In this chapter I discuss the nature of various forms of epistemic injustice, as seen from the angle of social epistemology.

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Miranda Fricker’s ground-breaking book on epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) made several very important advances in philosophical discussions. First, it introduced new terminology for identifying a phenomenon that, if implicitly recognized, had not previously been called out by name: what she labels “epistemic injustice” is an injustice that affects individuals in their role as epistemic subjects. Second, and relatedly, Fricker’s book provided a tremendous impetus for those working in epistemology to speak to issues in fields that had previously been at a great remove from the theory of knowledge, at least as traditionally practiced – fields such as political and social philosophy, ethics, feminism, and critical race theory. While Fricker was not the first to try to make such connections, her work has certainly been extremely successful in attracting ever-greater attention to the relevant topics. Third, the notion of an epistemic injustice has been fruitfully applied in a variety of different areas within philosophy – something to which this volume attests beautifully. In this chapter, I will employ the notion of epistemic injustice in connection with social epistemology. If we think of social epistemology as the study of the social dimensions of knowledge acquisition, storage, dissemination, assessment, and application, then the notion of an epistemic injustice has clear application in this domain. My specific aim is to illustrate several distinctive types of epistemic injustice – ones that come sharply into focus when we take a decidedly social-epistemological vantage point on the phenomena to be discussed.

I begin with my own view of the nature of social epistemology itself. In other work, I have urged that social epistemology ought to be regarded as the systematic investigation into the epistemic significance of other minds. Such significance is apprehended when we recognize others as epistemic subjects in their own right – subjects who exhibit various forms of agency relevant to the acquisition, storage, transmission, and assessment of information. A systematic investigation of this significance will investigate three fundamental aspects of our knowledge communities: (i) the various forms taken by our epistemic dependence on others, (ii) the variety of norms that underwrite our expectations of one another as we make our way in the common epistemic
environment, and (iii) the distinctive epistemic assessment(s) implicated whenever a doxastic state is the result of a “social route” to knowledge.

This conception of the subdiscipline of social epistemology is admittedly somewhat idiosyncratic. The literature has been dominated by two other conceptions of the field. These are associated with the work of Steve Fuller (1988, 2012) and Alvin Goldman (1999, 2001, 2002). To a first approximation, Fuller-style social epistemology derives from Kuhn’s work in the philosophy of science (and tends to bring a seriously interdisciplinary approach to the study of our knowledge practices, in ways that share strong affinities with the Science and Technology Studies movement), whereas Goldman-style social epistemology has developed out of the tradition of so-called “analytic” epistemology (and tends to focus on topics that emerge out of the questions of traditional epistemology, in ways that employ the normative epistemic vocabulary of that tradition). In Goldberg (forthcoming a), I advocate for the conception described above as something like a middle ground. With the more interdisciplinary approaches it recognizes the need to incorporate our various knowledge practices and the norms that inform them into a full account of our knowledge in social settings, and with the more traditional approaches it acknowledges the need to acknowledge objective, broadly “reliabilist” standards on knowledge. But whether my “middle ground” conception has this merit or not, it is particularly useful in the present context. Simply put, this conception paves the way for some novel applications of the notion of epistemic injustice.

To bring this out I will focus on the second of the three dimensions capturing the epistemic significance of other minds: (ii) the variety of norms that underwrite our expectations of one another as we make our way in the common epistemic environment. Since the norms pertain to what we expect and what we hold each other responsible for, in connection with our roles in a common knowledge community, I will refer to them as generating “normative expectations” regarding our roles as epistemic subjects. My claim will be that there are a variety of forms of epistemic injustice that arise, or can arise, in connection with these normative expectations. One additional advantage of this angle on the subject is that we can quite naturally highlight the tremendous contributions that feminist epistemology has made to social epistemology, as feminist epistemology is (in Elizabeth Anderson’s apt words) “the branch of social epistemology that investigates the influence of socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interests and experiences on the production of knowledge” (Anderson 1995: 54; italics in original).

