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INVITED ARTICLE

Epistemic Injustice or Epistemic Oppression?

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The concepts of epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression both aim to track obstacles to epistemic agency—i.e., forms of epistemic exclusion—that are undue and persistent. Indeed, the two terms are often used interchangeably. In this paper, I begin by addressing the question of whether the concepts of epistemic injustice and of epistemic oppression are in fact synonymous, and how we might articulate the relation between the two. I argue that while they partly overlap, the two concepts are not synonymous, and that one fruitful way to characterize their relation is by drawing on the distinction between systematic and incidental epistemic injustice. I then turn to the question of what might be gained or lost by focusing on one concept rather than the other. I argue that the concept of epistemic injustice, specifically that of incidental epistemic injustice, allows us to track certain types of undue and persistent obstacles to epistemic agency that the concept of epistemic oppression does not, but that should nonetheless be of interest to theorists of epistemic oppression. I close with some suggestions for further avenues to explore in order to gain a richer and more precise understanding of the various forms that problematic epistemic exclusion can take and how we might characterize them within our philosophical taxonomies.

Keywords: academia; epistemic agency; epistemic exclusion; epistemic injustice; epistemic oppression; incidental epistemic injustice; second-order epistemic discrimination; philosophical methodology; Miranda Fricker; Kristie Dotson

Introduction

The publication in 2007 of Miranda Fricker's book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* has given rise to an ever-growing literature, both in philosophy (Catala 2024) and in other fields (Kidd et al. 2017) as varied as law, healthcare, education, psychology, environmental policy, and artificial intelligence, to name but a few. Among these developments, the literature on epistemic oppression, spearheaded by Kristie Dotson in her 2012 paper "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression" and in her 2014 paper "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression," has likewise continued to grow (Lockard 2024).

The concepts of epistemic injustice and of epistemic oppression are of course closely connected—so much so, indeed, that the two terms are often used interchangeably, perhaps because Fricker and Dotson themselves at times use both terms when introducing their respective accounts, as we will see in greater detail below. But while the two concepts are clearly related, it is important to ask whether they are in fact synonymous, and, if not, how the relation between the two might be spelled out. Moreover, it is important to inquire into what might be gained or lost by focusing on one concept rather than the other. This is important not only as a philosophical matter of conceptual clarity, so that we may more precisely grasp the epistemic dynamics to which these concepts respectively refer, but also from a transformative perspective concerned with the production, circulation, and use of concepts that allow us to more precisely and comprehensively track power relations in the world, so that we may more adequately identify them and more successfully address them.[1]

To be clear, the aim in exploring these questions is *not* to determine which concept is "better" *tout court* or should be used *in general*, regardless of context. Rather, the aim is to offer reflections to help us to determine which concept might better serve the goals of certain philosophical and transformative projects—such as tracking and addressing certain types of obstacles to epistemic agency. Otherwise put, one concept might

[1] See, e.g., Sally Haslanger's ameliorative approach (Haslanger 2000, 2012).

be better suited in one specific context, and the other in another. As Dotson notes in her paper on limiting epistemic oppression, "accounts of epistemic injustice . . . can stand side by side, useful for different kinds of analyses in possibly compatible and incompatible sets of hermeneutical resources" (2012, 42). Likewise with the concepts of epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression: each concept, because of its specific orientation and scope, might simply be unable to capture certain epistemic dynamics even though these dynamics might be problematic and hence deserve our philosophical and transformative attention.

In this sense, concepts can function somewhat like light beams: at the same time as they shed light on particular areas of the world, thereby facilitating our understanding of these areas, their specific orientation and scope mean that concepts also leave other areas in the dark. Now, this analogy is admittedly imperfect as it oversimplifies the ways in which the production and definition of concepts work. But if we grant that a *desideratum* for concepts is that they help us to better understand the world in order to more accurately communicate about the world and to transform it when justice or emancipation call for it—i.e., if we grant that we want our concepts to be helpful interpretive and communicative tools that also serve transformative ends—then the analogy can at least capture the improved-understanding function that concepts should ideally serve. Of course, in the case of concepts or (mis)understandings that distort the realities they aim to capture and make sense of (i.e., when concepts or understandings are harmful or oppressive rather than helpful or liberatory)—as in the case of active ignorance (Mills 1997; Dotson 2012; Pohlhaus Jr. 2012; Medina 2013)—we might need to switch to a different analogy (such as distorting lenses, for example).[2]

In other words, any given concept by definition comes with certain epistemic limits: while it will improve our understanding of a targeted area of the world, it will not do so for others, including for all the areas that are directly adjacent to the targeted area. This is of course inevitable, and not necessarily problematic. On the contrary, a more fine-grained understanding of the world will accordingly require multiple concepts that reveal its sheer complexity. But the complexity of the world, combined with the epistemic limits of concepts, *precisely means that we should always be careful* to ensure not only that the area we wish to shed light on or better understand is in fact covered by the relevant light beam or concept, but also that the latter bring out the relief of the terrain or the nuances of the phenomenon they aim to illuminate. And if they do not, we should bring in additional, complementary light beams or concepts that will allow us to do so.

