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A Primer on Epistemic Injustice in Schools

Educational ethics as a subfield has recently exploded. More philosophers (Santoro & Cain, 2018; Levinson & Fay, 2019) are examining the moral dilemmas teachers face, and organizations like *Justice in Schools* are supporting teachers in applying ethical theories when navigating them. Still, the epistemic dimension of injustice in schools remains underexplored. Yet this dimension is critical because teacher-student relations are fundamentally epistemic: the roles are built around the project of sharing and learning knowledge with others. So when some students are impeded from this project because of biases or ignorance, then the student is not just wronged as a *person*, but wronged as someone who is trying to know and share what they know. This type of injustice is called *an epistemic injustice*, or a morally objectionable wrong against someone in the project of knowing that perpetuates systemic oppression.

In some ways, epistemic injustice is not new to most teachers, but rather something we worry about constantly. But just like with educational ethics, philosophers' analyses can support teachers in how they continue to grapple with these issues.

The following chapter tries to give one such introduction. Designed as a guide for the busy teacher, this section gives an overview of what epistemic injustice is, how it appears in class, and what teachers can do about it.

How would someone get wronged as a knower, rather than just as a person?

A good place to start is that a world without trust is impossible (Baier, 1986). We need to trust each other - that is, to rely on each other's "good will" - to cooperate and survive (Baier, 1986, p. 235). Baier (1986) further points out that the things we care about exist because they are created by and depend on others, which means we are also *vulnerable* to how others act towards us. This is why teachers spend a week creating classroom norms and making colorful posters of them for our walls. How students relate to their teachers and peers -- and their confidence in those relationships -- are essential to successful learning, and so we all depend on each other for such cooperation to occur (Baier, 1986).

Philosophers have many ideas about what this dependence entails. Basu (2019) says we owe each other a "moral standpoint" -- that is, seeing others as complex human beings with their own attitudes and desires. Classroom norms like "listen when others speak," for instance, are in effect taking a moral standpoint, emphasizing that peers also have thoughts to share that deserve your attention, just like your thoughts deserve theirs. Dotson (2011) relatedly offers that, when knowledge is exchanged, the listener must both be able and want to hear the speaker. Strategies like "Clap once if you can hear me," for instance, are essentially identifying the speaker as

someone to be listened to and also relies on students wanting to abide by this call for quiet. But the overall point is that we have unique expectations, and when they are broken, the person is wronged not just as a person, but also as someone trying to know and learn things. This is why, when a student is talked over in class, a teacher worries not just about whether they feel personally hurt by this, but also about how this interaction impacts that student *as a learner*.

So epistemic injustice is just violating one of these norms?

Well, not quite. The wrong has to be linked to one person's (often, the listener's) position of power because of their social identity (e.g., in the U.S., that typically means being white, cis, or some other dimension aligned with the dominant culture). Again, philosophers differ in how to describe the exact way these connect. For Basu (2019), it means treating people as objects to be predicted - including what is anticipated based on racial or gender stereotypes - which denies one's entitlement to a moral standpoint. For Dotson (2011), it means denying the above requirement of reciprocity because of what she calls a "pernicious ignorance," or a reliable, consistent ignorance that is linked to one's social position and that harms others (e.g. a white person being reliably ignorant about race in a way that perpetuates white supremacy) (p. 238). The point is one person is not just violating a norm, but rather they are wronging someone because of their socially situated position of power, and through this perpetuating the oppression of a non-dominant group.

But how would this look in a classroom?

Let's look at an example. One possible form of epistemic injustice is something called **testimonial injustice**. To Fricker (2007), the central case of this is when a person sharing knowledge is *given less credibility than they deserve because of persistent prejudicial biases*.

Consider a recent study by Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019): pre-service teachers were given the same vignette of a male student not engaging with an assignment and talking back to the teacher. The speech was designed to be ambiguous: it could or could not be viewed as defiant. The authors also randomized between stereotypically Black and white student names. They found that participants were significantly more likely to view the student as someone who would "misbehave" moving forward if given a stereotypically Black versus a stereotypically white name.

Hypothetically, the Black student here would be experiencing testimonial injustice. The child could be genuinely frustrated because they don't understand the assignment -- testimony which could be interpreted as a signal to review the lesson. But the teachers disregard his testimony as signalling "misbehavior" seemingly due to underlying prejudice. Therefore, the student is not just wronged as a person, but wronged as someone who knows and is trying to know things.

Why does testimonial injustice matter over just knowing they were wronged as a person?

An important reason for teachers might be that it reveals different ways student learning is harmed. Fricker (2007) argues that testimonial injustice has the primary harm of wronging the speaker “in one’s capacity as a knower” (p. 45). They are not treated as a person, but instead as an object that doesn’t get to participate in the project of knowing. This account is not uncontested. Pohlhaus (2014), for instance, argues that the speaker is actually being treated as a moral “other” - that is, someone human but less than the listener’s equal. This treatment allows the listener to dismiss information challenging their dominant views while still demanding that the speaker uphold epistemic standards. Still, analyzing “primary harms” helps us understand how the student was uniquely wronged.

