

8. What is epistemic injustice? How important a factor is it in sustaining gender injustice, and how might it be combated? Explain and defend your view.

This essay will define epistemic injustice, explain what it is, how it affects gender injustice and ways to combat it. First, I will briefly define Epistemic injustice and gender injustice. Epistemic injustice is a concept first coined by philosopher Miranda Fricker in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of knowing*. It describes the phenomenon when somebody's knowledge is not acknowledged correctly, either because of prejudice or because of a gap in the pool of knowledge. Gender injustice is oppression and inequality based on gender; a typical example is the wage gap between male and female workers, even though there are laws for equal pay. It is unfair, and it results in women being more vulnerable financially. In this essay, I will argue that epistemic injustice is a crucial factor in sustaining gender injustice. It maintains the status quo of power imbalances. Additionally, I will propose fighting against prejudices through implicit bias training, the necessity of education for solidarity between genders, and the urgency to stop thinking in binaries to combat epistemic injustices.

Epistemic injustice is at the intersection of epistemology, the study or theory of knowledge, and ethics, by the term injustice. Hence, a first answer to the question of what epistemic injustice is could be *a wrong done to someone in the field of knowledge*. The concept of Miranda Fricker is more precise than that. Epistemic injustice is: "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower." (Fricker, 2007, p.1). She further differentiates two forms of epistemic injustice: hermeneutical injustice and testimonial injustice. To consider these two forms, and so epistemic injustice itself, we need to consider the knower in relation

to others since knowledge is intrinsically social. In McKinnon's words: "No knower is an island: we depend on social structure and other people for the creation, and dissemination of knowledge." (McKinnon, 2016, p.438). This conception of epistemology is far from Descartes's meditations, which conceives knowledge from the perspective of an individual alone, regardless of their social environment.

Epistemic injustice requires considering knowledge exchange between individuals, knowledge as a currency for trust, and recognition of a knower. In the case of testimonial injustice, credibility is the currency, and in the case of hermeneutical injustice, it is the acknowledgement of knowledge as such. Testimonial injustice happens when a knower – a speaker – is given less credibility than they deserve by the hearer due to "identity-prejudicial credibility deficit" (Fricker 2007, p.4). This happens when due to negative stereotypes, individuals are labelled less competent than they are. An example of stereotypes leading to testimonial injustice would be when a man and a woman are involved in a car accident, and the policemen give more credit to the man because they unconsciously associate women with lousy driving. Hermeneutical injustice happens when the knower lacks the epistemic tools to phrase their experience comprehensibly. In other words, when the knower tells something that is not recognised and understood by others because of a gap in the pool of knowledge. In Fricker's words: "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" (Ibid., p.1). The example Fricker gives is that of Carmita Wood and her experience of sexual harassment before the concept was labelled and recognised as a legal issue. However, not all occurrences of a credibility deficit are instances of testimonial injustice since it might happen to be just an honest mistake of someone who did genuinely not know about something, which is inevitable. It would still be an injustice, but not epistemic injustice,

since: 'credibility deficit might simply result from innocent error: error that is both ethically and epistemically non-culpable' (Ibid, p.21). To be considered an epistemic injustice, there needs to be some 'ethical poison in the judgement of the hearer' (Ibid., p.22), and this ethical poison is precisely identity prejudice.

The sad irony of epistemic injustice is that the term itself exemplifies it. It is a term popularised by Miranda Fricker, a white female philosophy professor when the concept as such has already been known and described by black feminists like Patricia Hill Collins: 'In her book, *Black Feminist Thought* [...], she claims that by virtue of her being a U.S. black woman she will systematically be undervalued as a knower' (Dotson, 2011, p.242). Other non-white women write about epistemic injustice even if not phrased like that, and the readership fails to recognise that work. As McKinnon points out, "that work only secures wide uptake when a white woman articulates the concepts" (McKinnon 2016, p.438). Therefore, the concept of epistemic injustice in itself highlights an underlying epistemic injustice: the failed acknowledgement of the work and knowledge of women of colour.

While looking at epistemic injustice instances, it is interesting to consider silencing practices, like testimonial smothering, which consists of a form of self-censorship of the speaker due to a hostile audience. Testimonial smothering: "occurs because the speaker perceives one's immediate audience as unwilling or unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony." (Dotson, 2011, p.244). This happens when the content of the testimony "runs the risk of causing negative effects by virtue of being unsafe" (Idem). Hence the testifier will self-censor and cut out problematic parts. One instance of testimonial smothering Dotson gives is that of Cassandra Byres Harvin: a white, middle-aged woman asks about Harvin's research. When Harvin answers that it concerns raising black sons in the USA, the white woman fails to recognise that it could be different, and hence Harvin does not engage further

with that woman. This is an instance of testimonial smothering as 'the speaker themselves withholds their testimony' (McKinnon, 2016, p.442) and therefore cut out content of their speech.

