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How the notion of epistemic injustice can mitigate polarisation in a conversation about cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations

Åberg, I. B.

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Epistemic injustice and anti-oppressive education in polarized times

Abstract

It is a common contention that education done uncritically and unreflectedly may serve to sustain and justify the status quo, in terms of mechanisms of cultural or racial privileging and marginalisation. This article explores an argument made from within anti-oppressive education theory and advocated by theorist Kevin Kumashiro, namely that transformative education must entail altering harmful citational practices. I see two shortcomings in relation to this argument: first, its focus on discursive practice entails a prerequisite of high discursive literacy. Second, it may lead to a lack of credit to people's intentions, risking a conflation of honest mistakes and wilful ignorance, depriving us of theoretical nuance. While a well-argued and important call, I argue in this article that both shortcomings lead to the risk of a polarised conversation. Focusing on cultural, ethnic and racial categorisation, and using social studies as an illustration, it is suggested that applying notions from the theoretical concept of epistemic injustice may open up a space for granting nuanced credit to people's intentions, thereby serving to mitigate the risk of polarisation. Rather than viewing attention to outcome and attention to intention as oppositional to one another, it is argued that both theoretical perspectives may benefit from the insights of the other. By applying needed context-specificity and nuance to categorisations of dominance and marginalisation in individual discursive exchange, this can be done without granting priority to the experience of dominantly situated knowers.

Keywords

Anti-oppressive education; discursive practices; epistemic injustice; social studies education.

1 Introduction

It is a common contention that education done uncritically and unreflectedly may serve to sustain and justify the status quo, in terms of mechanisms of privileging and marginalisation (e.g. Freire, 2014, Gillborn and Ladson-Billings, 2004, Romanowski and Oldenski, 1998).

Within the sphere of cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations, ethnocentrism, colonial discourses and unconscious notions of racial hierarchy are such mechanisms, often pointed to as having discriminatory, othering¹ or oppressive effects. Questions of how to challenge such mechanisms are the primary concern of a range of contributions within education theory, which could be headlined ‘anti-oppressive’ (Kumashiro, 2000). In this article, I will take a closer look at one of them – an argument developed by theorist Kevin Kumashiro (2000, 2002, 2016). Kumashiro argues that, in order to effect change, anti-oppressive work must entail labouring to alter harmful citational practices. ‘Citational practices’ should be understood here in a wider, discursive sense, not exclusively as a question of scholarly citational practices. I will use it interchangeably with ‘discursive practices’ in this paper.

While, overall, an important and well-argued contribution, I nevertheless claim (and the following may serve as an outline of the argument in this paper) that his recommendation may 1) lead to the creation of an anti-oppressive discursive space which requires a high level of discursive literacy. 2) Because alteration of citational practices is a recommendation, those who fail may be subject to a sort judgement which conflates wilful ignorance and honest mistakes, which could be perceived as a sort of prejudice regarding their intentions. 3) This

¹ In the context of anti-oppressive pedagogy, the notion of othering refers to discursive constructs which serve to subordinate and marginalise certain social groups. Specifically, within a postcolonial framework, the process of othering and the notion of Otherness are connected to operations and discourses of colonial power. Such discursive constructs, it is argued (e.g. Hall, 2018), are still at work even though the political institutions of colonialism have been dismantled.

judgement may lead to a kind of gatekeeping which leads the “less literate” to withdraw from the anti-oppressive discursive space. These points, I argue, carry a risk of leading to an exclusive and polarised conversation – a situation which seems contrary to the aim of anti-oppressive education.

In the course of the article I will argue for applying arguments from the notion of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), in order to chisel out a position which rests less heavily on a precondition of being familiar with the conversation, and which grants nuanced credit to people’s intentions. I believe these allowances can enrich the discussion on how to challenge privileging and marginalising mechanisms along the lines of cultural, racial and ethnic categorisation in education².

While this line of reasoning might seem to lend itself to the interpretation that the experiences of dominantly situated knowers are given priority, I would like to underline that this need not be the case. Rather, the argument presented below brings to the forefront the need for care, nuance and context-specificity in the categorisation of ‘dominant’ and ‘marginalized’ knowers, and what is considered fruitful measures to aid constructive and transformative anti-oppressive conversations.

