PART 4

Socio-political, ethical, and psychological dimensions of knowing
Epistemic injustice is, broadly speaking, about ways that members of marginalized groups may be wronged in their capacity as knowers, due to prejudicial stereotypes. Members of marginalized groups are also the main subjects of concern in discussions of implicit bias and stereotype threat. Those writing on implicit bias are primarily concerned with the ways that largely unconscious, largely automatic associations and stereotypes may play a role in how we interact with members of stigmatized groups. And those writing on stereotype threat are primarily concerned with the ways that awareness of negative stereotypes about one’s group may impair performance. A key concern in discussions of both implicit bias and stereotype threat has been the effects of these phenomena on academic endeavours. It may seem clear, then, what the relationship is between epistemic injustice, implicit bias, and stereotype threat: at first glance, it would appear that implicit bias and stereotype threat are simply varieties of epistemic injustice.

This thought, however, is a mistake. While there are many interesting relationships between epistemic injustice, implicit bias, and stereotype threat, these relationships are far more complicated than the simple one suggested above. To explore this, we will look at Miranda Fricker’s (2007) two main categories – testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice – exploring how each relates to implicit bias and stereotype threat.

1. Testimonial injustice

According to Fricker, in systematic cases of testimonial injustice (her and our primary concern):

The speaker sustains such a testimonial injustice if and only if she received a credibility deficit owing to the identity prejudice of the hearer.

(28)

A key element of this is often what Kristie Dotson calls ‘testimonial quieting’, drawing on the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1990). This, she writes, “occurs when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower,” often due to a ‘controlling image’ (e.g. welfare mother) or stereotype (Dotson 2011: 242–243).
1.1 Testimonial injustice and implicit bias

While there will be substantial overlap between cases of testimonial injustice and cases of implicit bias, we will see that the two notions come apart in many ways. To see this, we’ll need a more precise understanding of implicit bias. Here is a useful outline of the notion, from Brownstein and Saul (2016: 2).

‘Implicit bias’ is a term of art referring to evaluations of social groups that are largely outside of conscious awareness or control. These evaluations are typically thought to involve associations between social groups and concepts or roles such as “violent,” “lazy,” “nurturing,” “assertive,” “scientist,” and so on. Such associations result at least in part from common stereotypes found in contemporary liberal societies about members of these groups. Substantial empirical support has developed for the claim that most people, often in spite of their conscious beliefs, values, and attitudes, have implicit biases and that those biases impact social behavior in many unsettling ways. For example, implicit racial biases are thought to cause a majority of people to give more favorable evaluations of otherwise identical resumés if those resumés belong to applicants with stereotypically white names (e.g. Emily, Greg) than if they belong to applicants with stereotypically black names (e.g. Jamal, Lakisha). Even more ominously, participants in “shooter bias” tasks are more likely to shoot an unarmed black man in a computer simulation than an unarmed white man, and are more likely to fail to shoot an armed white man than an armed black man.

Comparing Fricker’s original discussions of testimonial injustice with discussions of implicit bias, there is an initially rather striking difference. Her central cases, from To Kill a Mockingbird and The Talented Mr. Ripley, involve quite explicitly expressed and endorsed prejudices. And she writes of the relevant prejudices being things like “the idea that women are irrational, blacks are intellectually inferior to whites, the working classes are the moral inferiors of the upper classes” (Fricker 2007, 23). That is, she seems to be focused on prejudices as propositions explicitly believed/endorsed. Later she writes that “prejudices are judgments, which may have a positive or a negative valence” (Fricker 2007, 35). Again, ‘judgment’ is suggestive of something explicit and conscious. In the implicit bias literature in philosophy, on the other hand, the focus has been very much on the implicit biases which conflict with explicit beliefs and commitments. The prejudices that are the subject of so much discussion are largely unconscious and automatic ones, that people may be horrified to discover they hold (if they are even willing to face up to this revelation).

However, this contrast is overstated. The philosophical implicit bias literature has focused on cases of conflict because they are the most puzzling ones and the cases in which there seems the most potential for alteration and improvement. But even the most openly bigoted people still have implicit biases – generally ones that fit perfectly with their explicit beliefs. So, for example, the bigoted white people in To Kill a Mockingbird almost certainly hold implicit biases against black people that match their explicit biases. And Fricker’s discussion of how credibility deficits actually function is in fact a very nice fit with discussions of implicit bias. First, her crucial notion of a negative identity-prejudicial stereotype does not seem to be one that requires consciousness:

A widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalization that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment.
She also notes that “prejudicial stereotypes can sometimes be especially hard to detect because they influence our credibility judgments directly, without doxastic mediation” (36), and notes that they may conflict with the holder’s beliefs.