As explained below, the concepts of epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression both aim to track obstacles to epistemic agency—i.e., forms of epistemic exclusion—that are undue and persistent. These obstacles that unduly and persistently constrain epistemic agency can arise at different levels, such as individual or group interactions (Fricker 2007; Dotson 2012; Hill Collins 1990; Medina 2013; Mills 1997); social or local structures, including academia and other institutions (Anderson 2012; Catala 2022a, 2022b, 2025; Hill Collins 1990; Mills 1997); and research methodology, including philosophical methodology (Dotson 2012; Catala 2020, 2025; Henning 2020). In what follows, I begin by addressing the question of whether the concepts of epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression are in fact synonymous, and how we might articulate the relation between the two. I argue that while they partly overlap, the two concepts are not synonymous, and that their relation is fruitfully characterized by drawing on the distinction between systematic and incidental epistemic injustice (section 2). I then turn to the question of what might be gained or lost by focusing on one concept rather than the other. I argue that the concept of epistemic injustice, specifically that of incidental epistemic injustice, allows us to track certain types of undue and persistent obstacles to epistemic agency that the concept of epistemic oppression does not, but that should nonetheless be of interest to theorists of epistemic oppression (section 3). I close with some suggestions for further avenues to explore in order to gain a richer and more precise understanding of the various forms that problematic epistemic exclusion can take and how best to characterize them within our philosophical taxonomies (section 4).

Epistemic Injustice and Epistemic Oppression: Definitions and Relation

Let us start by defining the concepts of epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression in order to ascertain whether they are synonymous and how to articulate their relation. Due to space constraints, I will focus on the definitions of these concepts as offered by Fricker (2007) and Dotson (2012, 2014a), respectively.[3]

[2] To determine whether concepts are helpful/emancipatory or harmful/oppressive, we might turn to standpoint theory (Hartsock 1983; Harding 1986; Hill Collins 1990; Wylie 2004; Toole 2019). For more on this point, see Catala (2025, introduction and chap. 1).

[3] I focus on Fricker's and Dotson's accounts as theirs are the first accounts that explicitly conceptualize epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression, respectively, using the specific language and providing a systematic account of the concepts. As many (including Fricker and Dotson) have pointed out, however, much work in feminist epistemology, Black feminist thought, and critical race theory had previously identified and critically analyzed the problematic epistemic dynamics that the two concepts capture (Catala 2022a; Dieleman 2012; Dotson 2024; Fricker 1999, 2007; Lockard 2024). In this sense, it is always important to avoid what Dotson calls "a rhetoric of beginnings" (Dotson 2014b; cited in Mitova 2024). Similarly, both Fricker and Dotson are clear that their accounts offer one way to conceptualize epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression, and both are open to complementary or alternative accounts (more on this in section 4 below).

Fricker defines epistemic injustice as an injustice that a person suffers in her capacity as a knower, specifically when she engages in "two of our most basic everyday epistemic practices: conveying knowledge to others by telling them, and making sense of our own social experiences" (2007, 1). Fricker accordingly distinguishes between two main types of epistemic injustice, testimonial and hermeneutical:

> Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; 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. (2007, 1)

To face epistemic injustice, then, is to receive unduly diminished levels of *credibility* due to conscious or subconscious biases on the part of our interlocutors (in the case of testimonial injustice), or to receive unduly diminished levels of *intelligibility* due to biases in the mainstream pool of interpretive tools (what Fricker calls hermeneutical resources), such as words, concepts, social meanings, collective representations, or shared understandings (in the case of hermeneutical injustice). If a police officer does not believe the truthful testimony of a Black witness because the witness is Black, and the officer (consciously or subconsciously) relies on the stereotype that wrongly associates Blackness with unreliability, the witness thereby suffers testimonial injustice because they are *not adequately believed* due to biases on the part of their interlocutor (Fricker 2007, chap. 1–2). If a woman is unable to name and convey as such her experience of sexual harassment because the term does not yet exist, she thereby suffers hermeneutical injustice because her experience is *not adequately understood* due to biases in mainstream hermeneutical resources (Fricker 2007, chap. 7). More precisely, these resources are inadequate because they are shaped mainly by dominant groups who produce interpretive tools that tend to capture their own experiences while obscuring, distorting, or stigmatizing the experiences of non-dominant groups (here, there is no adequate term to describe sexual harassment, and the experience is instead characterized as "harmless flirting" or as "asking-for-it"). The exclusion of non-dominant groups (here, women) from processes of conceptual production in the mainstream is what Fricker calls hermeneutical marginalization.

