

Riptides of Ignorance: a Sociological Account of Epistemic Injustice in America

Epistemic Injustice, an Introduction

Many injustices that occur are obvious; a thief steals the money or belongings of another, or a student gets away with cheating on a math exam. In more serious situations, children starve for no apparent reason, and ethnic groups are arbitrarily persecuted. While these forms of injustice are very worthy of attention, one form of injustice is often overlooked or completely unknown: *epistemic injustice*. In this regard, an individual or individuals are wronged as *knowers*, whether it be in their ability to access, contribute to, or experience knowledge in its various forms. Today's champion of this recent concept, Miranda Fricker, writes extensively on this issue in her book titled Epistemic Injustice. Fricker distinguishes between two different types of epistemic injustices, *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*. Through these concepts, she attempts to describe different ways in which someone's epistemic value can be diminished, whether that be through person to person conversation or on a societal level.

In this paper, I will provide an exegetical account of Fricker's conceptions of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. I will then demonstrate how these two types of injustices can interact with each other in a way that can create a downward-spiraling effect for those caught between them, which leaves particular groups of people to be simultaneously victimized and vilified as knowers. I will illustrate this idea using Fricker's concepts to describe a sociological relationship between three different groups of people in America: those in dominant society, rural Americans, and marginalized minority groups. While Fricker does a brilliant job of elucidating these previously unlabeled phenomena, my goal is to explain how these pervasive

forms of epistemic deficiency lead those who perpetrate epistemic injustices to become victims of them as well.

Testimonial Injustice

According to Fricker, “Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” [Fricker, 1]. One example of this is a sexist man underestimating a woman’s capability of possessing, learning, or conveying information. The man holds an obvious prejudice, his sexism, and this prejudice prevents him from perceiving a woman as *credible*. The concept of credibility, according to Fricker, is composed of two parts: competence and sincerity. Sexism as it’s understood may resemble a credibility deficit regarding competence, while the idea that a black person is less honest than a white person is an example of a deficit regarding sincerity.

The way in which someone can experience a testimonial justice is twofold, for an individual can truly lack the knowledge needed while coincidentally being discriminated against as a knower, or the individual can possess the appropriate knowledge and despite this, still be discriminated against. One’s epistemic status is not a factor to the hearer; to the hearer they are merely an epistemic object or artifact. In this manner, the complexity of an individual as a knower is sanitized and simplified by prejudices held by a hearer.

An example (courtesy of Matthew Congdon) is that of a black person with blood on their shirt who encounters a police officer. In this case, the black person may have injured themselves or been helping another who had been injured. Upon explaining this and asking for assistance, the police officer behaves in a manner different from what his protocol would require, and instead of navigating the situation as an objective knower, their perception of the black person is colored by

their prejudice, and they doubt the black person's testimony. An important reminder is that this injustice is epistemic in nature. The police officer does not need to commit an act of physical or emotional violence; unfairly doubting the credibility of the speaker is enough to constitute a testimonial injustice. In this situation, a testimonial injustice may even be unspoken. A hearer can easily come to a conclusion before a dialogue has even begun. Note that committing a testimonial injustice goes beyond a healthy skepticism. In the aforementioned scenario, one might argue that the police officer need be cautious, especially in a situation with a sign of danger, blood. However, cautiousness turns into prejudice when an individual is wrongly discredited as a knower in any circumstance.

Hermeneutical Injustice

The second type of injustice is hermeneutical injustice, which “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” [Fricker, 1]. To illustrate this, imagine a group of people around a campfire. Some are able to gather close and experience the fire's brilliance and warmth, while others are left on the periphery with a less illuminated view of their surroundings as well a lack of warmth they may not even be aware of until they feel the fire's heat. Simply replace the campfire with knowledge and the way in which hermeneutical injustice operates becomes clear. Some people are able to interpret and contribute to a body of knowledge while others are quite literally left in the cold and kept in the dark, unable to understand their surroundings and experiences.