Nonetheless, implicit bias is not simply a subcategory of testimonial injustice. There are at least three ways in which implicit bias might occur without testimonial injustice. First, an epistemic injustice must be done to someone. There is no epistemic justice until there is an occasion on which some specific testifier suffers a wrong due to a specific credibility deficit. Implicit bias is not like this – implicit biases are associations that may or may not ever manifest in this way. To see this, imagine the case of someone who lives in an all-white isolated village, with no access to internet, television, or news of the outside world, who has picked up racist implicit biases due to an early acquaintance with racist children’s literature. It might in principle happen (though this is increasingly unlikely) that this person is never actually in the position of deciding whether to believe the testimony of a non-white person, and so they never inflict an epistemic injustice on anyone. This would be the case of an implicit bias that does not give rise to an epistemic injustice. It also brings out another significant point: implicit bias is a psychological notion, concerning the state of mind of an individual (albeit in ways very importantly related to their society). Testimonial injustice is a more interactive notion, requiring a speaker, an audience, and an occasion on which an injustice is done. Implicit bias can give us a small bit of this – it can be part of why a speaker might perpetrate an epistemic injustice. But it will not ever give us the whole of this.

Another way that implicit bias is a broader notion is that it is not just about credibility. There are clearly implicit biases related to credibility: associating men with maths and women with arts may reduce the credibility that a woman mathematician receives, for example. But not all implicit biases are related to credibility. Associating black people with violence is not (straightforwardly, anyway) a matter of credibility, and the devastating effects of this association are quite different from the (also devastating) credibility-related effects of associating black people with lack of intelligence.

A final way that implicit bias is potentially a broader notion than testimonial injustice is that implicit biases may be positive as well as negative. While most literature has focused on negative implicit biases about stigmatized groups, there are also positive implicit biases about valorized groups. Indeed, one standard sort of test for implicit biases (the Implicit Association Test) relies on comparing the accessibility of associations about two different groups. A well-known version of this has demonstrated the tendency to associate white people with ‘good’ and black people with ‘bad.’ The extent to which positive credibility-related prejudices may count as testimonial injustice is controversial. Fricker maintains that epistemic injustice only occurs in the case of credibility deficits, but Jose Medina (2013) argues that credibility excesses may also result in epistemic injustices. These two versions, then, come apart in their ability to encompass positive effects on credibility judgments from implicit bias, with only Medina able to include positive implicit biases as (potentially) giving rise to epistemic injustice.

1.2 Testimonial injustice and stereotype threat

Stereotype threat is a phenomenon that occurs when members of a group that are negatively stereotyped at some particular task care about doing well at it, and are reminded of the negative stereotype of their group. The most-discussed effect of this is underperformance, but it can also lead to other effects such as avoidance or disengagement (for an overview, see Steele 2010).

Since stereotype threat may impair performance, it may lead to less credible testimony. If someone is stumbling over their words, forgetting what they want to say, or displaying other
signs of hesitation or stress, they may well be seen as less credible. Since members of stigmatized
groups are especially (though not exclusively) likely to suffer from stereotype threat, these groups
may be especially likely to suffer from lowered credibility in these ways. This does not, however,
mean that they therefore suffer a testimonial injustice. A testimonial injustice occurs only if the
credibility deficit is due to identity prejudice. The belief that people who show signs of great
stress while speaking are not to be believed is not an identity prejudice, even if its results may be
more damaging for members of stigmatized groups.

Boudewijn de Bruin (2014), however, has argued that there is a significant, underexplored
relationship between testimonial injustice and stereotype threat. Stereotype threat impairs per-
f ormance due to awareness of stereotypes that are widespread in the culture. Some of these
stereotypes are precisely those identity prejudices that give rise to testimonial injustice. Take, for
example, the belief that women are not good at mathematics. This belief may lead to a woman
mathematician’s testimony being taken less seriously than it should be – a clear case of testimonial
injustice. But, crucially, the widespread presence of this belief can also lead the woman mathema-
tician to suffer from stereotype threat and to perform less well. His point is that there may be a
self-fulfilling aspect to testimonial injustice, which functions via stereotype threat.

Another example of testimonial injustice causing stereotype threat comes from Audrey Yap
(2015), quoting a discussion of Aboriginal rape victims facing hostile questioning in court: “The
more hostile and racist the credibility assaults, the more distressing and traumatizing the trial
process is for rape complainants, creating a vicious circle such that their very distress undermines
their ability to ‘hold up’ under legal interrogation in a way that is seen to be credible” (Yap 2015:
32). This is quite a complex case, in which stereotype threat may also be causing victims to behave
in a way that makes their testimony less believable because it displays what are commonly taken
to be non-group-based markers of low credibility. Ishani Maitra (2011) also discusses this sort
of case, noting that “(e)ven granting that the stereotype here is genuinely reliable and nonprej-
udicial, if this police officer dismisses the victim merely because of her shifty manner, without
making any further effort to check whether she is really lying, he (intuitively speaking) seems to
commit a wrong against the victim” (2011: 203).