Based on a premise that preparing students to become active and responsible citizens and advocates for justice is a central concern in social studies, the question of how to mitigate privileging and marginalising structures becomes particularly relevant in social studies education. At the end of this article, I will take social studies education as an illustration of the difficult balance teachers face in their efforts to prepare students to reflect critically about the

² While the argument I present may apply to a range of identities and positionalities historically subject to marginalisation, such as for instance gender, sexual orientation, ability and age, the focus in this paper is on race and ethnicity.

prevalence and mechanisms of cultural, racial and ethnic categorisations in society – and help them engage in respectful and constructive conversations about these issues. Thus, I hope to show that the theoretical argument may be useful in a concrete way.

The article proceeds as follows: in section 2, I outline the field where Kumashiro's work is situated, with sections 2.1 and 2.2 respectively preparing, and homing in on, his argument for labouring to alter citational practices (Kumashiro, 2000, 2002, 2016). Then, in section 3, I point to two shortcomings regarding this stance, before presenting, in section 4, an outline of the concept of epistemic injustice, as developed by philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007, 2017). In section 5, I explore the question of whether this notion may enrich a conversation about the discursive reproduction of mechanisms of injustice in education. In section 6, I briefly visit social studies education as an illustration of the dilemmas which the theoretical argument purports to address, before making some final remarks in section 7.

2 Anti-oppressive education and the call to alter citational practices

As mentioned, there are several theoretical traditions within education which could be labelled anti-oppressive (Kumashiro, 2000), aiming to address the reproduction of mechanisms which serve to privilege some and marginalise others. Within the sphere of cultural, ethnic and racial categorisation, multicultural education (e.g. Banks, 2009), critical traditions such as critical pedagogy (e.g. Freire, 2014, Apple, 2000), critical multiculturalism (e.g. May and Sleeter, 2010), intersectionality (e.g. Bhopal and Preston, 2011, Gillborn, 2015) and critical race theory (e.g. Gillborn, 2019, Ladson-Billings and Tate, 2016) have long roots, and have developed interconnectedly.

One author who has written extensively to describe and develop anti-oppressive education theory, is Kevin Kumashiro (2000, 2002, 2016). In his book *Troubling Education* (2002) Kumashiro describes and explores different approaches to education aimed at challenging

oppression, and develops an argument for ‘labouring to alter harmful citational practices’ (Kumashiro, 2002, pp 63-64). I will now take a look at his line of reasoning.

2.1 The call for critical awareness

Kumashiro (2002) identifies four approaches to anti-oppressive work in education: education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and marginalisation, and education that changes students and society (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 31). In a broad sweep, the first two approaches may be placed under the umbrella of multicultural education (Banks and Banks, 2010), aiming for broadening a sense of the normal, and providing culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). While these are important elements in anti-oppressive work, they do not sufficiently disturb the very construction of the Other, whose marginalisation they purport to oppose.

The third approach, which aims for critical awareness and transformation of patterns of privilege and marginalisation, corresponds broadly to perspectives associated with critical pedagogy (Freire, 2014, Apple, 2000) and critical multiculturalism (May and Sleeter, 2010). A key argument in this approach is that to combat the effects of othering discursive constructs, one must also see what is normalised – that is, see what is discursively constructed as objective, neutral, unmarked – that which goes without saying (Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2011). To the extent that normalisation entails a notion of belonging to the main, or dominant, group, normalisation is privileging and othering is marginalising. Kumashiro argues that there is a need for teachers to develop – and work toward their students developing – a critical awareness of ‘not only how some groups and identities are Othered in society, but also how some groups are privileged [...]’ (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 44). For instance, discussing discrimination of women should focus equally on male privilege; stories about assimilation of indigenous peoples should be accompanied by stories about how majority identities were

imagined and promoted; discussions of sexuality should ignite awareness of heteronormativity, and so on. In a school setting, this work would entail that the teacher labours to examine her own positionality – that she gazes inward (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 37).

The critical strain of anti-oppressive education has been criticised for assuming that oppressed and oppressor are easily identifiable, and that the same people belong in these categories more or less regardless of context (e.g. Butin, 2002, Mac An Ghaill and Haywood, 1997, Anwaruddin, 2015). In response, Kumashiro (2002) has argued for a *curriculum of partiality*, viewing the inclusion of different stories and voices in the curriculum not as definitive accounts from any group, but rather as partial and situated stories. By underlining the partiality of representations (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 58-59), grand narratives concerning cultural or racial identity are challenged – but not replaced by new ones. This line of reasoning is broadly in line with theories of intersectionality (Bhopal and Preston, 2011, Gillborn, 2015) developed to argue that analyses of privilege and marginalisation must take into account how social situatedness is dynamic, multidimensional and relational, in order to avoid the reproduction of essentialising and stereotypical representations.