Before turning to the epistemic injustices themselves, it will be important to understand the variety of norms and expectations that structure our epistemic communities. One can discern the existence of the norms themselves, and the expectations they underwrite, in our everyday informational exchanges with others.

To begin, consider the variety of expectations we have regarding others’ epistemic condition – their knowledgeableness, the inquiries they have performed, the evidence they possess, the inquiry-related responsibilities they have, and so forth – as we make our way through the world acquiring information. These expectations are present as we rely on our doctor’s medical advice, entrust our children to daycare providers, make business decisions with our partners, enroll in a course to learn about a subject, get expert advice on a matter presently before us, interact with our colleagues at work, buy food in a grocery store, etc. In these and so many other humdrum cases, we expect certain things of one another. The expectations that concern us here are those whose content is epistemic: they concern what others know, what evidence they have, what
evidence-collecting responsibilities they bear, what reporting procedures they follow when they acquire relevant new information, and so forth.

It is important to see that these expectations are normative (as opposed to merely predictive) in nature. It is certainly true that in most or all of these cases, you would predict that the various people do in fact have the knowledge (evidence, etc.) you expect of them, and it is also true that you have a good deal of evidence to back up your expectations. But the expectations themselves are not merely predictive in nature. To see this, suppose that you were to find out that your doctor was not knowledgeable about best treatment practices regarding a common medical condition. If your expectation were merely predictive, then, given what you found out, rationality would require that you surrender your expectation of your doctor’s knowledgeable. But of course this is not how you would react. On the contrary, you would appeal to this expectation in order to criticize your doctor for not having been relevantly knowledgeable. It is in this sense that we can speak of normative expectations.

Of course, not all normative expectations are legitimate. An imperious boss might normatively expect every one of the workers to know absolutely everything that there is to know about the efficient running of the business, but if this expectation is unreasonable (or otherwise unwarranted or arbitrary), then the expectation itself is illegitimate – it would not be proper for the boss to appeal to this expectation to chastise those who failed to meet the standard. This raises an interesting and difficult question in social philosophy: precisely when are normative expectations legitimate (where a legitimate standard is one to which it would be proper to hold others accountable)?

While I have no precise answer to this question, it is worth noting that the expectations described above (in connection with our knowledge communities) appear to be far from unwarranted or arbitrary. These expectations would appear to be underwritten by (the norms of) our social practices. To see this, consider the practices of relying on experts. There are a variety of (educational) ways for people to acquire expertise in a given area and, having done so, to signal their expertise to others (credentialing). In addition, there are various ways by which the experts “police” themselves (i.e., via professional organizations). And finally there are various ways for those who rely on experts to signal that they are so relying (i.e., by hiring them in their role as expert in the domain in question), as well as various ways for the experts to communicate what can be expected of them in their role as experts (the publication of professional standards). Similar things can be seen in our reliance on authorities such as doctors or consultants. Here it is perhaps even clearer that the sort of reliance connecting ordinary people to such authorities is itself answerable to various sets of standards: in some cases the standards are explicitly formulated by professional organizations (the American Medical Association, the Institute of Management Consultants); in other cases there is relevant law regulating interactions of these types. So, too, for the norms informing the practices in which we rely on other types of professionals (daycare providers, instructors).

The sort of norms and expectations that structure our epistemic communities, as well as the social practices that underwrite these, go beyond our interactions with professionals. Sometimes, such expectations arise in the course of a personal (family, friendship, or acquaintance) relationship between two or more people. Once again, we can account for the legitimacy of these expectations (when they are legitimate) in terms of the legitimacy (and mutual familiarity) of the practices that emerge in the course of these relationships. Consider for example the expectations that two long-term partners in a family might have regarding one another: one partner, S, might expect that the other partner, T, knows of S’s interests in X, Y, and Z, so that if T were to acquire any relevant knowledge about such matters, T would report this immediately to S. Here, there is a practice of sharing such information with one another whose familiarity to both S and T is
part of what renders the expectations themselves legitimate. Or – sticking with the case of family partners – S and T might have the practice of leaving notes on the refrigerator door whenever they are in need of something from the store, so that when one leaves such a note in the evening for the other, s/he expects the other to have read it and to know its contents by breakfast. 10 Once again, the mutual familiarity of the practice is part of what makes the expectations themselves legitimate.

