



“Don’t talk foolish, this is serious!” The debate on the causes of epistemic injustice

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Sometimes justifiably, we stop trusting someone’s testimony when we catch that person repeatedly on a lie. But what is the reason why we assign less credibility to someone if nothing justifies the lack of trust? When we give a person less credibility than she deserves because she belongs to a particular social group, we are committing a testimonial injustice. Is this due to factors that are individual (explicit prejudices and implicit biases) or structural (social norms and conventions, institutions and material reality)? These two approaches differ both in their versions of the causes of these injustices and how to intervene to resist them. However, they can be easily integrated.



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provide reliable testimony, is reduced in virtue of her belonging to a socially disadvantaged group (gender, sexual, ethnic minorities, etc.). It is worth clarifying that “testimonial” must be understood here in a broad sense, as any judgment carried out by the speaker, either based on opinion or direct witnessing.

Several police officers examine the available evidence about who may be the sinister killer who is keeping the entire city on its toes with his crimes. One of them, Lucy, proposes the name of the person she considers the primary suspect. Immediately, one of the male officers says: “Don’t talk foolish, Lucy, this is serious! Let’s leave the female intuition for another time.”

This is a standard case of epistemic injustice, in particular, one of testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007): the phenomenon by which the credibility of a person as possessor and provider of knowledge, and therefore able to

To explain the causes of epistemic injustices in general, and testimonial injustices in particular, the positions vary along a continuum that goes from extreme individualist to extreme structuralist positions (as we will see, 'individual' here refers to internal factors of individuals, while 'structural' refers to elements of the social fabric). Extreme positions claim that either individual or structural causes are sufficient to account for epistemic injustices.

Extreme individualists maintain that testimonial injustice is only the result of prejudicially evaluating a speaker's testimony, whether due to explicit prejudice or implicit bias. Like prejudices, implicit biases are evaluations that "involve associations between social groups and concepts or roles such as 'violent,' 'lazy,' [...] and so on" (Brownstein & Saul, 2016, p. 1-2). However, unlike prejudices, implicit biases "are largely outside of conscious awareness or control" (Ibid. p. 1). Thus, they are assessed by means of special tasks, such as the Implicit Attitudes Test (see Project Implicit: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>). In this test, a person's reaction time to associate words and images with specific categories is measured. Spending a longer time in making some associations reveals the strength of the implicit biases. On an unconscious level, many of those who take these tests harbour, to varying degrees, biases of a racist, sexist, classist nature, or all of them. For individualists, the main way to reduce or end social injustices is the reduction of explicit or implicit prejudice that sustains such injustices.

In reaction to this sort of individualism, structuralists (Anderson, 2010; Banks & Ford, 2011; Haslanger, 2015; Ayala & Vasilyeva, 2015) argue that this analysis is not only incorrect but also dangerous. It is wrong because the prejudices or implicit biases are not the causes but some of the consequences of living in unfair and unequal societies. It is dangerous as a paradigm because it makes invisible the structural nature of the injustices that we must face if we want to make our societies more egalitarian and fairer. The structural dimension ranges from institutional aspects and social norms to the material living conditions of people who are subjected to injustice. As Haslanger (2015) notes, injustice and inequality in the form of racism or sexism, for example, may continue to exist even in societies free from implicit racial or gender biases and prejudices. Ending these prejudices, therefore, does not mean ending existing injustices and social inequalities which makes the extreme individualistic approach insufficient in itself. For extreme structuralists, the aim of those who seek to combat social injustices must be "the alleviation of substantive inequalities, not the eradication of unconscious bias" (Banks & Ford, 2011, p. 2). However, they also have to cope with criticism from supporters of individualism, who complain from, on one hand, the imprecision with which the structural dimension is sometimes characterised and, on the other hand, the difficulty of adequately combining the structural and the agential (Ayala, unpublished manuscript).

These two frameworks are incompatible only if it is accepted that each of them is sufficient in itself to understand and solve the problem. However, there are more than enough reasons to reject this exclusionary vision. Moderate positions maintain that both individual and structural factors are necessary to explain injustices (Ayala, 2017). They embrace a framework in which the structural and the individual are interdependent dimensions, both of which are necessary to undertake the social changes necessary to tackle social injustices effectively (Madva, 2017; Saul, forthcoming).

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