Within the categories of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, Fricker further distinguishes between systematic and incidental cases (2007, chap. 1, 7). *Systematic* cases of epistemic injustice, whether testimonial or hermeneutical, are due to biases or "prejudices that 'track' the subject through different dimensions of social activity—economic, educational, professional, sexual, legal, political, religious, and so on" (Fricker 2007, 27). The Black witness who is not adequately believed by the police officer is likely to receive similarly diminished levels of credibility across other spheres of social life. Likewise, the woman whose experience of sexual harassment is not adequately understood is likely to receive similarly diminished levels of intelligibility across other spheres of social life. Both examples are cases of *systematic* epistemic injustice (testimonial and hermeneutical, respectively) because the prejudice at play is part of a broader pattern or *system* of power relations and injustice that pervades and structures multiple spheres of social life.

By contrast, *incidental* cases of epistemic injustice, whether testimonial or hermeneutical, are due to biases or prejudices that are "highly localized" (Fricker 2007, 153) or limited to a specific sphere or aspect of social life. For example, if a qualitative researcher is not taken seriously by their predominantly quantitative colleagues because of this methodological difference, the researcher faces *incidental testimonial injustice*, because the methodological bias is unlikely to follow them outside of their profession (say, in the legal or medical spheres). Or, if a cis straight white man's experience of being stalked by a religious fanatic who wants to convert him is dismissed by police because it does not meet their criteria for legal protection (in the absence of threatened or actual violence), the man faces *incidental hermeneutical injustice* because this interpretive bias is unlikely to follow him beyond this particular experience (Fricker 2007, chap. 7).

Both incidental and systematic cases of epistemic injustice can be persistent or repeated across time, and both are unjust. As Fricker explains:

> To categorize a testimonial injustice as incidental is not to belittle it ethically. Localized prejudices and the injustices they produce may be utterly disastrous for the subject, especially if they are repeated frequently so that the injustice is *persistent*. . . . "Persistent" labels the diachronic dimension of testimonial injustice's severity and significance, whereas "systematic" labels the synchronic dimension. The most severe forms of testimonial injustice are both persistent and systematic. (2007, 29, italics in original)

We will come back to this point below, but for now we should note that whereas all cases of systematic epistemic injustice will be persistent, not all cases of persistent epistemic injustice will be systematic: some of them will be incidental.

Dotson, for her part, defines the concept of epistemic oppression as follows:

> Epistemic oppression refers to persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production. Epistemic exclusion, here, will be understood as an unwarranted infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers. Epistemic agency, in this analysis, refers to the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources within a given community of knowers in order to participate in knowledge production and, if required, the revision of those same resources. (2014a, 115)

Within epistemic oppression, Dotson (2012, 2014a) distinguishes between three orders of epistemic exclusion, each corresponding to a specific type of epistemic injustice: first-order epistemic exclusion corresponds to testimonial injustice (2012, 26–28); second-order epistemic exclusion to hermeneutical injustice (2012, 29–31); and third-order epistemic exclusion to what Dotson calls "contributory injustice" (2012, 31–34). Contributory injustice arises when non-dominant groups have produced concepts to capture a significant area of their social experience (e.g., heteronormativity or white supremacy), but dominant groups refuse to integrate these concepts into mainstream conceptual resources.[4] In this case, the inadequacy of mainstream conceptual resources is due not to the lack of conceptual production (as in the case of sexual harassment), but rather to the lack of circulation or adoption of concepts into the mainstream. As in the case of sexual harassment, however, the mainstream conceptual inadequacy that results from contributory injustice is due to the persistent hermeneutical marginalization of non-dominant groups, whose conceptual resources are actively excluded from the mainstream by dominant groups.

While Dotson's analysis of epistemic oppression goes into further detail,[5] I will focus on those parts of her account that help to answer the questions of this section: namely, the possible synonymy and relation between the concepts of epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression. Referring to the three types of epistemic injustice or orders of epistemic exclusion, Dotson explains: "All the forms of epistemic injustice introduced here involve some form of pervasive, harmful epistemic exclusion. As such, they are all species of epistemic oppression" (2012, 36). Here we can see that Dotson uses both concepts when developing her account and that she articulates the relation between them in two main ways. First, she construes testimonial, hermeneutical, and contributory injustice as different forms of epistemic injustice; and second, she construes these various types of epistemic injustice as subcategories of epistemic oppression. On Dotson's view, then, the concept of epistemic oppression encompasses and is therefore broader than that of epistemic injustice.

