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ARTICLE

Toward an Agential Conception of Hermeneutical Injustice: Isolation and Domestic Violence

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Abstract

Miranda Fricker's definition of hermeneutical injustice entails that hermeneutical injustice is always structural and never agential, but I argue that hermeneutical injustice has an agential dimension that is evident in cases of domestic violence. This dimension becomes especially apparent when examining the experiences of knowers who are multiply non-dominant. Centering this intersectional approach, I focus on domestic violence perpetrators who intentionally isolate their victims, preventing them from accessing the necessary conceptual resources to understand their experience as one of domestic violence. Recognizing the agential dimension not only has implications for our understanding of the range of harms suffered by victims of domestic violence but also invites further reflection on cases of hermeneutical injustice where the injustice is the direct result of an agent's actions or is even intentionally inflicted.

In *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker introduces the idea of hermeneutical injustice, arguing that hermeneutical injustice occurs when unjust distributions of knowledge prevent us from using or even conceiving of the very concepts required to understand our own experiences (Fricker 2007). Significantly, Fricker argues that hermeneutical injustice is always structural and never agential, that is, it is never the case that an individual is personally responsible for causing hermeneutical injustices. I challenge the idea that hermeneutical injustice cannot be agential. Drawing on my experience working with survivors of domestic violence, I describe the case of domestic violence victims who are epistemologically isolated by their perpetrators as a case of hermeneutical injustice. Emphasizing how hermeneutical issues are deeply impacted by intersecting axes of oppression, I conclude, contra Fricker, that not all hermeneutical injustices are structural and that this case demonstrates the existence of an agential form of hermeneutical injustice.

Since Fricker's very definition of hermeneutical injustice entails that it is always structural, to prove that hermeneutical injustice can be agential, I must first reject or amend some of Fricker's stipulations; in particular, I examine both her conception of

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the collective hermeneutical resource and her view of the ways people can be prevented from using the conceptual resources that are available to them. To achieve this, I build upon the arguments of Trystan Goetze and Hilkje Hänel to make sense of several unusual cases of hermeneutical injustice (Goetze 2017; Hänel 2020). Looking particularly at cases where collective understanding is blocked because of the hermeneutical interference of dominant narratives, I go even further to suggest that hermeneutical interference may be caused by individual people. I then argue that victims of hermeneutical injustice need not be hermeneutically marginalized, rather, there need only be some kind of hermeneutical interference that prevents the knower from accessing the relevant concepts. In part II, I draw on these developments to describe the case of domestic violence victims who have been isolated by their perpetrator and don't realize that they are experiencing abuse. Specifically, these victims experience a hermeneutical injustice when the hermeneutical interference of dominant narratives blocks them from applying the concept of domestic violence to their own situation. Moreover, I argue that there is a particular *agential* hermeneutical injustice when the perpetrator isolates their victim, preventing them from accessing the epistemic resources that might help them comprehend their own experiences. Paying particular attention to victims who are multiply nondominant, I emphasize how this harm is often compounded by different intersecting axes of oppression, especially where individuals and domestic violence services focus primarily on the needs of certain dominant groups. I conclude by pointing to additional manifestations of agential hermeneutical injustice, as well as the impact of agential hermeneutical injustice on conceptualizations of the virtue of hermeneutical justice.

I. The Concept of Hermeneutical Injustice

Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization" (Fricker 2007, 158). There are four key qualifications for an experience to be considered a hermeneutical injustice by this definition: (1) the social experience that is obscured must be significant, (2) the experience must be "obscured from collective understanding," (3) the hermeneutical injustice must arise from the victim's hermeneutical marginalization, and (4) the lack of collective understanding must constitute an injustice. Fricker further claims that hermeneutical marginalization occurs when individuals or certain social groups are prevented or otherwise excluded from the sharing and creation of collective knowledge, which results in "the collective hermeneutical resource being structurally prejudiced" (155). The injustice then occurs when, because of this marginalization, the individual can't make experiences communicatively intelligible. Importantly, Fricker states, "No agent *perpetrates* hermeneutical injustice—it is a purely structural notion" (159). In other words, Fricker conceptualizes hermeneutical injustice as structural, not agential. In this context, I take agential to mean directly arising from the intentional acts of an agent, though this agent need not be aware of the entirety of their action's effects. For example, the agent need not know that they have caused a hermeneutical injustice.

Theorists have questioned Fricker's definition on the grounds that it fails to capture the full scope of experiences that plausibly are instances of hermeneutical injustice. One vein of criticism developed by Goetze seeks to clarify Fricker's conception of the "collective hermeneutical resource," pointing out two dimensions of a collective hermeneutical resource: (1) the existence (or nonexistence) of the relevant concepts and (2)

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their availability to persons within various communicative contexts (Goetze 2017). Fricker's example of Carmita Wood demonstrates a case of hermeneutical injustice in which the relevant concept was not available because it simply didn't exist. While working at Cornell University, Wood was repeatedly subjected to the sexual advances of a distinguished professor, eventually causing her to quit her job. Without the concept of sexual harassment, Wood struggled to explain why she left her job and was subsequently rejected for unemployment insurance. Fricker explains that "[h]er hermeneutical disadvantage renders her unable to make sense of her ongoing mistreatment, and this in turn prevents her from protesting it" (Fricker 2007, 151). When Wood finally had the opportunity to share her story with other women, she found that many of them had similar experiences of these unwanted sexual advances. Ultimately, this group of women coined the term *sexual harassment*.