In short, it is a pervasive feature of our social life in knowledge communities that we have what I call normative expectations of others, that some of these expectations pertain to the epistemic condition of others, and that at least some of these normative epistemic expectations are legitimized by relevant social practices (whether professional, legal, scientific, personal, or familial). That is, the norms of the practices themselves determine standards against which we hold one another accountable, and when those practices are themselves mutually familiar and legitimate, the norms or standards captured by our expectations are legitimate as well. But what should be said about the legitimacy of the practices themselves?

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Not all of our practices (or the expectations they underwrite) are legitimate, of course, and when they are not, they can give rise to certain forms of epistemic injustice. There are at least three ways in which the illegitimacy of social practices can give rise to epistemic injustice. One sort of epistemic injustice occurs when some people are unjustly excluded from participating, or else are treated unjustly when they do participate, in the development and sustainment of a social practice informed by normative epistemic expectations. A second sort of epistemic injustice occurs when the social practice itself “warrants” normative epistemic expectations whose standards themselves would have us treat people unfairly. And a third sort of epistemic injustice occurs when the social practices (and the expectations they generate) are “policed” in a way that treats people unfairly, or else which has effects that are unjust. In what follows, I cite examples of each, borrowing heavily from the literature in feminist epistemology and related parts of critical race theory, as well as recent social science. 11

Since epistemic expectations help to regulate a practice, it should be open to all individuals who participate in the practice to help shape the practice, and so help shape the expectations “warranted” by the practice. Let us begin, then, with the sort of injustice that occurs when some people are unjustly excluded from participating, or else are treated unjustly when they do participate, in the development and sustainment of a social (epistemic) practice.

Insofar as one is excluded from participation altogether, one is excluded from enjoying the potential benefits of the practice. Insofar as these benefits are epistemic – the acquisition of new knowledge, access to further evidence or sources of evidence, etc. – one has been unfairly excluded from acquiring epistemic goods, rendering the injustice an epistemic one. Injustices of this sort have been emphasized by, among others, Alison Wylie (2011): she notes the noxious effects of climate issues in knowledge communities, among which are the exclusion of women and members of underrepresented minorities. 12 And Carla Fehr (2011) has noted similar things for academic institutions more generally.

Consider next the case in which one does participate in the practice, but is treated unjustly as a participant. As an example, we might focus on the norms and expectations in the practice of science. Many feminist philosophers of science have pointed out that some of these have been sexist in effect, if not (always) in intention. Kristina Rolin (2002), for example, describes the sexist effects of regarding masculine styles of presentation as providing the scientific standard. Early work in feminist epistemology held that the sexist norms and expectations in the practice
of science were in fact incompatible with the norms of science itself, and might be addressed by appeal to the latter (Bleier 1984; Hubbard 1983; Longino 1990; Longino and Doell 1983); several others held that sexism was inextricably linked to the scientific perspective itself, leading to a more wholesale critique of scientific practice (Addelson 1983; Keller 1985; Lloyd 1984). But whatever the outcome of this debate, it is clear that both sides agree that – whether intended or not – the norms and expectations informing scientific practice have affected the ways in which female scientists could contribute to the scientific projects in which they were engaged (Grasswick 2017).