What does Fricker say about the connection between epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression? In a 1999 paper titled "Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege," Fricker introduces the concept of hermeneutical injustice as a type of epistemic injustice. She explains that "if someone or some group suffers epistemic injustice in a systematic way, then it will be appropriate to talk of *epistemic oppression*" (1999, 208, italics in original). She goes on to say that in societies structured by unequal power relations, "the powerless are epistemically oppressed: epistemic oppression arises from a situation in which the social experiences of the powerless are not properly integrated into collective understandings of the social world" (1999, 208). In other words, when people suffer epistemic injustice in a systematic way that reflects larger power inequities, they can be said to face epistemic oppression. Indeed, Fricker later extends her construal of systematic epistemic injustice as epistemic oppression to include not only hermeneutical but also testimonial injustice. She explains that "where it is not only persistent but also systematic, testimonial injustice presents a face of oppression" (2007, 58), adding that when testimonial injustice is persistent, it creates "repeated exclusions from the spread of knowledge" that amount to "a sustained assault" on epistemic agency and thereby "take[s] on the proportions of oppression" (2007, 59). Like Dotson, then, Fricker also uses both concepts in her account, delineating their relation in a similar way: when epistemic injustice (testimonial or hermeneutical) takes on a systematic form, it can be described as epistemic oppression.

[4] See also Mason (2011) and Pohlhaus Jr. (2012).

[5] For example, Dotson's analysis of epistemic oppression as involving three orders of epistemic injustice or exclusion also identifies corresponding orders of change required to address each (2012, 36): addressing first-order epistemic exclusion (testimonial injustice) requires the first-order change of allocating credibility accurately; addressing second-order epistemic exclusion (hermeneutical injustice) requires the second-order change of a conceptual revolution; and addressing third-order epistemic exclusion (contributory injustice) requires the third-order change of switching to a different collective set of hermeneutical resources, which Dotson compares to Mariana Ortega's notion of world-traveling (2012, 34–35).

In sum, Fricker and Dotson seem to converge on the claim that systematic epistemic injustices—whether testimonial, hermeneutical, or contributory (in Dotson's case)—are forms of epistemic oppression. Indeed, Dotson's references to the pervasive and persistent character of epistemic oppression (2012, 35–36) and its connection to "socially and historically contingent power relations" (2014a, 116–17), combined with a general understanding within feminist philosophy of oppression as resulting from and maintaining unjust social structures (Khader 2024; Frye 1983; Young 1990; Cudd 2006; Haslanger 2016), suggest that she is referring more specifically to *systematic* cases of epistemic injustice when she characterizes epistemic oppression as encompassing those three types of epistemic injustice. In this sense, the concept of epistemic oppression seems to encompass and therefore to be broader than that of systematic epistemic injustice as defined by Fricker (namely, systematic testimonial and hermeneutical injustice), since Dotson's account also includes contributory injustice.

However, because Fricker's account of epistemic injustice includes not only systematic cases but also incidental ones, the concept of epistemic injustice *tout court* is broader than that of epistemic oppression (Catala 2025, introduction). The concept of epistemic oppression indeed accounts for systematic cases of epistemic injustice, but not for incidental ones. This is of course *not* an objection to the concept of epistemic oppression, since all concepts by definition have a particular orientation or scope that comes with certain epistemic limits. Rather, it is an objection to the *sole* use of the concept of epistemic oppression in order to capture problematic forms of epistemic exclusion that warrant our philosophical and transformative attention. If we are concerned about tracking and addressing obstacles to epistemic agency that are undue and persistent—and, indeed, ones that are more closely related to epistemic oppression than might at first appear—then we will need to use other concepts in addition to that of epistemic oppression, such as that of incidental epistemic injustice. Indeed, as Dotson cautions in her call for the development and use of conceptual structures that remain open to necessary modifications: "One has to remain constantly aware that there is always more to say and remain sensitive to the inevitability of damaging oversights" (2012, 42). So, much like Dotson introduces the concept of contributory injustice in order to capture certain types of undue and persistent obstacles to epistemic agency (here, forms of epistemic oppression) that are not included in Fricker's initial account of (systematic) epistemic injustice,[6] we ought to retain the concept of incidental epistemic injustice, in order to be able to capture other types of undue and persistent obstacles to epistemic agency that would not be readily apparent on the radar of the epistemic oppression framework, yet that should be of interest to theorists of epistemic oppression.

Incidental Epistemic Injustice: The Case of Academia

Recall that incidental epistemic injustice arises when the biases that give rise to testimonial or hermeneutical injustice are "highly localized," limited to a specific sphere of social life or a particular aspect of social experience. In this section, I argue that just as testimonial and hermeneutical injustice can take both systematic and incidental forms (as Fricker [2007] shows), contributory injustice can likewise take an incidental form, in addition to the systematic form Dotson (2012) identifies in her original account of epistemic oppression. Moreover, I submit that the line between systematic and incidental cases of epistemic injustice is more accurately described as tracing a continuum or an overlap between these two categories rather than as a sharp, clear-cut one establishing an immutable and impervious divide between them.