2. Hermeneutical injustice

Hermeneutical injustice is “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experi-
ence obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization” (Fricker
2007, 158). A key example Fricker discusses is that of experiencing sexual harassment before
the term and concept of sexual harassment existed. This lack of a concept meant that those
having this experience had much more difficulty both understanding their own experiences and
communicating with others. But that gap alone is insufficient for hermeneutical injustice. It is
also crucial that that gap resulted from hermeneutical marginalization – a lack of input into the
conceptual resources of the culture, due to the marginalization of a group, which had been kept
from the key concept-making roles.

It is not initially obvious that this would bear much relationship to implicit bias and stereotype
 threat. But as we will see below, there are several interesting avenues for exploration.

One fairly simple point that nonetheless bears making is that both stereotype threat and
implicit bias are concepts that are very helpful for making sense of the experiences of members
of marginalized groups. They fill important hermeneutical gaps. Prior to the rise in awareness
of implicit bias, it was very difficult to call attention to a bias without this being taken to be an
accusation of outright, conscious bigotry. This made it very difficult to communicate about a sig-
nificant portion of the barriers faced by members of marginalized groups. Similarly, the concept
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of stereotype threat has helped many members of stigmatized groups to communicate about their uncomfortable experiences in certain environments – to be able to explain this, name it, and talk about how to change it. Both concepts, then, have filled important hermeneutical gaps.

Importantly, however, this does not mean that the lack of these concepts itself constituted a hermeneutical injustice. For it to constitute a hermeneutical injustice, it would need to be the case that the gap resulted from hermeneutical marginalization. And this, it seems to me, is a matter for historians of science to determine. The gap was not filled until psychological research on stereotypes advanced to the point of formulating these notions. Perhaps it will turn out that this gap would have been filled much sooner, if there were more psychologists who were not white men. But perhaps it will turn out the demographics of the field did not play a role in this and that the gap could not be filled until certain technological advances were made, for which demographics are irrelevant. Before we can know whether the gap was a hermeneutical injustice, we need to know more than we currently do about its cause.

2.1 Hermeneutical injustice and implicit bias

It is relatively easy to see that implicit biases may play an important causal role in bringing about hermeneutical injustices. This is because implicit biases are likely to play an important role in bringing about hermeneutical marginalization. As Fricker notes, members of certain professions are more able to contribute to our common stock of concepts and ways of understanding ourselves than other people are. Politicians, lawyers, academics, and journalists clearly have more of a role in this than do cleaners, construction workers, and unemployed people. There are many factors that have posed barriers to those other than middle-class non-disabled white men advancing in these careers, but surely one factor has been implicit bias. If this is right, then implicit bias is implicated in the production of hermeneutical injustice.

But implicit bias may contribute to hermeneutical injustice in further ways as well, not just by contributing to the hermeneutical marginalization that is a background condition for it. In particular, implicit bias may make it more difficult for people to overcome hermeneutical gaps. Recall that hermeneutical injustice is not just about one’s difficulties in self-understanding. It also concerns difficulties in communicating one’s experience to others. Such communication is difficult enough with someone who has had very different experiences. But it is of course made more difficult by the presence of hermeneutical gaps. However, it can be overcome through what Fricker calls the corrective virtue of hermeneutical justice, on the part of one’s audience: “an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one’s interlocutor is having as she tried to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in the hermeneutical resources” (2007: 169). An audience who possesses implicit biases about the person attempting to communicate may well find it very difficult to exercise this corrective virtue.

2.2 Hermeneutical injustice and stereotype threat

Hermeneutical injustice may also, Stacey Goguen (2016) has argued, be caused by stereotype threat. Goguen argues that stereotype threat undermines one’s ability to trust oneself, suggesting that it “can also have subtle but powerful consequences for the very foundations of our epistemic lives: our sense of ourselves as rational and reliable human knowers, and as full persons” (2016: 222). Consider, for example, the case of a woman in a very male field, who frequently finds herself in stereotype threat-provoking situations. In such situations, she is unable to recall and use the knowledge that she worked so hard to acquire, and struggles to articulate her thoughts. As
this continues, she comes to doubt that she really is a competent and capable thinker. This lack of self-trust impairs one’s ability to make sense of and communicate one’s experiences, leading to hermeneutical injustice.