The feminist philosophers of science cited above, among others, can be seen as having questioned the legitimacy of the expectations embedded in scientific practice. Their critiques, then, can be usefully understood as advancing an allegation of epistemic injustice (in the hope of establishing a more legitimate set of practices). The allegation focuses on the harms to female scientists as knowers: their perspectives and claims are not taken with the same seriousness as those of their male counterparts, and the opportunities as well as the epistemic rights and privileges accorded to their male counterparts are often not accorded to them (or are accorded in only a diminished way). As a result, there is a corresponding diminishment in the authority granted to their claims regarding what inquiries are worth pursuing or what has been established in the inquiries that have been pursued. For this reason, practices with sexist effects do epistemic harm, not only to women scientists but to science itself and indeed the public at large: the fruitful lines of research that might have been pursued had women been full participants are not pursued, or are pursued only after unfair delays – depriving the public of useful and important knowledge that would have been acquired had the practice been more equitable.

Of course, these kinds of injustices are not restricted to women; similar points have been made by critical race theorists regarding the epistemic harms to members of underrepresented minorities, generated when social practices (whether scientific or not) themselves are illegitimate. Thus Charles Mills (1997, 2007) has suggested that there are various practices (including the norms and expectations informing them) that sustain the domination and privilege of whites. Since these practices can and do have a profound impact on what is investigated and why, they can have a profound impact on what is known and what remains in ignorance – thereby constituting an epistemic harm for those who would be well-served to have the knowledge in question, and an unfair advantage for those who benefit from this arrangement.

Interestingly, the kind of injustice Fricker (2007) labels “hermeneutical injustice” can exemplify an injustice of precisely this kind. As Fricker characterizes it, hermeneutical injustice is a sort of injustice that obtains when we lack the very vocabulary for understanding and describing kinds of harms that are done to people in virtue of their membership in a disadvantaged class. (Her example is sexual harassment prior to the coining of the term “sexual harassment.”) Fricker describes this sort of harm as an “asymmetrical cognitive disadvantage” (Fricker 2007: 161) since the lack of relevant vocabulary disadvantages the victim but not the perpetrator. Now it seems clear that this sort of injustice can obtain when certain areas of research aren’t pursued out of one or another form of prejudice – as when people aren’t included in the research practice, or else are not extended full participation, owing to prejudice against a disadvantaged class of which they are members. Insofar as the research at issue would have developed the vocabulary in question if it had been pursued, neglecting such research out of prejudice would appear to constitute hermeneutical injustice to those who are victims of the harms in question.

Next, let us move on to the sort of epistemic injustice that occurs when a social practice “warrants” normative epistemic expectations whose standards themselves treat people unfairly. A familiar example of this sort of injustice is the “soft prejudice of low expectations” in educational settings. Consider prevailing educational practices in schools whose students are primarily
drawn from low-income neighborhoods in the US. Often, classrooms are overcrowded, teachers are not well-supported (and in some cases not well-trained), facilities are poor, and the students themselves typically face additional personal and familial challenges. The result is that educational practices are shaped to conform to the prevailing conditions, and what is “expected” of these students often falls far below what might be expected of students from a school in a wealthy neighborhood. This familiar scenario results in an injustice when the result of these lowered expectations are lowered average performance by the students in the low-income school (relative to the state or national norm), and what makes this injustice an epistemic injustice is that the affected students have been harmed epistemically, first, in not having access to the same opportunities to acquire epistemically-relevant skills and the cognitive competences needed for acquiring and assessing knowledge, and second, in not acquiring knowledge that is already possessed within the community (Kotzee 2017).

This sort of injustice is particularly profound as it affects the students’ capacities for epistemic agency itself. Nor is this the only case of this sort to arise within a classroom setting. Consider how the imposition of certain standards of “academic excellence” might well have the (no doubt, unintended) effect of ensuring that the emerging academic interests of students from disadvantaged backgrounds might not count for as much, or at all, in determining what to read, or how to guide a conversation, in the classroom. These effects constitute a systematic epistemic harm insofar as the students who are affected are likely to be less engaged with the classroom material, and so less likely to do well in school, than those whose interests are taken to set the agenda, and the harm constitutes an epistemic injustice insofar as the epistemic harms (i) are the result of unfair expectations and (ii) disproportionately affect already-disadvantaged students in their capacities as knowers.