Let us start with an example of incidental epistemic injustice, where incidental testimonial injustice leads to incidental contributory injustice. Suppose that all top-ranked journals in a given academic field are clearly

[6] Dotson indeed argues that Fricker's account precludes the possibility of contributory injustice as a type of epistemic injustice (2012, 25). Dotson adds: "Instead of taking her to task about what she overlooks or what her account cannot track, we can simply acknowledge the strengths and limitations of her position and move on to offer another theory of epistemic injustice that addresses the limitations of her account" (2012, 42). Note, however, that Fricker (2016) has since highlighted that she has always construed the category of hermeneutical injustice as an internally diverse continuum between what she calls "maximal" or "radical" cases, where the person is unable *both* to fully make sense of her experience to herself *and* to communicate it to others due to a lack of adequate concepts, as in the case of sexual harassment (2007, chap. 7), and what she calls "minimal" or "moderate" cases (2016) where the person is perfectly able to make sense of some highly localized experience, but is unable to communicate it to dominantly situated others to whom it would be in her interest to be able to communicate it, as in the novel *Enduring Love*, where Joe, a white man, is being stalked by a religious fanatic but is dismissed by police when he tries to report it (2007, chap. 7). In other words, Fricker construes hermeneutical injustice as a continuum between these two extremes: namely, a case of systematic hermeneutical injustice where a concept is lacking altogether to name and communicate a widespread experience, and a case of incidental hermeneutical injustice where the person understands their localized experience while it remains misunderstood by relevant others. Within this continuum, Fricker (2016) acknowledges the numerous contributions (e.g., Mason 2011; Pohlhaus Jr. 2012; Dotson 2012; Medina 2013) that have identified and theorized what she calls "midway cases" of hermeneutical injustice, where the person understands an important aspect of their experience that is pervasive (rather than localized) thanks to concepts developed within her community (e.g., heteronormativity or white supremacy), while this experience remains misunderstood or misrepresented in the mainstream due to persistent hermeneutical marginalization (e.g., stemming from willful or active ignorance).

biased in favor of a certain methodology. By consistently rejecting submissions that rely on other methodologies, these journals are in effect dismissing epistemic contributions because of methodological biases. Because these methodological biases are limited to the professional sphere of academic publishing and do not follow academic contributors across other spheres of social life, this is a case of *incidental testimonial injustice*, where potential contributors are dismissed because of highly localized biases. But there is more: because their contributions concern how best to understand certain objects or phenomena in their field of study, their consistent dismissal will translate into hermeneutical marginalization in their field. That is, they will be unable to participate equally in processes of conceptual production and meaning-making that shape core understandings in their academic field. Instead, these methodological biases will prevent them from contributing relevant hermeneutical resources for how to understand certain objects or phenomena in their field.[7] Because the biases at play here are limited to the academic sphere, and because the relevant pool of interpretive resources here is that of a given academic field, rather than that of society more broadly, we might speak of *incidental contributory injustice* rather than systematic contributory injustice. While the dismissed contributors in this example certainly face incidental epistemic injustice (testimonial and contributory), they are clearly not epistemically oppressed to the extent that the methodological biases that constrain their epistemic agency in the academic sphere are unlikely to follow them outside of it. So their epistemic exclusion here is persistent (in academia), but not widespread (outside of it). To use Fricker's terms, this sort of incidental epistemic injustice meets the diachronic dimension of persistence (within a given sphere), but not the synchronic dimension of pervasiveness (across multiple spheres).

Still, these dismissed contributors do face undue and persistent obstacles that directly undermine both the testimonial and contributory dimensions of their epistemic agency in their professional sphere, and that therefore warrant our philosophical and transformative attention. To be able to track these kinds of obstacles, we need the concept of incidental epistemic injustice, as the concept of epistemic oppression by definition includes only systematic cases. Again, this is not an objection against the framework of epistemic oppression, but against its *sole* use when attempting to map the sorts of undue and persistent obstacles that undermine epistemic agency. To focus solely on epistemic oppression, then, is to risk missing a host of relevant cases—much like focusing solely on Fricker's notions of systematic hermeneutical injustice (where a concept is lacking altogether) and of incidental hermeneutical injustice (where the relevant experience is highly localized) would miss the sorts of cases that the notion of contributory injustice captures (where the relevant concept has been created by the marginalized community to capture an experience that is widespread, but where dominant groups refuse to integrate the relevant concept into mainstream conceptual resources).[8]

I now want to suggest that paying attention to incidental epistemic injustice additionally allows us to track cases that might in fact be closely connected to epistemic oppression but that would not be picked up on the epistemic oppression radar because they are operating under the guise of incidental epistemic injustice. We can appreciate this by considering, first, a case of testimonial injustice, and then one of contributory injustice, again in the context of academia.