One of the most recent accounts of hermeneutical injustice (or a rally against it) is the emergence of the concept of sexual harassment. The term *sexual harassment* was not officially

coined until 1975, when a group of women gathered in solidarity to fight against a force that they could not even put a name to. Quite simply, the concept did not exist despite the fact that it had adverse effects on women everywhere. For many women, lewd comments, unwanted advances, and vulgar gestures impinged on their lives daily. Suffering from an information deficit is part of experiencing a hermeneutical injustice, but it is also important to note that what makes this phenomenon unique is that an individual or group of people are left out of the interpretive process necessary to adequately participate in a community of knowers. Many women who experienced sexual harassment did not find epistemic clarity until they were able to congregate with a community of women and discuss their own personal experiences, thus formulating a specific narrative that each individual could relate to. This initial inability to congregate and discuss issues (which Fricker may call a gathering of hermeneutical resources) is precisely what kept these women in the dark. Although contentious, Fricker also makes it clear that harassers in addition to harasees suffer from an inability to interpret these epistemic and social phenomena, but she is hesitant to claim that harassers experience the same injustice as harasees. She would simply like to make it clear that there are no “winners” in the camp of epistemic disadvantage, but some groups suffer much more than others.

Dynamics of Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustice

Both testimonial and hermeneutical injustices have been defined, but how do these concepts interact? Hermeneutical injustices occur as structural phenomena which make it possible for episodes of testimonial injustice to occur. In other words, hermeneutical injustice is the backdrop for testimonial injustice. One is the script, the other the actors, engaging in a performance where one can't help but read the lines given to them (though this example may

de-emphasize the autonomy of those involved in these interactions). This lack of knowledge is one of the ways in which testimonial injustices can be formed. Additionally, a multitude of negative consequences can arise from operating with a hermeneutical information deficit. Not only is it the case that one examines the world lacking information to make appropriate judgements about themselves, others, and a variety of pertinent phenomena, but they are often perceived as lacking this information, which can cause them to experience testimonial injustices.

The key relationship I would like to present is this: those who suffer from hermeneutical injustices may actually exacerbate testimonial injustices against themselves and others. Operating with an epistemic disadvantage causes them to be seen as less credible, and they in turn give less credit to others as a result of their own deficit. The cycle continues; there are many cases where because a group commits a testimonial injustice against another group, they themselves continue to appear less credible. Committing testimonial injustices diminishes one's own credibility and perceived value as a knower while also exacerbating hermeneutical and testimonial injustices against themselves and others. One can imagine a schoolyard bully who wrongs others through intimidation, shaming, and violence. As the story goes, the roots of this bully's aggression lie in the pain they have incurred but do not know how to deal with. The bully's victims are merely outlets, as the bully makes a desperate cry for help masked in violence and confusion. This is precisely what is captured in the epistemic quagmire that faces many individuals who partake in society as (un)knowers.

A Triad of Epistemic Injustices

Thus far the concept of epistemic injustice has been explained as well as how it operates among individuals and collectives. To better illustrate this epistemic web of injustices, one can

apply Fricker's concepts to sociological phenomena, specifically the interaction between what I will call *dominant society*, *rural America*, and *marginalized minorities*. For lack of better terms, these will serve as placeholders to capture the essence of each group.

Dominant society will refer to the hegemonic belief systems, intellectual practices, etc. of a "majority" of Americans. While dominant society may not even hold a simple majority in regards to population, it is referred to with this label because the practices, beliefs, and epistemic climate of this group casts its shadow on the rest of America. One example of this is the experience of white dominance during South African Apartheid. A more recent and subtle example of this concept of quasi-majority can be found in the misrepresentation of many social issues via disproportionate media coverage. (For example, many LGBT+ issues that receive news coverage chiefly affect affluent members of the queer community and not the community as a whole. While the queer community is considered a minority group, this quasi-majority is analogous to the dominant society group that I would like to capture conceptually).

The second group, rural America, refers to predominantly (though not exclusively) white people that live in non-dense areas further away from cities and cultural hotspots (it is a semi-coincidence that most members of this group are conservative, for there are plenty of conservative individuals who live in urban communities or fall into other realms of society. However, some argue that conservatism is a product of existing in spaces that may be removed from urban areas). Rural America also encapsulates many blue collar workers and participants in localized operations. While some may consider this demographic "Trump's America," that label again, is coincidental to this demographic and is most often used as a pejorative term, making it unproductive for any fruitful examination of these individuals or their epistemic situations.

