool may allow marginalized groups to understand themselves and their situations, but dominant group members will remain ignorant. And this can often be active, in the way that Mills (2007) argues that white ignorance is active, even belligerent. Think of the opposition, for example, to the concept of ‘rape culture’ in North American social contexts. Many men – and some women – actively deny that rape culture exists, and they thus fail to see the way that it operates, perpetuating women’s (and some men’s) oppression.

In short, the broad topic of epistemic injustice is currently the center of a rapidly expanding and exciting literature. One avenue of current development is that we’re better understanding how epistemic harms constitute epistemic violence and can contribute to epistemic oppression. One way to harm people, as we’ve seen, is to harm them in their capacity as knowers, and as epistemic agents. When we systematically exclude people of a particular social identity – such as women, people of color, disabled people, and many intersectional identities – we enact both epistemic and political violence. Dotson (2012a, p.24) defines epistemic oppression as ‘epistemic exclusions afforded positions and communities that produce deficiencies in social knowledge’. Compare Bailey (2014). When we exclude various ways of knowing – such as treating ‘lived experiences as a criterion of credibility’ or when we ignore women for being emotional – we exclude knowers who deploy those ways of knowing. And when knowers are excluded for epistemically, and politically, defective reasons, this causes and contributes to epistemic oppression.

Sometimes willful hermeneutical ignorance is a result of what Dotson (2011) refers to as testimonial quieting. This happens when an audience, due to an identity prejudice, doesn’t properly regard the speaker as a knower. That is, the audience doesn’t regard the speaker as a source of knowledge, and that the audience does this for the wrong – often sexist or racist – reasons. So even though a speaker may give testimony, she doesn’t just suffer a mere credibility deficit (since that at least involves a credibility judgment); rather, her utterance is ignored entirely. It’s as if she didn’t speak at all. For example, when Tom Robinson is viewed as inherently epistemically defective, due in part to deeply racist stereotypes about black people being dishonest and uneducated – indeed, some thought that black people were inherently uneducatable – his testimony doesn’t simply suffer a credibility deficit: it’s worth nothing to the jury. It’s just as if he didn’t testify at all.

Alternatively, if a speaker recognizes that an audience – perhaps due to the likelihood that an audience harbors an identity prejudice against the speaker – is unlikely to give her adequate uptake, she’ll choose not to speak. Dotson (2011) calls this testimonial smothering. For example, if a woman knows that a particular audience is hostile to her claims of experiencing harassment, she’ll be unlikely to discuss her experiences with that audience: she’ll choose to smother her testimony. In testimonial smothering, the speaker themself withholds their testimony. But it
would be wrong to say that they exclude themselves from knowledge production: they smother their testimony because the credibility economy is such that their audience may be hostile, may ridicule the speaker, or worse. And so while the speaker decides for themselves not to speak, it’s often due to a pre-existing injustice in practices of uptake and credibility assessments. Thus, the speaker is still excluded by broader social forces, and testimonial smothering is yet another form of epistemic oppression.

As I’ve noted already, Fricker’s work has ignited a variety of projects seeking to extend our understanding of epistemic injustice, both in terms of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, as well as in terms of extending our understanding beyond Fricker’s framework.22 Regarding the former, work is being done on understanding the implications of epistemic injustice for our responsibility as epistemic and moral agents,23 on the role of trust,24 and other topics. Regarding the latter, important work is being done on applying epistemic injustice in medical contexts,25 argumentation,26 developmental policy,27 education,28 language and communication,29 propaganda,30 gaslighting and ally culture,31 and many others.32 It’s an exciting time in epistemology. Looking back, I suspect that future epistemologists will see the recent focus on issues of epistemic injustice as a watershed moment.

Short Biography

Rachel McKinnon is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the College of Charleston. Her research primarily focuses on epistemology, philosophy of language, feminism and gender issues, and metaphysics. She has a 2015 book, *The Norms of Assertion: Truth, Lies, and Warrant* with Palgrave Macmillan, and is currently working on her second book, *Things We Do With Assertions* also with Palgrave Macmillan. Her articles have appeared in journals such as Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Philosophical Studies, Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, American Philosophical Quarterly, Hypatia, Metaphilosophy, and Res Philosophica, among others.

Notes

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1 Lackey (2006, 2008) refers to this as the transmission principle of testimony. For examples of proponents, see Audi (2006), Burge (1993, 1997), and Schmitt. Lackey (2006, 2008) and McKinnon (2013, 2015, and Forthcoming, a) argue against the requirement that speakers need to know what they say in order for hearers to come to know on the basis of testimony.

2 For example, see Goldberg (2010, 2015).

3 The implicit bias literature is very large. For a detailed summary, see Kirwan Institute (2015).

4 For an accessible history of the shift from individualism to anti-individualism, with particular focus on the contributions of feminist epistemology, see Code (2014).


9 This is a point of contention to which I will return below.


12 See also Davis (Forthcoming).
However, many have opted to speak in terms of the 'social imaginary' (such as Medina 2011, 2012 and many others). In fact, I prefer talk of the social imaginary over 'imagination'.


An excellent introduction can be found in Sullivan and Tuana (2007).


But as Dotson (2014) reminds us, Fricker (1999) originally frames epistemic injustice in terms of epistemic oppression. So it's worthy of remark that 'oppression' has dropped largely out of the debate until recently.


Indeed, building on Davis (Forthcoming), expanding on my discussion of situational avoidance forms of stereotype threat in McKinnon (2014), some instances of situational avoidance stereotype threat constitute testimonial smothering. Testimonial smothering also happens frequently to persons who previously experience gaslighting from an audience. See McKinnon (Forthcoming, b).


For example, Riggs (2012), Medina (2013).


Bondy (2010).

McCollum (2012).

Løkkivi et al. (2013), Murrins (2013).


Stanley (2015), McKinnon (Forthcoming, c).

McKinnon (Forthcoming, b),

An important collection of papers on epistemic injustice is about to be released. See Pohlhaus et al. (Forthcoming).

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