

Epistemic Injustice

Subjects: [Education](#), [Special](#)

Contributor: Hana L. Wee , Evelyn A. Karkkulainen , Luca Tateo

Epistemic injustice constitutes psychological harm done to an individual based on prejudice about their capacity as a knower. The term is further divided into hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs as a result of structural prejudice, whereas testimonial injustice is defined as prejudice that causes the hearer to ascribe a deflated level of credibility to the speaker.

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1. Introduction

Epistemic injustice, a term coined by Miranda Fricker ^[1], constitutes psychological harm done to an individual based on prejudice about their capacity as a knower. The term epistemic injustice is further divided into hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs as a result of structural prejudice. This takes place at an initial stage, where it is impossible to make sense of a social experience because of a gap in collective interpretive resources, placing the individual at a disadvantage. Testimonial injustice is defined as prejudice that causes the hearer to ascribe a deflated level of credibility to the speaker. An act of epistemic injustice is committed when an individual is denied the credibility they deserve. For instance, when a student provides an answer, but is met with doubt because of their identity as an immigrant who is assumed to have little to no education. Epistemic exclusion is committed when one denies an individual the right to contribute as an epistemic agent ^[2], such as when a teacher always chooses certain students to answer questions and consistently ignores the attempts of a certain individual or group.

The act of epistemic injustice is related to social power. Social power affects our thoughts by eliminating or distracting us from reasoning and functioning as rational human beings. Identity power, a form of social power that is held by an individual, is based on a shared social concept and tied to social identities ^[1]. This is culturally formed and differs from culture to culture. For instance, some cultures regard the teacher as a fellow parent, allowing them to act as co-parents, while others regard teachers as nannies who watch over their children and blame teachers for minor issues, such as paint on their child's clothes.

The hearer is given the instant task of determining the speaker's credibility and has to estimate the likelihood that the speaker is speaking the truth. The prejudice that the hearer holds towards the speaker can cloud their judgement when they determine the credibility of the speaker's words. The social identity that the speaker holds contributes to the prejudice held by the hearer, if the hearer decides to base the speaker's credibility solely on their identity. This subjects the speaker to prejudicial credibility deficit ^[1]. Prejudice can come in many forms, one of

which is identity prejudice, related to a person's social identity. Identity-prejudicial credibility deficit occurs if the speaker receives a credibility deficit due solely to identity prejudice, which results in testimonial injustice [1]. This is commonly the case for children in relation to their abilities at different developmental ages. The words of children are often taken less seriously, for instance in court or at the doctor's. The child identity is seen as less knowledgeable, with fewer reasoning skills and limited language [3]. For these reasons, children are more susceptible to testimonial injustice [2][4]. Students from immigrant backgrounds not only have the child identity, but also have limited language skills in the language of their destination country. Furthermore, in addition to their child identity, students from immigrant backgrounds may suffer testimonial injustice due to negative stereotypes and the low status of immigrants in the Nordics. Testimonial injustice can be intended or unintended—intended due to prejudice, or unintended due to prejudicial residue on the part of the hearer.

2. Culture and Epistemic Injustice

As we have seen in the previous section, epistemic injustice is socially situated. The formation of social identity and identity power is based on a shared social context. This section discusses the formation of stereotypes and the role of culture within it. Stereotypes are introduced by Fricker [1] as “widely held associations between a given social group and one or more attributes”. Similar to our brains, which form cognitive schemas in order to reduce cognitive load and effectively process information [5], stereotypes help us simplify the information we have about others. It is simply too difficult to pay attention to the available information, recall it and perceive that it is being communicated [6]. The cultural-historical perspective theorizes that development happens through interactions between ourselves and the environment. The environment that we are born into shapes us, forming habits, beliefs and attitudes that we come to learn through joint activities, which are rich in beliefs and experiences we carry over time [7][8].

Our frequent discussions of the actions and attributes of others, along with the frequent sharing of social information, result in the spontaneous and unintentional formation of cultural stereotypes [6]. The formation of stereotypes happens, for instance, when we are chatting with friends, or when we read or hear things in the media, such as in news articles, social media, or website forums. It is these stereotypes that play a part in epistemic injustice. Even though we may not agree with these stereotypes or the beliefs that we come to acquire growing up, they still reside within us and, unbeknownst to us, play a role in our interactions with others, resulting in epistemic injustice. This is also known as epistemic injustice as a result of prejudicial residue.

3. Importance of Epistemic Justice in Schools

While children develop, their experiences, skills and knowledge are not yet as ingrained as adults' and are therefore vulnerable to testimonial injustice [3]. Because of their age and their assumed abilities at that age, adults tend to take what they say less seriously [2][4]. Understanding epistemic injustice in schools is important because knowledge is the epitome of teaching and learning, and knowledge production between students and teachers is ongoing, every day. Students are evaluated daily, based on the knowledge they show in class through assignments, classroom participation and discussions, and standardized tests. School assessment can be

metaphorically described as an evaluation of a student's ability to prove they are an independent producer and carrier of the knowledge that is promoted by the school's system of values ^[9]. For instance, in the case of students from immigrant backgrounds, their previous knowledge (e.g., native language, culture, customs, and history) may be undervalued by the formal education values system. This can lead to an unfair assessment of the student as a legitimate knower.

Within the dominant values framework, the negative perceptions that the teacher holds about the student can result in epistemic injustice ^[3]. If the teachers hold negative perceptions of their students, this affects the accuracy of the teacher's prediction of the support the student truly needs. In order to provide the support the student needs, the teacher has to accurately identify the true zone of proximal development (ZPD). This is the distance between the true developmental level of the student at which they are able to independently solve a problem, and the level of potential development at which they are able to solve a problem with guidance from an adult or more capable peers ^[8]. In identifying the student's ZPD, the teacher can then provide scaffolding, that is temporary support to assist students in understanding and acquiring new concepts and skills, and remove these when the student has acquired the necessary skills ^[10]. The teacher's perceptions of the student as a knower can affect their ability to identify the student's true ZPD and fully assess what the student needs. Chinga-Ramirez ^[11] presents an example of this when discussing a case in which a student was assumed to require extra help only when she started to wear a hijab.

The problem with testimonial injustice is that repeated exposure to intrinsic epistemic insults, which question the individual's intellectual abilities, erodes their confidence such that they begin to lose confidence in their general intellectual abilities. This repeated undermining leads students to lose confidence in what they believe in, as well as in their ability to justify these beliefs, putting the student at a continuous disadvantage, making them unable to learn ^[1]. When they suffer epistemic injustice, this loss of confidence and of the ability to justify their beliefs may contribute to a student's unwillingness to express themselves, since their voices are actively suppressed or, in the case of epistemic exclusion, not heard. It is at this point that the student's ideas and creativity start to die, since they are not given the opportunity to foster them ^[12].

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