The third group will refer to marginalized minorities. This umbrella term is applicable to ethnic minorities, immigrants, women, members of the queer community, non-christians, and those who are not fluent in English. This list of criteria is not rigid nor exhaustive, but many of these identities are markers for historical disenfranchisement.

The figure below demonstrates the complex relationship between these three groups, with the blue arrows representing hermeneutical injustices and the red arrows representing testimonial injustices. While there is no particular point of origin, one may argue that dominant society engages in practices which create an information deficit for marginalized groups. Rural America in turn embraces these practices, while the spatial difference between them and dominant society slowly creates a different type of information deficit. Thus the marginalized minority group feels the injustices of two groups simultaneously. As a result, marginalized minority groups internalize this discrimination and it is directed back to themselves via in-group testimonial injustices. Rural America, however, also feels the weight of injustices. The natural deficits which arise solely through logistics cause them to be perceived as ignorant or intellectually inferior to dominant society, which causes testimonial injustices to be directed towards them. This is only worsened by rural America's discriminatory behavior toward marginalized groups, which demonstrates how they lack information to operate with. While dominant society too lacks this information, it is largely by their own doing, so they experience a hermeneutical injustice that is self inflicted. Thus a vicious cycle of ignorance is perpetuated.

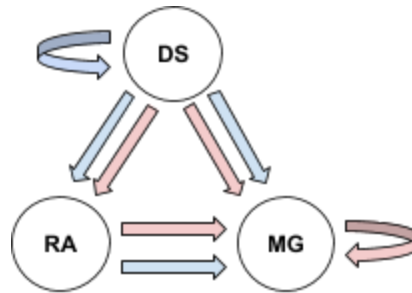


Figure 1

Now that a conceptual groundwork has been laid out, it is time to provide a more thorough and sociologically detailed account of how this cycle operates. Why do rural Americans experience hermeneutical injustice in the first place? Spatially, they exist in a relationship with dominant society where information matriculates to them slower. It is a rather insulated community that per capita likely lacks the number of internet connections, books, cell phones, libraries, sources of information in general. Historically, the economies of rural areas were not conducive to many types of work that produce what Fricker calls an exceptional climate (one where people can congregate to interpret/discover information). In addition to spatial isolation, rural America may experience a form of social isolation. As previously mentioned, rural communities often have smaller, less dense populations than urban ones. Similarly, many rural communities are homogenous in nature. Fewer interactions (both in sheer quantity as well as the amount of different types of people) results in a smaller data set for rural Americans with which to make judgements and formulate and modify their beliefs. It is possible that many rural Americans hold what are deemed inappropriate beliefs due to never hearing of other views anecdotally (while there are other ways to come across opinions and information, one could argue that interpersonal interactions seem to be more receptive).

Despite many marginalized groups' closer proximity to dominant society (or their quasi-inclusion in it), societal infrastructure often leads to these groups being deliberately or de facto cut out of the exchange/wellspring of information. There are dozens of obvious forms of discrimination against this group, but what is of interest here is epistemic in nature. Higher incarceration rates and lack of access quality education, transportation, and other resources are all factors in the epistemic resource deficit experienced by many ethnic minorities and immigrants (with these two identities almost always intersecting). Interestingly, limited access to quality resources is a similar disadvantage felt by many rural Americans. However, those cases are largely due to proximity as opposed to policies against marginalized groups that worsen epistemic gaps. From a testimonial perspective, it is clear how marginalized minority groups can be wronged. Women, people of color, and non-English speakers are perceived quite acutely as lacking knowledge and many epistemic capabilities. Non-christians may be wronged due to an assumed lack of biblical literacy, and members of the queer community might be judged as being ignorant or having a distorted perception of romantic and sexual beliefs and practices.

There are many more questions that may be generated by exploring the dynamics between these three groups, but this paper merely serves to demonstrate the complexity of epistemic relationships and the ripple effect brought about by unequal participation in the interpretation of various phenomena. While injustice is popularly imagined with jewel thieves and handcuffs, Miranda Fricker points to a more nuanced and pervasive form of injustice applicable to all people as knowers. In this sense, individuals as knowers are often caught in a riptide between committing and experiencing these two types of injustices. To remedy this issue

would require both a personal and structural correction of biases so that every knower can participate equally in the economy of understanding.

Bibliography

Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.