Fricker (2007) further identifies two secondary harms -- practical and epistemic -- of testimonial injustice. First, the student is in a practically worse position because of the injustice. The Black student for instance gets labeled as a troublemaker, which hurts his relationship with his teacher and increases odds of suspension (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Second, he’s in an epistemically worse position. Fricker (2007) would worry that the student could lose confidence in his beliefs (“maybe the assignment isn’t hard and I’m missing something”) or abilities (“maybe I just can’t do this”), which undermines his participation in the learning community.

Fair enough. But you said there are other forms of epistemic injustice?

Yes! Dotson (2012) suggests that epistemic oppression is so pervasive, we may never actually know all its forms. So while there is no comprehensive list, three especially relevant ones for teachers are *intellectual haughtiness*, *the arrogant view*, and *testimonial smothering*.

The first example is perhaps most obvious. According to Tanesini (2016), **intellectual haughtiness** involves *the speaker thinking they should be believed but are simultaneously exempt from questions or challenge*; speakers are consequently hostile towards objections, which they see as denying “their intellectual worth as authoritative informants” (p. 81). Tanesini (2016) contends that this trait is an *epistemic vice* because it denies recipients their entitlement to queries and often involves hurtful speech against the listener in the process. An example appears in Shalaby’s (2017) *Troublemakers* through Zora, one of the only Black students in a white, wealthy school. While Zora’s parents encourage her to challenge norms, the teacher singles Zora out for this same practice, viewing nonconformity to her rules as inappropriate. She thus demands that Zora follow commands like all her white peers, often publicly shaming or singling Zora out.

Taking the **arrogant gaze** can be more subtle. Lugones (1987) sketches this through first explaining how everyone has different “worlds” they exist within, each with unique norms and languages (for instance, the world of your particular school, the world of your family’s culture, etc.). Some worlds you are at ease in for a variety of reasons, but some of them you are not. Lugones (1987) characterizes the arrogant gaze as *entering someone’s world for personal gains*

like competence while holding onto one's cultural norms and expectations. Think of the premise behind white-savior education movies like *Freedom Writers*. The white teacher is only understanding students' worlds to be competent enough to get them to achieve some feat white reviewers value (Hughey, 2010) and be personally applauded for doing so.

Ortega (2006) white women may want to learn about women of color's views, but still fail to "check or question" their understandings or studies they use out of a hesitancy to give up white privilege (p. 61). (Imagine your most performative white friend.) Ortega (2006) ironically calls this *loving, knowing ignorance*: the speaker references women of color's work for their personal gain. Rather than being actually loving, it risks misrepresenting women of color and maintains the white speaker's privilege. Bettina Love (2019) expressed a similar concern in her *EdWeek* op-ed, "Dear white teachers: You can't love your Black students if you don't know them." She notes that white women teachers often say they "love all children" while still taking no action to counteract racism in school or to celebrate their Black students' cultures in class, which ultimately perpetuates harm (Love, 2019, para. 2).

Marginalized students may recognize this incompetence in teachers or peers as a result of that party's pernicious ignorance. Consequently, Dotson (2011) notes that speakers may experience **testimonial smothering**, where they are *forced to "truncate" their speech* in certain conversations about their world *because they know the listeners will misunderstand in a way that could harm the speaker's community* (p. 249). This wrongs the student, again violating the condition of reciprocity Dotson (2011) outlined.

So, what can I do as a teacher to fight these forms of epistemic injustice in my classroom?

Again, no answer can be comprehensive, but here are a few potential next steps:

1. **Embrace playful "world-travelling."**

Rather than understanding others simply for oneself, Lugones (1987) advocates for a loving-playfulness in travelling to another's world, where you are open to surprise and recreating yourself without bringing your rules along. "The reason why I think that travelling to someone's 'world' is a way of identifying with them," Lugones (1987) explains, "is because by travelling to their 'world' we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes" (p. 17). One classic example in education is Delpit's (1988) pedagogical approach of inviting parents to class to learn about, 'travel to,' and celebrate students' different worlds.

2. **Advocate for structures that counteract these biases or make it easier to act justly.**

Epistemic injustice must also be tackled structurally. Anderson (2012) notes that biases are too deep to correct by conscious habit-forming alone, which Fricker had (2007) recommended. Some decisions seem fine at Fricker's (2007) individual-level but are

problematic at the systems-level. For instance, shared reality bias is psychologically useful between individuals to minimize disputes, but systemically, it “will tend to insulate members of advantaged groups,” preventing them from developing the tools to understand disadvantaged groups’ experiences (Anderson, 2012, p. 170). In response, Anderson (2012) suggests advocating for policies like school integration so that students of different identities can (1) have a shared reality, since they will be sharing cultural resources, and (2) have equivalent access to education and its benefits.

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