Epistemic injustice is a crucial factor in the preservation of gender injustice. Generally, epistemic injustice is a way of maintaining a power differential between two groups. The more powerful group believes, maybe even unconsciously, to have some interest in maintaining the status quo. This is why we find instances of epistemic injustice in minorities; it is a way of maintaining the power struggle favouring one group over another, which leads to maintaining the injustice. Additionally, like the example of the lack of recognition of women of colour in work about epistemic injustice, these factors tend to cumulate. A black woman will struggle more than a white woman. In Byskov's article 'what makes Epistemic Injustice an Injustice?', Byskov mentions 'five conditions that make an epistemic injustice an injustice. While the first two conditions—the disadvantage condition and the prejudice condition—are derived from Fricker's [...] arguments, [Byskov] identif[ies] three additional conditions—the stakeholder condition, the epistemic condition, and the social justice condition—the violation of which create an epistemic injustice.' (Byskov, 2021, p.116). The disadvantage condition is the outcome that is worse for the person discriminated against as a knower. Whereas the social justice condition states that there is already vulnerability due to belonging to an oppressed group, which shows how epistemic injustice is standard in maintaining oppression. To return the example of the black woman, according to Byskov, all else being equal, being a white female or a black female who is not recognised as a knower, will not be the same experience of epistemic *injustice*.

In gender injustice, Epistemic injustice and testimonial smothering maintain the status quo because society still fails to acknowledge some injustices. For example, upskirting, which consists of "taking [...] a photo or a video up a woman's skirt without her permission" (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017), is punishable and a criminal offence, thanks to Gina Martin's courage. She spoke up when the policemen and the law did not recognise upskirting as a crime since they could not apply to any well-known law. This is an instance of hermeneutical injustice since there was no law about this. There was a gap in the pool of knowledge. Without Martin's actions – starting a campaign and a petition –, little would have changed about upskirting.

Testimonial smothering is a common way to maintain inequality. In 'Stop Thinking So Much About 'Sexual Harassment'', Saul mentions a sexual harassment example between a professor and a student where the complaints are not filed out of fear of vengeance. Since professors have much power and are well-known and protected figures, the victims could have more to lose by filing a complaint than by keeping quiet. This is an example of testimonial smothering. The victim will fade out details that could put her in a worse situation, out of fear of their audience's uptake or later repercussions. A better awareness of bystander ethics could tackle this. Victim-blaming is another example of how epistemic injustice perpetuates gender inequality. For example, a woman tells her friend that she experiences inappropriate comments – harassment – but the friend fails to recognise it because of their obsession with how the woman dressed. This is an instance of testimonial injustice. It does not explicitly fail to say that this was an instance of sexual harassment. However, it operates a shift in the responsibility, making the claim of women less credible (since she was dressed in a certain way that the friend judged) and failing to acknowledge her experience as a knower.

There are different ways to combat epistemic injustice, one is anchored in the present, and the second is anchored in the future. To answer now to the problem of epistemic injustice in gender injustice, we can use myth busters and other ways of avoiding bias: for instance, in academia, anonymous grading, or anonymous peer-reviewing, gender quotas for domains where women are underrepresented. Also, raising general awareness about what it is like to be a woman: the law against upskirting is a success because Gina Martin did a campaign and raised awareness of it. Internet is an excellent tool to communicate such ideas and share knowledge. This is how the #metoo movement gained momentum. Actions seeking to reduce bias will help diminishing gender injustice because of the reduction of negative identity prejudice from the hearer in cases of epistemic exchanges, which is crucial in testimonial injustice. Sharing over media, like the internet, experiences between women will hopefully reduce hermeneutical injustice cases. Another way to combat epistemic injustice is to become an active, involved and helping bystander, speaking up – if possible – when a knower remains unheard.

One long-term action for gender equality is rethinking the way we raise children and 'have honest conversations about raising children differently, about trying to create a fairer world for women and for men' (Adichie, 2017, p.4). Like black feminist and novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie suggested in *Dear Ijeawele, A Feminist Manifesto in fifteen suggestions*, teaching about the nonsense behind the concept of gender roles, about oppression, or simply acknowledging the ever-presence of difference in childrearing would be beneficial for greater equality.

Lastly, it would be interesting to broaden reconsider who is affected by hermeneutical injustice. According to Beeby, 'although Fricker's paradigm example concerns sexual harassment, Carmita Wood's experience of sexual harassment is not an instance of

hermeneutical injustice. The hermeneutical injustice here is her experience of being unable to *understand and communicate about* sexual harassment.' (Beeby, 2011, p.481) The hermeneutic injustice is not sexual harassment in itself; it is the resulting impossibility to exchange about this experience with others. While sexual harassment involves a harasser who is doing wrong, the hermeneutical injustice is not committed by the harasser. He is not guilty of hermeneutical injustice: 'hermeneutical injustice involves no culprit. It is a purely structural notion, dependent on the power relations present in our social structures and not on any one agent.' (Ibid., p.483) Therefore, there are actually two victims of hermeneutical injustice, Wood herself and her harasser, since they neither have access to the intellectual content to understand how his behaviour was wrong. This highlights once more the need for an open, inclusive discussion about gender injustice involving *everybody*.

As can be seen, there are two timelines on which to act to combat epistemic injustice in gender inequality: the present and the future. The now being affected by an opening of the discussion, sharing experiences like it is already the case with fourth-wave feminism and institutional measures to help avoid bias. The future will change by rearing children differently than we were. Ultimately, one should not grow up in a society that sees gender in an outdated binary of blue and pink. The idea of a gender binary is indeed harmful because thinking in terms of 'us against the world' is a belief that maintains injustice, as it reduces our ability to listen closely to what is said, without the layer of our pre-conceived beliefs. It is crucial to break such stereotypes since what feminism aims for is an abstract idea but among the fundamental rights: equality. By creating an environment that is self-aware of the possibility of bias and values the sharing of knowledge regardless of authority and power, chances are

epistemic injustice could be less frequent and even, ideally, suppressed, and gender inequality reduced.

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