Though Wood experienced a hermeneutical injustice because the concept hadn't been created yet, hermeneutical injustices can also occur when the relevant concept exists but is not a part of the collective hermeneutical resource. Goetze claims that the collective hermeneutical resource is the collection of interpretive resources that different interpretive communities have *in common* (Goetze 2017, 76). Jennifer Ware calls this the "mainstream account" of the collective hermeneutical resource "as it asserts that collective hermeneutical resources include all and only those resources that are available across some significant cross-section of social groups" (Ware 2020, 30).[1] Therefore, though different communities may all share ideas and concepts, some concepts may be available to only one community or another. Thus, Goetze shows that a hermeneutical injustice can arise if the concept exists but is not yet pervasive enough to be available to those who need it to make sense of important experiences. Similarly, if the concept is not available to the audience of the affected speaker, the communicative attempt will fail.

The case of Wendy Sanford, described first by Fricker, demonstrates how a hermeneutical injustice can occur when a concept exists but is not pervasive enough to be a part of the collective hermeneutical resource (Fricker 2007, 148–49). In the sixties, Sanford struggled with depression after the birth of her son and believed that these struggles were a personal failing. Although a doctor would now easily identify Sanford's experience as postpartum depression, this condition was not widely discussed or known about at the time. However, after attending a women's workshop where the participants shared their personal experiences with postpartum depression, Sanford was finally able to realize that her experience was common among new mothers. Thus, by exchanging testimonies with the other women at the workshop, Sanford was able to overcome her lack of hermeneutical resources. In this instance of hermeneutical injustice, the collective hermeneutical resource did not include the concept of postpartum depression, at least partly because of the marginalization of women, preventing Sanford and many others from being able to make their experiences intelligible to themselves and to others. Yet, importantly, the concept still existed, though it was known only within certain limited social or medical groups. Goetze's contribution therefore enables us to consider cases with a variety of distributions of hermeneutical resources as cases of hermeneutical injustice.

In a second vein of criticism, Hänel argues that even when a concept is technically available as a part of the collective hermeneutical resource, the subject may be unable to apply it to their own experience because of various dominant narratives at play. Hänel illustrates her claim with the fictional case of Anna, an undergraduate philosophy student. Anna is aware of the underrepresentation of women in philosophy and has the

concept of gender discrimination. However, when Anna fails to get funding for graduate school but her less academically successful male peer Bob does, she is unable to recognize her experience as one of gender discrimination because of the pervasive narrative that academia is a strict meritocracy. As Hänel explains, "[a]lthough Anna does not suffer from a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource, she is prevented from understanding her experience adequately due to the hermeneutical interference of misguided but dominant background narratives of academia" (Hänel 2020, 339).[2]

However, Hänel's example of Anna problematizes the relationship between the collective understanding and the collective hermeneutical resource. Though the concept of gender discrimination was technically a part of the collective hermeneutical resource, Anna was still unable to apply the concept to her own experience, obscuring it from collective understanding. Therefore, I suggest that "collective understanding" is the ability of *all* knowers to be able to draw, *uninhibited*, upon the appropriate tool or concept from the collective hermeneutical resource. From this definition of collective understanding, I argue that people may be inhibited from drawing on the appropriate concept not just because of the hermeneutical interference of dominant narratives, but because of the interference of individual people. In other words, there may be an agential hermeneutical injustice that arises when individual people prevent others from accessing important conceptual resources.

Hermeneutical Injustice without Hermeneutical Marginalization

The final element of Fricker's definition that I interrogate is the concept of hermeneutical marginalization. Fricker states, "when there is unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area(s) of social experience, members of the disadvantaged group are *hermeneutically marginalized*," such that the collective hermeneutical tools unfairly reflect the interests and experiences of those in more powerful hermeneutical (and often socioeconomic) positions (Fricker 2007, 153). Fricker's definition of hermeneutical injustice states that the injustice is "*owing to* hermeneutical marginalization," implying that all hermeneutical injustices are predicated on the victim's hermeneutical marginalization (158). However, the example of Anna complicates the role of hermeneutical marginalization in hermeneutical injustices. Anna could not apply the concept of gender discrimination to her own experience not because the concept wasn't a part of the collective hermeneutical resource, but because of the hermeneutical interference of the dominant narrative that academia is a meritocracy. Thus, hermeneutical interference is not about marginalization so much as it is about preventing the resources from getting to the people who need them. Since the hermeneutical injustice in Anna's case was not predicated on the collective hermeneutical resource being structurally prejudiced, we cannot claim that hermeneutical marginalization was a condition for the hermeneutical injustice she experienced.[3]

One might argue that hermeneutical marginalization is essential to identifying hermeneutical injustices because it is the only condition that makes instances of hermeneutical injustice actual injustices. Fricker herself identifies hermeneutical marginalization as a condition for a hermeneutical injustice because hermeneutical marginalization results in "the collective hermeneutical resource being structurally prejudiced" (Fricker 2007, 155). She holds that it is the existence of this prejudice that makes hermeneutical injustices not only harmful, but wrongful, and therefore injustices rather than simply epistemic bad luck (153). However, this prejudice can still be accounted for by the hermeneutical interference of dominant narratives in the cases in which the subject's lack of understanding is

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not because of hermeneutical marginalization. These narratives are dominant precisely because they reflect the stereotypes, biases, and prejudices of socially dominant groups. Even where the hermeneutical interference is the result of an individual agent, this interference will usually occur either because the agent is intentionally preventing the knower from accessing important epistemic resources, or because of internal biases. Thus, victims of hermeneutical injustice need not be hermeneutically marginalized, merely the victims of a structural or individual prejudice.

