

From Silencing to Erasure: Understanding Epistemic Injustice and Epistemicide

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Abstract

Epistemic means ‘relating to knowledge’. Knowledge is the central key point in flourishing not only our personal well-being but also in the advancement of society. Therefore, it has become increasingly important to recognize the ability to be treated equally as a knower as an important aspect of social and political philosophy. Unfair and unjust communicative structures, institutions, and practices have the potential to reproduce and further exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities and injustices. Epistemic Injustice is a concept given by Miranda Fricker, which occurs when individuals are unfairly evaluated as knowers due to systematic prejudices and unethical bias that the hearer has towards the speaker. Epistemic Injustice is divided mainly into two types: Testimonial Injustice and Hermeneutical Injustice. The term ‘Epistemicide’, on the other hand, coined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, encapsulates the systematic destruction of diverse knowledge systems and ways of knowing, particularly those that are non-Western or indigenous in nature. It is a form of cultural and intellectual domination that serves to erase or undermine the legitimacy of diverse modes of knowledge production. It is a deliberate act of violence against non-Western ways of knowing, which stands as a significant challenge to the plurality and richness of a global knowledge landscape. In this paper, I would like to focus on the framework of these two concepts and how they are both connected on a single spectrum and how simple personal biases and prejudices can lead to systemic annihilation of certain institutions. I would also like to mainly assess the historical roots and significant effects of epistemicide on knowledge systems around the world.

Keywords: Epistemic Injustice, Epistemicide, Prejudice, Knowledge Systems.

Introduction

Knowledge is not only a key point in the advancement of society, but it is also one of the strong foundational pillars upon which an individual or a community asserts

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their dignity. When an individual is given due recognition and is considered an important epistemic agent in the process of knowledge production, it gives him/her a proper seat in the social standing, but, in contrast, if they are not treated equally and are debarred from the whole process, it not only affects them but also impacts the society at large. It restricts an individual from developing completely as an epistemic agent. This kind of unjust and unequal treatment can be termed as Epistemic Injustice. This concept was established in full detail by British Philosopher, Miranda Fricker. Another phenomenon which also explains how certain knowledge systems can be simply silenced or annihilated is defined as Epistemicide. It is a concept which has been introduced to us by famous sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Although Epistemic Injustice can reside in the field of analytic philosophy and Epistemicide in sociology and de-colonial political theory, but they are not completely two separate phenomena. Therefore, in this paper, I would like to focus on these two concepts and how they both are connected on a single spectrum and how simple personal biases and prejudices can lead to systemic annihilation of certain institutions. I would also like to mainly assess the historical roots and significant effects of epistemicide on knowledge systems around the world.

Literature Review

Epistemic Injustice is a concept that has been systematically developed by Miranda Fricker in her book "*Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*". She defined this concept 'as a wrong done to someone in his or her capacity as a knower.' (Fricker, 2007). Fricker explains how a marginalized individual is unjustly devalued in his/her status as a knower. It is a harm done to an individual where he/she is undermined in their capacity as cognitive agents, leading to a loss of epistemic authority or credibility. (Miranda Fricker, 2007). She further divides them into two types- Testimonial Injustice and Hermeneutical Injustice to explain how prejudices gap in communication lead to an individual being given lesser credibility, how power dynamics play a major part in it and how the structured social dynamics lead to certain individuals being completely debarred from knowledge production.

While Fricker's texts remain the foundation of epistemic injustice, several contemporary scholars have also expanded this concept and have tried to address different forms of oppression.

Kristi Dotson has tried to give us an account of how epistemic injustice works by telling us that, during knowledge making, due to the structural prejudices that are already present in the hearers, which led them to continuously discredit a marginalized person's credibility. This continuous discreditation has severe impact because the people from those marginalized section start losing self-confidence. Hence, which result in them self-censoring their testimonies. (Dotson, 2011).

Alison Bailey has stated that there is a surge of resistant anger among the oppressed voices which is generated because of the continuous silencing of them by the dominant knowers. Being continuously silenced and ignored inevitably sparks a "knowing resistant anger" among the marginalized people. This anger can be seen as a symbol for self-preservation and intellectual survival and as a defensive mechanism to endure the systematic, structured oppression. (Bailey, 2018).

In regard to Epistemicide, Boaventura de Sousa Santos has talked about this concept mainly in his book "*Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against*

Epistemicide”, where he states Epistemicide as the intentional destruction of knowledge systems that do not conform to Western standards. Santos argued that epistemicide is not simply a matter of neglect or oversight, but rather a deliberate act of violence against non-Western ways of knowing. Epistemicide, for Santos, also means an energy that comes from a destabilizing image of the murder of knowledge. He points out that unequal exchange among cultures has always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinate culture.