The sorts of cases I have been describing in connection with educational settings are those whereby a social practice “warrants” normative epistemic expectations whose standards themselves in effect treat people unfairly (in ways bearing on their status as knowers). Another source of epistemic injustice – the final one I will explore in this chapter – comes when social practices (and the expectations they generate) are “policed” in a way that treats people unfairly, or that has effects that are unjust. Once again, cases of this sort have been described in educational settings. Thus certain norms of the classroom, which may be perfectly fair when stated abstractly, might nevertheless be enforced in ways that unjustly disadvantage women and people of color. Sally Haslanger (2014) has described cases in which norms of interaction in the classroom (both student-teacher and student-student) can result in situations in which students who come into the class already disadvantaged have their disadvantages reinforced. Consider a classroom situation in which a teacher regularly engages in active debate with the “good” students in the classroom, while largely ignoring those who often fail to bring in their homework. This sort of practice, in itself, need not constitute any sort of injustice. But if practices of this sort regularly fall along already-existing lines of disadvantage – it is the white male students who are regularly engaged, and it is female students or students of color whose only regular interaction with the teacher involves the teacher challenging them regarding whether they did their homework – the practices can have the effect of furthering existing advantages and disadvantages.

In the sort of case just described, the practice-sanctioned expectations themselves are fair and just in the abstract, but their enforcement is not, putting additional burdens on those who are already underprivileged. Another familiar case of this sort has been documented to arise in connection with the assessment of CVs from people whose names are ethnic-sounding: even if the epistemic expectations regarding the successful job candidate are perfectly appropriate, an injustice arises if those CVs with ethnic-sounding names are specially scrutinized in ways that the other CVs are not – in effect, holding the two groups to different standards. Insofar as the
committee draws inferences to unwarranted conclusions regarding the epistemic condition of the applicants on the basis of the perusal of the CVs, the harms to those with ethnic-sounding names include epistemic harms, constituting an epistemic injustice. But the results of unfair “policing” of standards can be still more far-reaching: insofar as proper social scrutiny of knowledge claims is part of what renders them worthy of belief as objectively correct (Longino 2002; Scheman 2001), unfair policing of claims can undermine the warrant we have that we are getting things right regarding the objective world – thereby constituting an epistemic harm to all, albeit with particular noxiousness to those whose authority is prejudicially denigrated.

The sorts of injustice that Fricker (2007) herself labels “testimonial injustice” can be seen as an instance of this very sort. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker’s credibility on an occasion of testifying is downgraded owing to prejudice. Now suppose that the practice of giving testimony (or of making assertions more generally) is one for which there are normative epistemic expectations. For example, many philosophers who write on assertion have supposed that we expect those who make assertions to assert only what they know. Even if we suppose that this standard is legitimate, if the “policing” of this standard is unfair – if some people (women, members of underrepresented minority groups) are systematically downgraded in the assessment regarding whether they know, merely in virtue of their membership in the group in question – then clearly the policing is unfair, giving rise to the epistemic harm Fricker characterizes as “testimonial injustice.”

Social epistemology can be conceived as the systematic investigation of the epistemic significance of other minds. So conceived, the investigation involves a focus on the practices by which knowledge communities acquire, store, transmit, and assess information. These practices reflect aspects of the economic division of labor, but they also include practices that emerge in the course of personal, familial, or business interactions between particular people who have regular opportunities to interact with one another. Whether the practices are professional or personal, participants come to expect things of each other, among which are expectations about each other’s epistemic condition – one’s state of knowledge, the evidence one has, the epistemic responsibilities one acknowledges, and so forth. When the practices themselves are legitimate, these expectations are legitimate as well. But when the practices themselves prevail despite being unjust (or having unjust effects), we arrive at a situation in which there are normative epistemic expectations that are unjustly imposed on (or used to evaluate) others. This can give rise to various forms of epistemic injustice. In this chapter I have highlighted several kinds of epistemic injustice that might arise in this way. I have noted as well that both of the forms of injustice highlighted by Fricker herself (testimonial and hermeneutic) can be assimilated into this taxonomy; this is perhaps some evidence confirming the utility of the social-epistemic perspective, as conceived here.