A potential objection to this argument is that hermeneutical interference is just a form of hermeneutical marginalization. Importantly, as noted above, hermeneutical interference and hermeneutical marginalization play the same role of making hermeneutical injustices actual injustices. However, Fricker's definition of hermeneutical marginalization states that hermeneutical marginalization makes the *collective hermeneutical resource* structurally prejudiced. To make sense of cases like Anna's, then, where the subject has the concept but can't apply it, I distinguish between the collective hermeneutical resource and whether one can reliably draw from that resource. Based on this distinction, it is not accurate to say that hermeneutical interferences make the collective hermeneutical resource structurally prejudiced because hermeneutical interferences affect our ability to apply the relevant concepts, not the actual content of the collective resource. My goal here is to point to a particular social phenomenon that has been underdeveloped in the literature: the case in which someone has a concept but is blocked from applying it to their own situation and is unable to overcome the resulting hermeneutical injustice because of social isolation. Therefore, for my purposes, these linguistic distinctions enable a more nuanced analysis of my primary case.

Ultimately, even where a concept is a part of the collective hermeneutical resource (or the collection of concepts shared by a substantial intersection of social groups), agents may be prevented from using those concepts because of hermeneutical interferences. Furthermore, the possibility that the hermeneutical interference of dominant narratives, not just hermeneutical marginalization, can lead to a hermeneutical injustice opens the possibility that individual people can create this hermeneutical interference as well.

II. The Case of Domestic Violence Victims

Having established these developments to the definition of hermeneutical injustice, I am in a position to characterize domestic violence victims, and in particular those victims who are isolated by their perpetrator, as victims of hermeneutical injustices.[4] These victims not only suffer from hermeneutical injustice when they fail to recognize their abusive situation, but are also prevented by their perpetrators from accessing the resources that might help them conceptualize their circumstances. In these cases, the victim's conceptual deficiency is the result of an individual agent's actions. Thus, the perpetrator can be said to be engaged in hermeneutical interference or hermeneutical isolation. This injustice is often further compounded by different intersecting axes of oppression that exacerbate the victim's isolation and may even make existing domestic violence resources inaccessible.

I look first to the injustice that victims of domestic violence experience when they fail to recognize that they are in an abusive relationship. This is certainly a common experience among survivors, and I have encountered it in my work as a volunteer advocate at a domestic violence shelter. Additionally, many survivors of domestic violence who have publicly discussed their experiences have talked about how long it took for them to recognize their situation as abusive. One such survivor, Leslie Morgan Steiner, details in

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her TED talk how it took years of violence and abuse for her to self-identify as a victim of domestic violence and how she had written off her husband's violence saying that he was just "a troubled man" (Steiner 2012). A recent psychology study even suggests that it may be especially difficult for people to recognize abusive behaviors in their own relationships, finding specifically that "both women and men frequently perceived controlling behaviors in other young couples; however, few of them recognize suffering (women) or exercising (men) control in their relationships" (Sánchez-Hernández, Herrera-Enriquez, and Expósito 2020, 77).

For our purposes, let's imagine the case of Clare, a woman married to an abusive partner, Sarah. Clare knows that domestic violence is a genuine issue and she's seen advertisements for domestic violence agencies. However, when Sarah starts threatening her with violence and throwing things at her shortly after they are married, Clare writes it off by telling herself that she must have provoked Sarah, or that Sarah had a bad day at work. Though Sarah's emotional manipulation and violent outbursts cause Clare great physical and emotional distress, she does not realize that what she is experiencing is domestic violence. Furthermore, when they got married, Sarah insisted that they move across the country, far away from any of Clare's family or friends, and Sarah gets angry at Clare when Clare makes any attempts to create new friends.

Clare clearly is experiencing a hermeneutical injustice. According to Fricker's original definition, along with the revisions established in part I, the experience must: (1) constitute a significant aspect of the subject's social experience, (2) be obscured from collective understanding due to a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource or hermeneutical interference, and (3) constitute an injustice. Addressing the first criterion, Clare finds herself constantly alert and in a state of fear, trying not to set her wife off, and she has been isolated from the family and friends she might otherwise turn to for support, so this experience is undoubtedly significant.

Regarding the second criterion, the concept of domestic violence is arguably a part of the collective hermeneutical resource. According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, more than 20,000 calls are made to domestic violence hotlines nationwide on an average day (NNEDV 2022). For someone to call a domestic violence hotline, that person needs to have a sufficient definition of domestic violence, broadly construed, to recognize that a domestic violence hotline is the right resource for their situation. If the term *domestic violence* were merely a part of one interpretive community or another but not of the collective hermeneutical resource, it would be unlikely for hotlines advertising domestic violence services to have so much traffic, and on a daily basis nonetheless.

However, many myths about what domestic violence is "supposed" to look like can prevent victims from recognizing cases of domestic violence that don't adhere to these myths. In "Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustice," Katharine Jenkins argues that "domestic abuse myths are at least partly responsible for the fact that some victims do not conceptualize their experience as one of domestic abuse" (Jenkins 2017, 194). Jenkins compiled a list of myths surrounding domestic violence and argues that when a person believes one or more of these domestic violence myths, their conception of what constitutes domestic violence is narrowed. Jenkins's list of myths includes:

1. That domestic abuse is always physical.
2. That domestic abuse is always perpetrated against women, by men, within the context of an intimate relationship.

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3. That domestic abuse only occurs in contexts of poverty and deprivation.
4. That domestic abuse typically involves or is caused by drug use or excessive alcohol.
5. That a "genuine" victim of domestic abuse will certainly leave the relationship at once; victims who stay with violent partners are complicit in the abuse/desire the abuse/are not really being abused.