The literature on Epistemic Injustice focuses on how knowledge production is so deeply integrated with structured power dynamics that it completely excludes individuals or certain social groups as knowers. The silencing of individuals in discussions on important social issues perpetuates power imbalances and allows dominant voices to control the narrative. While Epistemicide highlights how an entire knowledge system is destroyed. It points out how non-Western epistemologies are continuously marginalized since colonial times, because of the growing influence of Western epistemologies.

Forms of Epistemic Injustice and its impact

Fricker sought to explain various ways that members of marginalized or oppressed groups are unjustly devalued in their status as knowers and thus not taken seriously. She argued that this can occur in all areas of life; it can cramp people’s self-development and prevent them from becoming who they really are. Epistemic injustice refers to the type of harm done that impedes recognizing a person’s capacity as someone who is able to know or have knowledge of their own. It is an injustice done to an individual or a group where they are undermined in their capacity as cognitive agents, leading to a loss of epistemic authority or credibility. According to Fricker, epistemic injustice occurs any time a member of a marginalized group fails to be considered authoritative because of their identity or positionality, so the presence of “identity prejudice” is central to epistemic injustice. (Fricker, 2007).

To have a better understanding of epistemic injustice and the harms caused by it, she focuses on an examination of different forms of epistemic injustice.

Testimonial injustice is when someone's testimony is given less credibility than it merits because of a stereotype about the speaker's identity. This stereotype has nothing to do with whether the speaker or the individual should be given credibility, but it nevertheless affects the speaker in some way and unfairly gives others who are not subject to those stereotypes an advantage when sharing their knowledge. Sometimes people disregard someone's thoughts in testimonial unfairness just because of who they are. (Byskov 2021). Fricker has given us the example from “The Talented Mr. Ripley”, where Greenleaf shuts down Marge’s suspicion against Mr. Ripley simply because of his prejudice or epistemic bias. He considers Marge to be emotional, thus unable to think of the situation in a rational manner. He doesn’t consider Marge’s testimony to be credible because of the gender prejudice of his time that he was somewhat conditioned to believe. (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, refers to unfairness in how people interpret the experiences and events in their lives. It is hard to adequately convey thoughts and feelings without having a shared language to express them; a lack of terminology thus leads to a lack of internal and external understandings. In order to give a better understanding of Hermeneutical injustice, she gives an example of the

concept of sexual harassment. We all know what the concept of sexual harassment involves nowadays, but this term has been popular in use only since the 1970s, but the women who were experiencing sexual harassment before that didn't have that concept in their vocabulary, so they didn't know how to articulate their experiences, so even if they were experiencing some kind of harassment in workplace or in their household, those women didn't have a way to contextualize that and to communicate their experiences. Therefore, it is possible for members of groups to have their own understanding but not be able to explain those experiences to other people due to the way society is structured and the way that those other people are; therefore, lack the conceptual resources. (Fricker, 2007)

Epistemicide and its Historical Roots

Being ignored or not taken seriously wears a person down. It deprives people of their agency, marginalizes them, and makes them constantly doubt themselves, their value, the relevance and weight of their lived experience, as well as the validity of their own ideas or claims to expertise. This may result in the repression of one's voice, interpretive abilities, and, in turn, one's position within societal processes that include the common creation and exchange of meaning. The effects of epistemic injustice extend beyond the individual level and can have far-reaching consequences for society as a whole. When certain voices are silenced or marginalized, the collective knowledge and expertise of a diverse range of individuals are lost, leading to a lack of innovation, collaboration, and progress. By perpetuating existing power structures and inequalities, epistemic injustice can hinder social cohesion and mutual understanding, leading to increased polarization, conflict, and mistrust within society.

Epistemicide by Santos is a powerful critique of the ways in which dominant knowledge systems have systematically erased and marginalized alternative forms of knowledge production. Santos first used the word 'epistemicide', mostly to refer to the methodical elimination of Third World Knowledge by "Western Science", including traditional remedies, local knowledge of the natural environment and community justice systems, which cannot be comprehended within the classifications established by contemporary scientific discourse and are therefore being essentially erased in the name of advancement. It is a type of intellectual and cultural dominance that aims to discredit or destroy the validity of various knowledge producing processes. The diversity and depth of a global knowledge landscape are seriously threatened by this intentional act of aggression against non-Western modes of knowing. It is a form of cultural and intellectual domination that serves to erase or undermine the legitimacy of diverse modes of knowledge production. It is a deliberate act of violence against non-Western ways of knowing, which stands as a significant challenge to the plurality and richness of a global knowledge landscape. (Santos, 2014).

