

EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE ANIMATION TRANSCRIPT

Dr. Agomoni Ganguli-Mitra [AGM]: What is epistemic injustice?

Rebecca Richards [RR]: So have you ever had the nagging feeling that, for example in a social or professional setting, someone's voice or opinion was being dismissed, or taken less seriously because she was a woman, or because their accent was considered foreign or less sophisticated?

If so, you've come across epistemic injustice: the idea that someone can be unfairly treated in their capacity to know something, or their ability to describe their experience of the world.

Epistemic injustice is closely related to ideas of how knowledge is related to power, of oppression and various forms of prejudice and discrimination: the idea that some forms of knowledge are more important than others, some voices are more audible, and some stories and experiences more easily believed.

AGM: So where does the term come from?

RR: So the idea of epistemic injustice isn't new, even though it's recently received increased attention.

You can trace the roots of these ideas quite far back, for example in the words of Sojourner Truth, who was an African American women's rights activist and abolitionist, speaking about how society denied the voices of Black women.

Ideas of and related to epistemic injustice are found in the works of feminist scholars and activists, and researchers and practitioner who work on race, gender, colonialism, and other things.

The concept has gained more prominence most recently, though not exclusively, through philosopher Miranda Fricker's seminal work:

So Fricker describes two types of epistemic injustice:

The first is what she calls 'testimonial injustice'. And this is where the hearer takes the speaker's word less seriously because of ingrained prejudice (even if it is not done deliberately).

So, going back to the example I began with: You hear someone speak, or describe an experience, or an idea, and because of a specific characteristic (for example their gender, colour of skin, class, or nationality), you (consciously or subconsciously) find them less credible or authoritative. That is an example of testimonial injustice. Think for example of the authority that male professors hold in a classroom, compared to their female counterparts.

And the second type of epistemic injustice is what Fricker calls hermeneutical injustice:

And that refers to a particular type of gap. Because the individual or group do not have the words to describe their experiences or because the speaker and the hearer do not have enough shared experiences, there is a gap between the experience, the ability to express it, and the ability of the hearer to understand it. Consider how difficult it was for women to be taken seriously about things like sexual harassment or perinatal depression, before these concepts became part of our common language and social experience.

AGM: Are there examples of epistemic injustice in global health emergencies and disasters for example? Why we should worry about it in these contexts?

RR: So this is perhaps best illustrated through examples. So I'll give you three:

The first is about disability:

The perception of disability is often culturally ingrained, and often related to the idea that someone with a disability is also less competent. So although people with disabilities are best placed to identify their own needs in times of disaster or humanitarian crises, they are often side-lined or ignored. And this results in measures that are not appropriate or that do not meet their needs.

The second example is one related to asylum seekers

People fleeing conflict for example and requesting asylum at borders are sometimes disbelieved in their description of trauma, and are accused of making-up stories of violence. Sometimes, having experienced the violence, they don't necessarily have the words or concepts to describe the trauma they've experienced, adding to their inability to make their stories appear real and credible.

Thirdly, language and our perception of language can be particularly problematic:

Health emergencies sometimes occur in setting that are diverse in terms of language. However, the management and coordination of the international community's responses are often conducted in English, away from communities, without translations to local languages, and where a person expressing a need or concern in a local language might be given less importance or credibility.

So, if we are to respond to emergencies and disaster better, and more fairly, we have to start taking questions of epistemic injustice seriously.