Because anglophone academia relies heavily on rankings (e.g., of universities, departments, and journals) in key academic processes such as admissions, hiring, funding, inviting, and so on, prestige bias can easily generate unduly diminished levels of credibility and hence *incidental testimonial injustice*. As I have explained elsewhere, referencing work by Bright (2017), De Cruz (2018), and Saul (2012), "using pedigree or prestige as a heuristic shortcut for academic quality or promise . . . has been shown not only to be inaccurate, but also to keep non-dominant social groups such as women, nonwhites, or people of lower socio-economic status largely excluded from academia" (Catala 2022b, 335). In other words, "pedigree or prestige might in effect function as a proxy for gender, race, class, or national origin" (Catala 2022b, 335). The line between incidental and systematic epistemic injustice thus becomes blurred because prestige bias, localized though it may at first appear, in fact tracks larger biases regarding these broader axes of social identity (Catala 2022b, 335).

Similarly, because linguistic or accent bias pervades anglophone academia, it will give rise to systematic testimonial injustice for non-native English speakers, which in turn can give rise to *incidental contributory injustice* (Catala 2022b, 336–38)—again expanding the category of contributory injustice to cover incidental

[7] Note that Dotson (2012, 31ff) defines contributory injustice as a matter of hermeneutical resources, so there is a sense in which contributory injustice can be construed as a type of hermeneutical injustice: *not* hermeneutical injustice as initially introduced by Fricker, but rather hermeneutical injustice as a broader category that includes both hermeneutical injustice as initially introduced by Fricker and contributory injustice as construed by Dotson (alongside closely related notions such as Pohlhaus Jr.'s [2012] notion of willful ignorance and Medina's [2013] notion of active ignorance, all of which are also connected to Charles Mills's [1997] notion of white ignorance). For more on this suggested taxonomy, see note 6 of the present article as well as Fricker (2016) and Catala (2025, chap. 3).

[8] Fricker indeed acknowledges this, as explained in note 6 above.

cases in addition to the systematic ones captured by Dotson's original account of contributory injustice. In other words, the dominance of English in academia means that the epistemic contributions made by speakers of other languages may not be taken as seriously as they otherwise should. When these contributions concern how best to understand certain objects or phenomena in their field of study, their dismissal will translate into hermeneutical marginalization in that field. That is, non-native English speakers will be unable to participate equally in key processes of conceptual production and meaning-making in their academic field. Because the relevant pool of interpretive resources here is that of a given academic field, rather than that of society more broadly, we might speak of incidental contributory injustice rather than systematic contributory injustice. Yet, the line between incidental and systematic epistemic injustice again gets blurred here. As I have noted elsewhere (focusing here on the broader category of hermeneutical injustice, but extending to contributory injustice):[9]

> While it may seem as though incidental (academic) hermeneutical injustice concerns how best to understand a field's objects of study, whereas systematic (societal) hermeneutical injustice concerns how best to understand academic migrants' own experience, both are related, as our intuitions or experience—which are connected to the language we use—also shape how best to understand our field's objects of study. (Catala 2022b, 337–38)

In sum, incidental cases of epistemic injustice arise from localized biases in academia that may ultimately act as proxies for larger biases regarding broader axes of social identity, hence blurring the line or, more precisely, revealing a *continuum of epistemic exclusions*, between incidental and systematic epistemic injustice. On one end of the continuum, we have systematic epistemic injustice or epistemic oppression arising from general biases connected to social identity, such as race, gender, class, or disability—for example, an Autistic person who is discredited and misunderstood in a persistent and pervasive way because of widespread neuronormative biases on the part of their interlocutors or in mainstream interpretive resources. On the other end of the continuum, we have incidental epistemic injustice arising from localized biases connected to, say, professional identity, such as methodological biases—for example, a continental philosopher who is dismissed by their analytic colleagues.

In between these two ends of the continuum, we have cases where localized biases seem to overlap with, or ultimately track, larger biases about broader axes of social identity. Here we can think of the cases of prestige bias and of linguistic bias introduced earlier to illustrate incidental testimonial injustice and incidental contributory injustice, respectively. If prestige bias, which seems limited to the academic sphere, in fact often acts as a proxy for gender, race, class, or national origin (Bright 2017; Catala 2022a, 2022b; De Cruz 2018; Saul 2012), then we ought to pay attention to it, even though (or perhaps precisely *because*) it is a localized bias, and localized biases usually signal incidental rather than systematic epistemic injustice. Similarly, being unable to contribute equally to processes of conceptual production and meaning-making in one's academic field due to linguistic biases might seem limited to the academic sphere, but the line between academia and social life becomes porous when the very ways we understand our field's objects of study are shaped by the languages we speak and through which we come to apprehend the world. So, rejecting someone's interpretation of their field's objects of study might ultimately amount to rejecting their interpretation of some important aspect of their social experience.