If this person is a victim themself, these myths may prevent them from understanding their experience as one of domestic violence. Recall that Clare has never been physically injured by Sarah's outbursts. If Clare believes the first myth that domestic violence is always physical, this may explain why she is unable to recognize her experience as one of domestic violence, despite her knowledge of the term. Clare is at a further disadvantage as a woman experiencing domestic violence within a same-sex relationship, as stereotypes surrounding domestic violence tell us that domestic violence is perpetrated by heterosexual men against heterosexual women, even though most studies have shown that the lifetime prevalence of intimate-partner violence is the same or higher for LGBT people as compared to the general population (Brown and Herman 2015, 2).

These myths are an important contribution to the literature on hermeneutical injustice; however, other dominant narratives may similarly interfere with a victim's ability to apply the term *domestic violence* to their own experiences. For instance, men are generally expected and encouraged to be aggressive and violent as an expression of their masculinity, and primary gender-role socialization continues to enforce these aggressive and dominating behaviors to maintain patriarchal systems (Levant et al. 2003, 91–92). This then feeds into the narrative that it's normal for boys and men to express affection with violence. As an example, at a young age, girls are told that boys who bully them probably just like them, even when the teasing becomes violent. One mother spoke out about standing at the hospital registration desk with her four-year-old daughter who needed stitches after being hit in the face with a metal toy by a male classmate. The man at the desk said to her daughter, "I bet he likes you," referring to the boy who hit her (Dell'antonia 2015). This comment reflects the belief that it is appropriate for boys to express their affection with violence, a narrative that may obscure people's ability to recognize violence in adult relationships as abuse.

Dominant narratives will also affect people differently across varying intersecting identities, and these narratives need not be particular to intimate relationships to impact domestic violence victims. For instance, numerous stereotypes and other narratives often prevent Black women from being seen as victims. Black women who have killed their abusers frequently face substantial barriers when trying to bring a self-defense claim, especially when they fail to conform to the "white heteronormative victim narrative" (Ijoma 2018, 271). According to this narrative, the abused woman is weak, psychologically impaired, and bears no hostility toward her perpetrator. Therefore, controlling narratives that Black women are "independent" and "angry" essentially preclude Black women from accessing the category of victim. Narratives about queer and trans people similarly deny access to victimhood. Beyond stereotypes that domestic violence can't exist in same-sex relationships where there is no strong man/weak woman dichotomy, the cultural insistence on viewing transgender people as criminals rather than victims of gender violence is the "product of persistent melding of homosexuality and gender nonconformity with concepts of *danger, degeneracy, disorder, deception,*

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disease, contagion, sexual predation, depravity, subversion, encroachment, treachery, and *violence*" (Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock 2011, 23).

These narratives aren't simply myths that result in the misuse of a term, they are social norms that are deeply ingrained in the ways we interact with others and are expected to respond to certain types of violence. Thus, because of the hermeneutical interference of various myths and narratives surrounding queer relationships and domestic violence, the definition of domestic violence might be available to Clare theoretically, but not practically in her daily life.

Finally, the third criterion for a hermeneutical injustice is that the experience must constitute an actual injustice. Fricker states, "for something to be an injustice it must be harmful but also wrongful, whether because discriminatory or otherwise unfair" (Fricker 2007, 151). Since Clare cannot recognize that she's experiencing domestic violence, she does not leave Sarah. However, this puts her at further risk for physical injury, emotional and psychological trauma, long-term health problems, and even death, making this lack of recognition undoubtedly harmful (WHO 2013, 21). Furthermore, it is wrong that these harmful narratives and myths interfere with Clare's ability to understand her own experiences because these narratives and myths are based upon prejudiced societal narratives. Therefore, not being able to recognize one's experience of domestic violence such that one continues to live with a dangerous partner is wrongful as well as harmful, so Clare's experience constitutes an injustice.

An Agential Hermeneutical Injustice

I have argued that cases such as Clare's meet all the requirements for hermeneutical injustice because of widespread, prejudiced beliefs about domestic violence. However, that is not the only way in which victims experience hermeneutical injustice: victims of domestic violence can experience an additional injustice that is directly caused by the perpetrator, and that is therefore an agential form of hermeneutical injustice. Just as myths and dominant narratives can prevent people from accessing important concepts, individual people can also prevent others from accessing valuable hermeneutical resources by isolating them from potential interlocutors. Revisiting the case of Clare and Sarah, having already moved Clare away from family and friends, Sarah further isolates Clare by monitoring her phone calls and messages and controlling who Clare is allowed to see. Unable to freely communicate with trusted confidants, Clare never discusses Sarah's behavior with others who may be able to help her recognize her abusive situation. In this case, it is Sarah's isolation of Clare that prevents her from accessing the relevant hermeneutical resources. Thus, I take issue with one of Fricker's central claims about hermeneutical injustice, as Fricker claims that "no agent *perpetrates* hermeneutical injustice—it is a purely structural notion" (Fricker 2007, 159).

The claim that hermeneutical injustice is always structural may seem compelling if we focus only on cases where the relevant concept is nonexistent. For instance, in Carmita Wood's case, the term *sexual harassment* was not available to her when she needed it due to centuries of women's exclusion from knowledge-making practices. Though these systems of inequality may have been upheld by generations of individuals, no one person is to blame for the hermeneutical injustice. However, the case of domestic violence raises the possibility that specific agents can prevent people (especially victims of hermeneutical injustice) from accessing important conceptual resources. This additional hermeneutical injustice can be seen when victims of domestic violence who have been unable to recognize their situation as one of domestic violence are

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isolated by the perpetrator and are further prevented from understanding their experiences. In these cases, it is primarily the hermeneutical interference of the perpetrator that prevents the applicable concepts from getting to the victim, rather than dominant narratives or a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource.