**Related chapters:** 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 21, 26, 31

**Notes**

1. It is a personal embarrassment of mine that in my original reaction to Fricker’s book (Goldberg 2010), I only gave cursory acknowledgement of the importance of the connections Fricker was making between epistemology and other subdisciplines in philosophy – only to go on in my review to focus exclusively on a narrow question of her treatment of the epistemology of testimony. One must own up to one’s own blindness: mea culpa.

3 Indeed, Grasswick’s “Feminist Social Epistemology” entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Grasswick 2013) includes an entire subsection dedicated to epistemic injustice.

4 See e.g. Goldberg (2013, forthcoming a).

5 The emphasis on agency is also a characteristic of various forms of feminist philosophy; see especially Code (1991), Jaggar (1983), Nelson (1990), and Scheman (1995).


7 For a more detailed characterization from which I drew in this brief one, see Collin and Pederson (forthcoming), which serves as the introduction to a special Synthese volume on social epistemology they are editing.

8 For my appreciation of the role of feminist epistemology within social epistemology, I would like to register my deep indebtedness to Grasswick (2013), whose influence throughout this chapter is substantial.

9 What I have had to say is presented in Goldberg (forthcoming b).

10 The example is modeled on a case discussed in Gibbons (2006).

11 In the remainder of this section, I am heavily indebted to Grasswick (2013), whose presentation of feminist social epistemology is extremely helpful.

12 As we will see below, this not only constitutes an epistemic injustice to those excluded, but it also has unhappy effects for the community at large, given the epistemic value of diverse perspectives in “vetting” our claims and in deciding which research to pursue.

13 I thank Heidi Grasswick for noting this point to me (in conversation).

14 Dotson (2011b) distinguishes this case involving a diminishment of credibility ascribed to the speaker, from a related case, which she calls “testimonial smothering,” in which the affected speakers “insure that [their] testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competence” (Dotson 2011: 244).

15 In addition to the work cited above, see also Heldke (2001) and Tuana (2004, 2006).

16 See also Townley (2011), where a similar claim is made about the privileged more generally.

17 I thank Heidi Grasswick for suggesting this to me (in conversation).


19 It is worth noting, as a special case of this sort of epistemic injustice, practices and “policing” policies that are fairminded in design may nevertheless have systematically unfair effects on underprivileged groups. Consider, for example, the evidence from social science for the hypothesis that students of color are disproportionately disadvantaged through “resource depletion” in various interracial interactions (Richeson and Trawalter 2005; Richeson, Trawalter, and Shelton 2005). This raises the possibility that even otherwise “good” practices can inadvertently fail an already disadvantaged population – whether in school settings or beyond.

20 See Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004).


22 Fricker’s points about the epistemic injustice she calls “testimonial injustice” was anticipated in Code’s (1991) view that as epistemic subjects, we are dependent on the recognition, support, and affirmation of others – with the implication that when a subject is not properly recognized or affirmed, this can have a substantial impact on her epistemic agency. As Grasswick (2013) notes, other feminist social epistemologists “have investigated the complex links between assignments of credibility and social position,” including Alcoff (2001), Code (1995), and Jones (2002).

23 With thanks to Heidi Grasswick, Charles Mills, and José Medina for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter, and to Miranda Fricker and Kathryn Pogin, for several helpful discussions of these matters.

References

Social epistemology


Goldberg, S. Forthcoming: “Should Have Known.” Synthese.