Now, one might suggest that if prestige and linguistic biases are ultimately connected to broader axes of social identity and spheres of social life, then they really are more accurately described as systematic biases rather than as incidental ones—*so we do not need the concept of epistemic injustice after all*. This is mistaken for at least two reasons. First, as explained above, the concept of epistemic oppression captures three levels of epistemic exclusion, the first two of which correspond to systematic epistemic injustice, in its testimonial and hermeneutical forms, respectively. Second, while incidental biases such as prestige or linguistic bias may track or overlap with larger identity biases, this is not always the case. For example, a hiring committee might dismiss the file of a cis, white, middle-class man simply because he does not hold an Ivy League degree, even though his dissertation makes a significant contribution to the field. This is a clear case of *incidental testimonial injustice*, limited to the academic sphere, that would therefore not be captured on the epistemic oppression radar. Similarly, a Spanish-speaking academic's contributions might face systematic testimonial injustice when dismissed by his anglophone colleagues due to linguistic bias. But if he otherwise lives in Spain, where he is typically taken seriously, and if his contributions concern solely his academic field's objects of study and not social experience more broadly, then the systematic testimonial injustice he

[9] See note 6 above.

faces will lead to *incidental contributory injustice*, again limited to the academic sphere, and therefore not picked up on the epistemic oppression radar.

In these examples, prestige and linguistic bias are limited to the professional sphere of academia: they are localized biases that will not track the person across other spheres of social life. That is, the person faces incidental epistemic injustice, but they are not epistemically oppressed. Still, these localized biases might unjustly cost the person important professional opportunities, such as a stable position, funding, publications, promotion, and so on—all of which further contribute to one's credibility, intelligibility, and standing in one's discipline. In other words, incidental epistemic injustice directly contributes to an unjust credibility and intelligibility economy—here, in academia—and therefore warrants our philosophical and transformative attention. Indeed, paying attention to incidental injustice will allow us to track not only those cases where localized biases do *not* overlap with larger identity/social biases, but also those cases where they *do* yet that would be missed on the epistemic oppression radar, since what are readily apparent in those cases are localized/incidental biases that cover up larger/systematic ones.

Incidental epistemic injustice should thus be of interest to theorists of epistemic oppression for at least three reasons. First, because incidental epistemic injustice (e.g., in academia) will result in the sorts of demographic and epistemic losses that theorists of epistemic oppression are typically concerned about. Second, because the seemingly "innocuous"—i.e., less pervasive, more localized—character of incidental cases might misleadingly push us to leave them aside to focus on cases of systematic epistemic injustice or epistemic oppression, when in fact incidental cases might be more closely connected to these latter cases than might at first appear. Third, and relatedly, because leaving incidental cases unaddressed means that clearly objectionable biases regarding gender, race, class, or national origin might be able to operate largely undisturbed under the guise of seemingly "neutral" or "justified" criteria such as pedigree or prestige, thereby entrenching exclusionary biases as objective or legitimate criteria.[10]

Conclusion: Further Avenues to Explore

I have explored the question of what might be gained or lost when we focus on the concept of epistemic injustice or on that of epistemic oppression. I have suggested that to the extent that we are concerned with undue and persistent obstacles to epistemic agency, both concepts are useful and necessary. In other words, we cannot simply focus on one and leave the other aside entirely. Specifically, I have suggested that the concept of incidental epistemic injustice should be of interest to theorists of epistemic oppression.

As mentioned above, the foregoing discussion of epistemic injustice and epistemic oppression focused on Fricker's and Dotson's respective accounts of these concepts. At the same time, both Fricker and Dotson are clear that theirs is only one way of approaching these concepts rather than the only or definitive account.[11] One might therefore wonder whether the concept of epistemic oppression simply *does not* currently accommodate incidental cases of epistemic injustice, or whether it inherently *cannot*. My hunch is that retaining—rather than diluting—the analytical and normative force of the concept of epistemic oppression means that it cannot account for cases of incidental epistemic injustice. Creating or defining concepts that are useful from a philosophical and transformative perspective requires walking a fine line between over- and underinclusion. Referring to incidental cases of epistemic injustice as epistemic oppression would seem overinclusive in the same way that referring to any case of harm or injustice as oppression would be (Frye 1983; Bailey 1998). The cis, white, middle-class man whose file is dismissed by a hiring committee simply because he does not come from an Ivy League school certainly faces incidental epistemic injustice due to prestige bias, but not epistemic oppression. Similarly, the cis, white, tenured, francophone researcher who is not taken seriously by anglophone colleagues because she works in continental rather than analytic philosophy, or because she works at a French-speaking school, faces incidental epistemic injustice due to methodological or pedigree biases, but not epistemic oppression. Characterizing these examples as cases of epistemic oppression would seem to do violence to cases that typically fall within the scope of epistemic oppression by potentially obscuring or weakening their significance.

[10] On this point, see also Catala (2022a) as well as Bright's (2017) analysis of the concept of intelligence in terms of Haslanger's (2012) distinction between manifest and operative concepts (also mentioned in Catala 2025, chap. 5).