Through her examples, Fricker demonstrates the importance of conversation and testimonial exchange in overcoming hermeneutical injustice, highlighting the harm that isolation can inflict. In Fricker's accounts of Wendy Sanford's and Carmita Wood's experiences, the subjects were able to overcome their hermeneutical injustice only by gaining access to other epistemic resources. Fricker acknowledges the role that social isolation plays in preventing hermeneutical gaps from being overcome when she says, in reference to the case of Carmita Wood and other women experiencing sexual harassment, "[a]s they struggled in isolation to make proper sense of their various experiences of harassment, the whole engine of collective social meaning was effectively geared to keeping these obscured experiences out of sight" (Fricker 2007, 153). Carmita Wood and the women she shared her situation with were unable to make sense of their experiences in isolation; they were able to recognize that there was a broader lacuna in the language that needed to be addressed only after they were able to communicate with each other and share their experiences. Similarly, Wendy Sanford was able to overcome the cloud of "hermeneutical darkness" she had been experiencing only once she started to listen to the testimonies of other new mothers who had also been experiencing depression after the birth of their children. She even states explicitly that "what I'd been blaming myself for, and what my husband had blamed me for, wasn't my personal deficiency. It was a combination of physiological things and a real societal thing, isolation," clearly identifying the impact of isolation on her experience of hermeneutical injustice (149). Thus, the pooling of testimonies and epistemic resources is key to overcoming hermeneutical injustice.

This form of collective knowledge-production may be particularly crucial for communities of color. As Patricia Hill Collins has argued, the "suppression of Black women's ideas within White-male-controlled social institutions led African-American women to use music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness" (Collins 2002, 251–52). As a result, Black women typically develop new knowledge claims through dialogue rather than in isolation (260). Though this distinction is likely gendered, Collins argues that histories of oral traditions and call-and-response in African and African American communities work together to create a unique Black feminist epistemology (262). Thus, social isolation may be particularly epistemologically harmful for members of those communities that rely more heavily on testimonial exchanges in their knowledge-production.

It is important to recognize the hermeneutical harm and injustice that isolation can cause because isolation is a common tactic of domestic violence perpetrators. Domestic violence is defined by the National Domestic Violence Hotline as "a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship," and one of the ways that perpetrators maintain power and control is by isolating their victim (National Domestic Violence Hotline n.d.a). In the Power and Control Wheel, a common tool used by advocates working with survivors of domestic violence, isolation is characterized as "controlling what she does, who she sees and talks to, what she reads, and where she goes. Limiting her outside involvement. Using jealousy to justify actions" (National Domestic Violence Hotline n.d.b). This isolation tactic is intentional. According to Women's Aid, a British charity, "perpetrators will often try

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and reduce a woman's contact with the outside world to prevent her from recognising that his behaviour is abusive and wrong" (Women's Aid n.d.). Often victims can come to a greater understanding of their situation by talking with friends, family, and advocates. However, for situations of domestic violence that involve isolation, the victims are prevented from engaging in this exchange of knowledge and this isolation may often (though not always) lead to a hermeneutical injustice. Unable to communicate freely with friends and family, victims become further trapped—harmful narratives and myths prevent the terminology of domestic violence from being available for the victim as part of collective understanding, and their inability to pool epistemic resources with other people prevents them from being able to overcome this injustice and recognize their situation for what it is. Ultimately, abusers who have isolated their victims have *perpetrated* this additional hermeneutical injustice and are therefore directly responsible for maintaining the hermeneutical darkness experienced by their victim. The result is an agential hermeneutical injustice.

This isolation is often compounded by intersecting axes of oppression. In her seminal article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Kimberlé Crenshaw describes how intersections of race and gender uniquely shape violence against women of color. Many of the barriers facing people who are multiply nondominant further isolate them (both physically and hermeneutically) from people who may be able to help them recognize and escape from the violence they experience. Immigrant women, for example, who are more likely to live in multigenerational households, may be prevented from calling domestic violence agencies if they are living with extended family and have few opportunities to leave the house, resulting in limited privacy (Crenshaw 1991, 1248). Thus, these women are not only physically isolated, but blocked from accessing conceptual resources through alternative means. Furthermore, immigrant women who don't speak English may struggle to access information about local shelters and may even be unable to use a shelter's resources if the organization lacks bilingual personnel and materials (which many do) (1249). The language barrier may also be isolating in and of itself, especially if the victim does not live in a community with other people who speak their language. Similarly, queer people may be unable to seek support or shelter from their families, who may not know or be supportive of their sexual identity (Samons 2013, 420–21). LGBT communities also tend to be small and close-knit, so victims and perpetrators likely share friends and acquaintances (420). Thus, even when given the opportunity to discuss their experiences, victims may be fearful that shared friends will report the conversation back to the perpetrator.

Members of marginalized communities more generally may also face barriers to understanding or communicating their experiences of abuse if they are fearful of reflecting poorly on the larger community. Crenshaw describes this issue in the Black community, emphasizing how some narrowly focused antiracist strategies concerned about confirming negative stereotypes of Black people as violent may further isolate and invalidate the domestic violence experiences of women of color (Crenshaw 1991, 1257). Comparably in the Asian community, testimony from a domestic violence shelter director suggests that the cultural priority of family honor may similarly suppress the reporting of domestic violence cases (1257). Because of these pressures, members of marginalized communities may be especially hesitant to label their own experiences as domestic violence. If they do manage to reach out, victims trying to communicate their experiences within their own communities may also be met with resistance, denial, or gaslighting if their interlocutors are focused on the political costs of exposing domestic violence within the community rather than on supporting victims.