In the works of Ramon Grasfoguel, where he has described the four genocides of the long 16th century, he gives us a preview of how epistemicide impacts us as a whole, as the events are somehow interlinked with one another and are constitutive of the colonial world's epistemic structure. The four genocides/epistemicides are: 1) against Muslims and Jews in the conquest of Al-Andalus in the name of "purity of blood"; 2) against indigenous peoples first in the Americas and then in Asia; 3) against African people with the captive trade and their enslavement in the Americas; 4) against women who practiced and transmitted Indo-European knowledge in Europe burned

alive accused of being witches. The final conquest of Al-Andalus occurred when the Catholic Monarchy was on its journey to conquer the Andalusian territory. It was a proto racist discourse where they targeted the Jews and Muslims and massacred them, and those who survived and decided to stay in the territory were pressurised into conversion, resulting in completely diluting the Islamic and Judaic spirituality and knowledge. They were converted into Moriscos (converted Muslims) and Morranos (converted Jews), and have mutilated their knowledge, memory and spirituality. This whole conquest was done under the slogan of 'blood purity'. Therefore, they achieved this ethnic cleansing through genocides and epistemicide. They made sure that the new generation would be true followers of Christianity, as they had no traces of their ancestors' knowledge. The process of epistemicide/genocide that had started with the conquest of Al-Andalus has extended to new subjects such as indigenous people in America, Asia and the African peoples. During their conquest in Al-Andalus, they burned libraries; they burned 500,000 books of the library in Cordoba, in a time where other intellectual centres of Europe had only one-tenth of the books in comparison to Cordoba, which resulted in the extinction of that knowledge. In the conquest of America, the European conquerors employed the same method. They burned thousands of "codices", as it was a written practice of Americans to archive their knowledge. And burning those "codices" resulted in the massive destruction of the indigenous knowledge of America or spirituality.

Epistemicides and Genocides were the two massive tools in the process of conquest. Genocide occurred even during the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans in America. Millions of those slaves have died during the whole process of captivation, to being transported and then enslaved in America. But along with it, epistemicide was also inherently present, because during this whole enslavement process, the Africans were "forbidden from thinking, praying for thinking, praying or practicing their cosmologies, knowledges and worldviews". There was no autonomy for them in regard to knowledge production, which further resulted in them being the socially inferior class in the society. (Grasfoguel, 2013)

Although the fourth genocide is not much interlinked with the other three. But it has also impacted society and the current global structure in a massive way. This epistemicide was against women in European lands who have mastered their indigenous knowledge from ancient times and were in a position to transmit this knowledge from one generation to another. They were also completely silenced, as they started persecution of women in the name of witch hunting. And the knowledge they acquired was mostly oral, thus resulting in being completely forgotten in this contemporary world.

In Western countries, the perception or knowledge that has been produced by other epistemologies regarding the various subject-matters is still looked down upon or considered inferior in comparison to the "superior" Eurocentric ideas; i.e. the knowledge of the Global South is still not considered as a part of the canon of thought. Santos believes Western, Eurocentric theory tries to accept a linear time that confines the present and extends the future; it isolates theory from practice, failing to explain or anticipate modern social movements and emancipatory practices; it also assumes flimsy answers to important questions that diminish understanding, i.e. resulting in an individual's inability to envision the end of colonialism or capitalism. Thus,

Eurocentric power has actively created the absence of alternative ways of knowing as it helped them to assert their dominance and power over the marginalized societies, which resulted in perpetuating power differentials and silencing of marginalized societies and the suppression of alternative perspectives. (Santos,2014)

Conclusion

Fricker's concept of Epistemic injustice has highlighted the mechanism of how knowledge production works. It focuses on how the structured social power dynamics, which are already established in society, impact an individual. It analyzes the harm that one person endures when his /her epistemic credibility is dismissed simply because of certain prejudices or biases that are already present among the hearer. It can be seen as an ethical failure that a person goes through in the process of knowledge making. Epistemicide is just not merely the marginalization of a person or a group, but it is the complete annihilation of an entire way of understanding. It is the ultimate killing or silencing of knowledge of indigeneous groups, which is deemed as less worthy in comparison to the other knowledge of those in power. It is a form of culture and intellectual domination that serves to undermine the legitimacy of diverse modes of knowledge production. Hence, in a long stretch it can be said that Epistemicide happens when thousands of small, continuous acts of silencing individuals and debarring them from participating in mainstream knowledge ultimately lead to the complete destruction of a culture's knowledge. Thus, epistemicide is the imposition of a singular, dominant knowledge system that seeks to marginalize or erase other ways of knowing, which leads to the devaluation or erasure of traditional knowledge systems, indigenous knowledge, and other marginalized epistemologies that do not fit within the dominant worldview. This erasure can have devastating consequences for communities and cultures that rely on these knowledge systems for their survival, identity, and wellbeing.

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