[11] See Fricker (2013, 1318): "The category of epistemic injustice should be considered an umbrella concept, open to new ideas about quite which phenomena should, and should not, come under its protection." Similarly, Dotson explains: "A catchall theory of epistemic injustice is an unrealistic expectation. Epistemic oppression is simply too pervasive. Epistemic exclusions in the form of epistemic injustice that hinders social knowledge may be impossible to fully diagnose. By looking at only three levels of epistemic injustice, I have indicated that addressing and identifying epistemic injustice will be far more challenging than any one account can accommodate. The call for open conceptual structures is a call for an active realization of this reality that is built into the very structure of our inquiries into epistemic oppression. One has to remain constantly aware that there is always more to say and remain sensitive to the inevitability of damaging oversights" (2012, 41–42).

At the same time, attending to incidental injustice is important because, as suggested above, doing so allows us to track cases that may blur the line between incidental and systematic epistemic injustice or epistemic oppression, revealing an evolving continuum rather than a sharp separation between them. Theorists who are concerned about systematic epistemic injustice or epistemic oppression should therefore attend to cases of incidental injustice.

In closing, it is interesting to consider another category of cases where incidental and systematic epistemic injustice seem to interact, and that might therefore also be placed on the continuum between the two. This further category of cases might be termed *second-order epistemic discrimination* (not to be confused with Dotson's notion of second-order epistemic exclusion, which corresponds to systematic hermeneutical injustice). Second-order discrimination *tout court* arises when the stigmatization of a minoritized group (e.g., women, BIPOC, or people of lower socio-economic status) gets transposed onto anything or anyone associated with this group of people (e.g., caregiving or housekeeping work, a certain neighborhood) (Anderson 2010, 60). Extending this idea to the epistemic realm, we might say that second-order *epistemic* discrimination arises when epistemic contributions are discredited or misunderstood because the content or the form of their contribution is associated with socially minoritized groups, even if the epistemic contributors themselves are not socially minoritized. While she does not explicitly describe it as such, Emmalon Davis's notion of *content-based testimonial injustice* is one way in which what I am calling here second-order epistemic discrimination can manifest. Content-based testimonial injustice occurs when a person faces an undue credibility deficit not because of their own social identity, but because of the social group with which the content of their epistemic contribution is associated (Davis 2021). For instance, a cis white man might be dismissed by his colleagues because he works in feminist philosophy, which is associated with women and other minoritized groups. Davis also suggests that content-based testimonial injustice is a type of *incidental testimonial injustice* (2021, 242), adding that:

> Classifying these testimonial injustices as incidental would not be to say that the targeted contributors are not experiencing testimonial injustices. Rather, it is to say that they experience epistemic harms that only disadvantage them in a particular domain. But the localized nature of the harm does not dissolve the claims to justice that those targeted have against those who unjustly target them *within that domain.* Indeed, even if the harm did not take on any larger social significance, it would nonetheless warrant some ameliorative response within the localized contexts in which it arises. (2021, 242)

In addition to Davis's notion of content-based testimonial injustice, second-order epistemic discrimination can take a number of forms. For example, are qualitative methods dismissed because they are associated with characteristics that are culturally coded feminine (e.g., empathy, talking, listening), and are quantitative methods predominant because they are associated with characteristics that are culturally coded masculine (e.g., science, math, statistics)? Is research typically considered a better indicator of academic excellence than teaching or service because teaching and service are more akin to caregiving or housekeeping tasks, historically associated with women and BIPOC people, whereas research is the more "noble" or intellectually demanding task, requiring qualities historically associated with white men, such as rationality and objectivity (Catala 2022a, 7)? Or consider the case of a student, adjunct, or cleaning staff member whose perfectly legitimate request is dismissed by an administrator at the school because of their status, even though the same administrator immediately fulfills the same legitimate request when it comes from a professor. Are their requests dismissed because academia sometimes resembles a feudal system, where one's status in the academic hierarchy becomes akin to class or socio-economic status in society at large?

In all of these cases, larger, systematic biases regarding gender, race, or class come to affect the credibility and intelligibility of contributors in the academic context who may *or may not* experience these biases outside of the academic sphere. So, while larger, systematic biases are definitely at play here, the individuals whose credibility and intelligibility they affect (here, in academia) may not always be said to be epistemically oppressed. When otherwise relatively privileged individuals face second-order epistemic discrimination, what they face is closer to incidental testimonial injustice than to epistemic oppression because the epistemic exclusion they experience is limited to the academic context. Yet this type of incidental injustice is clearly connected to larger, systematic biases that normally target minoritized groups, thus revealing interesting ways in which incidental and systematic epistemic injustice interact.

In sum, the line between incidental and systematic epistemic injustice is more accurately characterized as a fluid continuum than as a sharp divide. It is therefore important to retain the concept of incidental epistemic injustice, in order to be able to more precisely and comprehensively track and address the sort of obstacles (e.g., localized, academic biases such as pedigree, methodological, or hierarchical biases) that

unduly and persistently undermine epistemic agency in a way that would otherwise not be readily apparent on the radar of the epistemic oppression framework, yet that warrants our philosophical and transformative attention.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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