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Sometimes a perpetrator may isolate their victim with the express purpose of preventing them from recognizing that they are experiencing abuse. Yet it may be even more likely that the perpetrator doesn't recognize themself as an abusive partner but isolates their victim out of a (conscious or unconscious) desire for power and control. In the second case, the perpetrator may be in almost the same position as their victim; they can't recognize that they are a domestic abuser.[5] Nonetheless, whether the perpetrator understands and is able to appropriately apply the concept of domestic violence or not, we can still say that the perpetrator's specific and intentional (that is, not accidental) actions led to the victim's isolation and continued hermeneutical injustice. In this way, even if the perpetrator didn't think they were trying to keep the concept of domestic violence from their victim, the continued hermeneutical injustice experienced by the victim is the result of the perpetrator's actions.

José Medina has similarly claimed that there is an agential dimension to hermeneutical injustice. He claims that "hermeneutically insensitive or numbed interlocutors can be the co-perpetrators of hermeneutical injustices," admitting that the kind of responsibility these perpetrators must take is "a shared and highly qualified responsibility" (Medina 2013, 113). Medina goes on to clarify that he conceives of these perpetrators as contributing "to the *production* of hermeneutical injustices at least in the indirect sense of *failing to resist* or to minimize their occurrence" (115). However, there is an important distinction here between Medina's conception of agency in hermeneutical injustices and my example of domestic violence perpetrators. Medina sees perpetrators as merely contributing, often unintentionally, to the production of larger-scale, structural hermeneutical injustices, whereas I claim that there are cases where one individual can intentionally prevent another from making sense of their experiences. In Medina's interpretation, these perpetrators are by no means solely responsible for hermeneutical injustices, merely responsible for failing to be more attuned or conscientious as interlocutors, along with everyone else who fails to actively resist structural epistemic injustices. Alternatively, according to my account, domestic violence perpetrators can also be perpetrators of hermeneutical injustices when they *intentionally* and *individually* isolate their victims from hermeneutical resources, making them directly responsible for this agential hermeneutical injustice that I describe.

Beyond Perpetrators

Agential hermeneutical injustice in domestic violence situations can extend beyond the hermeneutical isolation caused by the perpetrator, especially when we look to victims who are multiply nondominant. Domestic violence agencies and advocates who center their work on only one axis of oppression (that is, the needs of white cisgender heterosexual women) may similarly isolate domestic violence victims and prevent them from accessing crucial material and conceptual resources. In describing the unique barriers facing domestic violence victims who are multiply nondominant, Crenshaw presents numerous cases where domestic violence shelters or resource centers turned away victims because the center's resources were not designed with the needs of marginalized communities in mind. Consider Crenshaw's case of a Latina woman who was not allowed to stay in a domestic violence shelter because she was not sufficiently fluent in English (Crenshaw 1991, 1262–63). Even though the woman was in desperate need of housing, she could not participate in the shelter's required group therapy sessions because she didn't speak English and the shelter would not allow her son to translate for her. Thus, rather than working to provide

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the resources necessary to meet the intersectional needs of a diverse clientele, the shelter turned away survivors.

Many trans and gender-nonconforming survivors face similar barriers to accessing domestic violence services, particularly when those services are gender-segregated. Advocates at women's shelters have often turned away transgender women out of the transphobic belief that trans women aren't women (Goodmark 2013, 68). When shelters do accept trans women, advocates may still make *ad hoc* decisions about whether trans women qualify for the shelter's services based on how well they "pass" as cisgender (68–69). Though some progress has been made in recent years to ensure queer people have access to domestic violence services, this is the exception, not the rule, and queer survivors still struggle to find services that can meet their needs.[6]

Though these cases certainly demonstrate how a lack of intersectionality in domestic violence services can prevent victims from accessing important material resources such as shelter, these cases also show that social-justice workers who focus on only one axis of oppression can be engaged in a kind of hermeneutical interference when they deny services to victims. This is particularly clear when considering the important hermeneutical resources shelters provide. Domestic violence services create spaces where survivors can learn from each other, have their experiences validated, and gain important information from counselors who are trained in the effects of trauma and violent relationships. For instance, in my own experiences working with survivors, clients often doubted their own experiences of abuse when they were unable to remember a violent event or couldn't explain why they didn't fight back. Being in a privileged hermeneutical position and having been trained in trauma-informed care, I was then able to share my knowledge about the effects of trauma. By validating clients' experiences and assuring them that the freeze response and memory gaps are common reactions to violent situations, I was able to share important hermeneutical resources and help these clients feel more confident describing their experiences. Furthermore, as discussed above, testimonial exchange and group-processing are extremely valuable for survivors trying to overcome hermeneutical deficiencies. Thus, when domestic violence advocates turn away multiply nondominant victims, preventing them from accessing these important conceptual resources, they are further hermeneutically isolating these victims.