3. Remedies for epistemic injustice, stereotype threat and implicit bias

In Section 1, we saw that implicit biases may sometimes, but not always, give rise to testimonial injustices. We also considered ways that testimonial injustice may both cause and be caused by stereotype threat. In Section 2, we considered the ways that implicit bias and stereotype threat may cause hermeneutical injustice. Now we turn to considering the ways that remedies for epistemic injustice may impact on implicit bias and stereotype threat. Fricker devotes considerable attention to the issue of how to develop virtuous hearers. Our question is what impact Fricker’s virtuous hearers might be expected to have on the levels of implicit bias and stereotype threat in the world.

Linda Alcoff (2010), drawing on the literature on implicit bias, raises concerns about the very conscious, rational mechanisms that Fricker invokes as ways of becoming a more virtuous hearer:

These are all volitional practices, or ones we might consciously cultivate and practice. And this raises the first question I would direct to Fricker’s account: if identity prejudice operates via a collective imaginary, as she suggests, through associated images and relatively unconscious connotations, can a successful antidote operate entirely as a conscious practice? (2010: 132)

Fricker responds to Alcoff, by citing work in social psychology by Margo Monteith (1993), demonstrating that people who become aware of prejudiced behavior in conflict with their avowed convictions are at least sometimes able to self-regulate and reduce the manifestation of prejudice. The decades since Monteith’s paper lend even more support to the thought that self-regulation is possible, though they have complicated this thought as well.

Some of the most effective self-regulation, it turns out, itself takes place at an implicit rather than fully conscious level. Glaser and Knowles (2007) have shown that subjects who have a highly negative implicit attitude toward prejudice and a strong implicit belief that they themselves are prejudiced are able to block the manifestations of their implicit bias. Such subjects showed a very low correlation between levels of implicit bias against black people and tendency to “shoot” unarmed black people in the shooter bias task. (Other subjects showed a strong correlation between these.) Moskowitz and Li (2011) showed that consciously egalitarian subjects who reflected on a past instance of prejudice were able to inhibit the activation of stereotypes. Crucially, however, this happens without awareness that they are doing this.

Fully conscious self-regulation is also possible for implicit bias. But, crucially, this must be done in the right way. Simply trying not to be biased (Legault et al. 2011) can backfire, as can reflecting on how objective one is (Uhlmann and Cohen 2007). Instead, there are a variety of indirect measures that one can use—carefully forming the right sort of intentions (Mendoza et al. 2010), calling up images of counterstereotypical examplars (Blair 2001), undergoing the right sort of training (Kawakami et al. 2005). It is vital, then, not just to reflect upon the problem from the armchair— at the very least, one should use one’s laptop to explore the internet for effective interventions. And Fricker notes, in her response to Alcoff, that this might well be an important element in cultivating epistemic virtue: she notes that it may well turn out that one should “go in for some sort of unreflective psychological work-out involving anti-prejudicial priming techniques” (Fricker 2010: 165–166).
The nature of implicit bias and stereotype threat, however, also push us to move away from individualistic solutions. These are due to widespread stereotypes in the culture, and individual efforts can only do a limited amount to combat the problem. To fully address these issues, institutional and cultural solutions are needed. This might seem a disconnect with Fricker’s work, which is in its original form mainly focused on individual hearers as cultivators of epistemic virtue. But Fricker notes:

I am not wedded to reflective self-regulation as our only hope. In institutionalized competitive situations (such as appointments procedures, examinations, and so on), structural mechanisms – such as anonymization and double-blind marking and refereeing – are clearly indispensable.

(2010: 165)

I think Fricker would also be very friendly to the thought that what is needed are not just individual solutions (reflective or non-reflective) and not just institutional procedures, but wider cultural change. In the end, we need all of these, a point extremely well-made by Michael Brownstein in his (2015) discussion of implicit bias:

When conceptualizing the fight against implicit bias, our proximal focus should not be on harmonizing our internal states alone, nor should it be on changing the world in a broad sense, nor should it be on seeking out the right kinds of situations and avoiding the wrong ones as such. What I propose instead is a contextualist approach that blends all three from the get-go. It focuses on precisely those nodes at which our attitudes are affected by features of the ambient environment, and the ambient environment is in turn shaped by our attitudes and behavior.

All of these are also, I would argue, needed to effectively combat epistemic justice.

Related chapters: 1, 2, 3, 30, 31

Notes
1 All references are to this work, unless otherwise indicated.
2 It is worth noting, however, that some have disputed this twofold division. Ishani Maitra (2011) argues that these two varieties are not so separate as they may seem, and Kristie Dotson (2012) argues that two varieties are not enough.
4 For an excellent overview of these, see Madva (in progress). And see Rees (2016) for an argument that this is an excellent fit with virtue ethics, which is of course a part of the framework in which Fricker situates her project.
5 See Saul (2013) for an argument that this is where concern about implicit bias ultimately leads. See also Jacobson (2016) for an argument in favour of non-individual approaches to implicit bias, and Anderson (2012) for a discussion of institutional approaches to epistemic injustice.

References
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