Further Implications

Recognizing this new form of agential hermeneutical injustice enables us to give a better account of a variety of new cases of hermeneutical injustice in which an agent *intentionally* keeps another person ignorant regarding an important aspect of their experience. These cases may involve direct one-on-one agential hermeneutical injustice or the isolation of a larger community. Another example of this phenomenon is the case of Abby Stein, a transgender woman who grew up in the Hasidic Jewish community.[7] In her memoir *Becoming Eve*, Stein describes how she grew up completely isolated from the world outside the Hasidic community, not even learning English despite living in Brooklyn. Since the Hasidic community is nondominantly situated within the larger culture of the United States, their separation from the larger culture may be warranted. Yet this also puts LGBTQ+ individuals within the community at serious risk. Stein says, "[i]n a community that is so sheltered that it doesn't even fight or hate the LGBTQ+ community but simply ignores it, I had no idea there was anyone else like me. Without the Internet, without English, I had no name for what I felt" (Stein 2019, xvii). She describes the constant feeling she had as a child of being a girl in a boy's body, detailing

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her inner thoughts: "*I must be crazy. . . . There is no one else in the world who feels like I do. I am the only girl who is being raised as a boy*" (25). Finally, as an adult, Stein secretly connected to the internet using a borrowed tablet, searching the phrase "boy turn into girl," the best language she had to describe her experiences, and only then was she able learn that she wasn't alone in those experiences (222). On a structural level, Stein was prevented from understanding her experiences as a trans woman because being trans goes against norms in Hasidic culture. However, while growing up, she was also intentionally prevented by her parents and elders from accessing the testimony of other trans people, either through the internet or via interaction with people outside of the Hasidic community, and this testimony ultimately proved essential for her to gain self-understanding. Thus it was not only structural barriers and Stein's intersecting identities that prevented her from understanding her trans identity, but the actions of individual people that blocked her from accessing important conceptual resources. A greater awareness of these types of cases empowers us to recognize other cases like them more easily.

In just conditions, people like Stein and domestic violence victims should not only have access to the existing frameworks, as I argue above, but should also be able to participate in the continuing expansion and creation of relevant ideas and concepts when they find existing frameworks unsatisfactory.[8] The concepts we use and how those concepts are understood are constantly adapting to fit the needs and experiences of the people who use them. For example, recently in discussions surrounding domestic violence, the term *domestic abuse* has given way to new terms like *intimate-partner violence* and *coercive control*, which may more accurately reflect survivors' experiences. Recall also how Carmita Wood was able to participate in the creation of the term *sexual harassment* so that it accurately reflected the women's experiences. Only through this participation in the creation of hermeneutical resources can the deficiencies in these resources be ameliorated and our concepts continue to adapt to current needs. Otherwise, concepts may not accurately reflect the experiences of those they're supposed to serve. In Stein's case, if she had come out as transgender at a time when transgender people were regularly referred to as transsexuals, she may not have felt that the term *transsexual* accurately encompassed her situation. Historically, the term was highly medicalized, and transsexualism was classified as a mental disorder. Yet, over the years, the transgender community developed the word *transgender* and departed from its medicalized predecessor, even expanding the term to include nonbinary people, genderfluid people, and the many other gender expressions that we now fit under the umbrella term *transgender*.

The continued revision of our hermeneutical resources is particularly important given the tendency for resources to be co-opted to serve the most elite of a group.[9] When these resources include epistemic resources, the agglomeration of these resources to the most powerful has the potential to result in forms of epistemic injustice. More specifically, when words and concepts are directed primarily to describing the experiences of those in more dominant social positions, members of other social groups may find that those concepts don't appropriately describe their own circumstances.[10] Thus, in addition to having access to existing frameworks, epistemic justice here must include the ability to participate in the continuing development of accurate hermeneutical resources so that these resources meet the needs of all survivors of domestic violence, especially those in the most marginalized social and hermeneutical positions.

On a larger scale, identifying this agential element reveals the ways in which those in power can intentionally maintain the hermeneutical injustices of entire groups in less powerful social and hermeneutical positions. For instance, restrictions on what can

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be taught in public schools in the United States contribute to the spreading of misinformation and may prevent students from gaining accurate information. One of the most notorious restrictions is Florida's "Parental Rights in Education" law, known more commonly as the "Don't Say Gay" law, which prohibits the discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation in elementary school classrooms (Kline et al. 2022, 1397). Importantly, the bill also gives parents the power to bring lawsuits against teachers or schools they believe have violated this restriction (1398). The result is a chilling effect, silencing instruction about LGBTQ+ people, and making instructors fearful of extending support to students who are queer or questioning out of fear of legal action (1398). After the introduction of the Florida bill, similar legislation was introduced in more than a dozen other states, blocking students across the country from accessing important hermeneutical resources and support services that they might not have access to at home.

The American prison system can similarly be viewed as a large-scale case of hermeneutical isolation. Incarcerated people have limited access to people and hermeneutical communities outside of the prison. Furthermore, many prisoners may struggle to get adequate access to the internet, legal resources, and library materials (Wisnieski 2018). This hermeneutical isolation is particularly pernicious considering the vast racial disparity in American prison populations and the criminal legal system's targeting of people of color. For instance, Black Americans, who constitute only 12% of United States residents, make up 38% of the incarcerated population (Sawyer and Wagner 2022). Thus, mass incarceration in the United States serves to physically and hermeneutically isolate vast swaths of certain marginalized communities, interfering with incarcerated people's ability to access conceptual tools and contribute to the hermeneutical resources of the broader community.

Finally, recognizing that hermeneutical injustice can be agential opens new possibilities for fighting it. Fricker offers a conception of the virtue of hermeneutical justice that is "an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one's interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being a nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources" (Fricker 2007, 169). However, this virtue calls us to be vigilant only in recognizing that hermeneutical resources are unequally distributed during conversations, and to adjust our expectations accordingly. This definition fails to consider the role that individual members of a society can play in maintaining the hermeneutical injustices experienced by others and therefore in being the direct cause of further injustice. Moreover, when we consider hermeneutical injustice to be purely structural, it can be easy to write off the ways in which our own actions can contribute to the injustices of others. Given this agential aspect, the practice of the virtue of hermeneutical justice must not only attempt to mitigate the impact of hermeneutical injustice on the speaker's communication abilities but must include an awareness of the individual's impact on the availability of hermeneutical resources. Taking an intersectional view of relevant cases, we can see how the hermeneutical interference of agents as well as dominant narratives can create especially harmful iterations of hermeneutical injustice, especially for those who are multiply nondominant. Similar tactics can be used to isolate individuals or entire communities to achieve similar results. By continuing to expand our understanding of these possibilities, we can open new methods for combatting hermeneutical injustice.

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Notes

1 Goetze sometimes states that the collective hermeneutical resource must include resources that *everyone* shares. If we take him strictly at his word, this seems like an unattainably high bar. Ware's more generous (and practical) interpretation of Goetze's definition offers a path around this issue by suggesting that the collective hermeneutical resource isn't necessarily those resources available to every single person in every interpretive community, just those shared by some significant cross-section of social groups. As my focus in this article is not on the structure of the collective hermeneutical resource, I accept Ware's interpretation of Goetze. For a more exhaustive account of the various interpretations of the collective hermeneutical resource, see Ware 2020, 24–32.

2 Fricker herself acknowledges cases like Anna's as instances of hermeneutical injustice with her example from Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*. The young narrator knows what a homosexual is, and he is aware of the love and desire he feels for other men; however, the dominant background narratives of homosexuals as perverse and predatory make the term essentially unavailable to the narrator as a self-identifier (Fricker 2007, 163–64). This example demonstrates that cases like Anna's seem to fit within the scope of cases that Fricker originally envisioned as instances of hermeneutical injustice.

3 This alteration to the definition of hermeneutical injustice can help to explain one of Fricker's own examples as well. Fricker claims that there can be both systemic and incidental cases of hermeneutical marginalization. Whereas systemic hermeneutical marginalization, as in the case of Carmita Wood, involves "persistent wide-ranging" hermeneutical marginalization, incidental cases may involve fleeting or highly localized hermeneutical marginalization (Fricker 2007, 156). Fricker describes incidental hermeneutical marginalization with the example of Joe, who is experiencing stalking and harassment but struggles to communicate this experience to his partner and the police, who refuse to believe he is experiencing stalking. Fricker claims that Joe is "up against a one-off moment of hermeneutical marginalization" even though as a white, educated man, he "suffers the injustice not because of, but rather in spite of, the social type he is" (157–58). Though Fricker identifies this as a case of incidental hermeneutical marginalization, it is unclear to me how Joe was hermeneutically marginalized in this situation. As a white, educated man he is, in theory, in a privileged hermeneutical position (note Fricker's claim that the injustice Joe suffered was *in spite of* his social type). Therefore, the hermeneutical injustice Joe suffered cannot be *owing to* hermeneutical marginalization. Nonetheless, I agree with Fricker that Joe's case should still be considered a case of hermeneutical injustice. To make sense of this issue, I argue that Joe was not hermeneutically marginalized, rather his interlocutors were subscribing to harmful dominant narratives about who can be a victim of stalking. The interference of these dominant narratives prevented them from being able to understand Joe's experiences. For more on the challenges of incidental hermeneutical marginalization, see Romdenh-Romluc 2016.

4 Although law enforcement officers usually use the term *victim* to refer to people who have experienced domestic violence, many domestic violence activists and advocates prefer the term *survivor*, especially when trying to support those people who are trying to overcome past experiences of abuse. Importantly, though, many people who experience domestic violence are killed by their abusers or are unable to escape, and therefore have not survived their experience of abuse. Alternatively, *victim* may also be used to refer to people who are experiencing ongoing abuse, whereas *survivor* suggests that the person has escaped their abusive situation. Adhering loosely to these distinctions, I use the terms *victim* and *survivor* interchangeably throughout.

5 This is similar to Carmita Wood's harasser, who also didn't have the concept of sexual harassment, though Fricker importantly notes that "the harasser's cognitive disablement is not a significant disadvantage to him" (Fricker 2007, 151).

6 In 2016 the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) published a rule requiring shelters to ensure equal access to services, and many states have laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Yet many shelters aren't funded by HUD and many state laws include no explicit prohibitions for discrimination based on gender or sexual identity, with many state legislatures being openly hostile toward the trans and LGBTQ+ communities (Apsani 2018, 1710–11).

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7 Thank you to Lizzie Strauss for introducing me to this important example.
8 I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.
9 Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò describes elite capture as what happens when "the advantaged few steer resources and institutions that could serve the many toward their own narrower interest and aims" (Táíwò 2022, 22). For example, the resources intended for women most often go toward the needs of white women, and the resources developed for the Black community are directed toward helping Black heterosexual men. Though Táíwò focuses on material resources and political power, these resources can also include knowledge, attention, and values (10). For a more extensive discussion of elite capture and the concept's history, see Táíwò 2022.
10 Crenshaw describes how there is a long history of this elite capture within domestic violence prevention work. Looking to the common awareness strategy of pointing out how domestic violence occurs in every community, even in upper-class white families, Crenshaw criticizes how this tactic "permits white women victims to come into focus, but does little to disrupt the patterns of neglect that permitted the problem to continue as long as it was imagined to be a minority problem" (Crenshaw 1991, 1260). This rhetoric functions to "politicize the problem only in the dominant community," funneling resources and attention from the most marginalized to the most privileged among domestic violence victims (1260). For more discussion of elite capture in domestic violence work and the funneling of domestic violence recourses to white heterosexual women, see Crenshaw 1991.

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