However, another problem with a stance which is content with ‘critical awareness’ is that it seems to assume that conscientisation will lead automatically to transformation, in the sense of fundamentally challenging the students’ sense of their positionality in relation to privileging and marginalising structures – enabling them to challenge such structures themselves. Although critical awareness of privileging structures is necessary for transformation, is it not always sufficient. The student may have learned and reflected all that is needed to challenge discursive mechanisms of oppression, but may yet choose not to (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 48). Kumashiro addresses this weakness as he argues that an ‘education that changes the students and society’ (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 50) entails alteration of harmful citational practices. I will now outline this stance.

2.2 *The call to alter citational practices*

The fourth approach to anti-oppressive education which Kumashiro (2002) explores, involves education being a transformative experience, not only in terms of how students see themselves in the world, but how they act. This argument is influenced by poststructuralist approaches (e.g. Butler, 1997, Davies, 1989), focusing on how discursive practices ‘serve to reproduce [...] hierarchies and their harmful effects in society (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 50).

Taking as a starting point that critical awareness does not automatically beget change, Kumashiro argues that education that changes students and society must entail a call to alter citational *practices* (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 41), taking discursive action³. This prescription is contingent on an understanding of privilege and marginalisation as discursively *produced* (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 40), in the sense that unaltered repetition of terms invokes association to historical and systemic discrimination accompanying the use of the term, and thus the harm continues.

There are many examples of struggles over terminology regarding cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations. While it is no longer controversial to contend that using the n-word is unacceptable, because of its close connotations with master-slave relations of the colonial era, not all alterations of citational practice have gained the same acceptance. Indeed, Kumashiro (2000) argues that labouring to alter citational practices involves the disruption of what we already know, which will often invoke resistance, because of what he terms our ‘unconscious desire not to know’ (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 46): in an education setting, upon a dawning sensation that the way they think about their own place in the world is contingent on structures of oppression, the students may feel resistant. Kumashiro (2002) points out that

³ The term ‘action’ here should not be considered a neutral term (on a par with ‘practice’), but rather as an activist form of practice, aimed at begetting anti-oppressive change.

[l]earning that *the very ways in which we think and do things is not only partial but oppressive* involves troubling or "unlearning" (Britzman, 1998a) what we have already learned, and this can be quite an emotionally discomfoting process, a form of "crisis" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 63 [emphasis in original]).

This is what Kumashiro (2002) refers to as a 'crisis of unlearning', and it is essential to reach the aim of transformation (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 63). This seems to assume the role of the teacher as instigator and curator of such processes, which could be seen as misjudged (Butin, 2002), challenging to the point of being unattainable. I will return to this point in section 6.

Such criticism notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the notion of crisis and transformation places high demands on both students and teachers, which cannot be met through cognition alone. While Kumashiro points out that performative, bodily experiences are integral to the process of change (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 63), anti-oppressive education has nevertheless been criticised for underestimating the unconscious nature of prejudice (Lewis, 2016). Kumashiro realises, of course, that reflection and action do not follow one another automatically – that was the whole reason to call for altering citational practices in the first place. However, this realisation entails the possibility of a gap between a person's conscious intentions and their actions.

The question of how to navigate, in real life, the transition from the structural to the individual level in terms of categorizing people as situated within structures of dominance and marginalisation, does not have clear-cut, predefined answers. In public conversation, the call to alter citational practices has been received, sometimes without necessary context or nuance, and sometimes at the expense of serious attention to the complexity of communicative situations. This can hardly be attributed to Kumashiro's work as such – indeed, he points out that we live through different forms of repetition (2002, p. 69), and that there will always be room for multiple ways of reading (2002, p. 68), and this underlines the need for caution and

nuance in the application of his call. However, this situation does point to a question which is not given much attention in his account: under what circumstances are people to blame for their discursive violations, and when are they not? Could there be something to gain from applying a differentiated notion of blameworthiness?

Moving on, I will present a critique of Kumashiro's call for altering citational practice which is focused on the possibility of a gap between a person's conscious intentions and their actions, arguing that sometimes there is a need to grant *nuanced* credit to people's intentions.

3 Two shortcomings in the call to alter citational practices

The shortcomings I wish to address, have two separate, but connected, points: a demand of familiarity with discourse, and a lack of credit to people's intentions. I will argue that they both risk leading to a polarised conversation.

3.1 The demand for discursive familiarity and rigour

First, I would like to make an observation that for the call to alter citational practices to have its desired – or even any – effect, it is contingent on the participants in the conversation being familiar with the historicity of terms in the realm of social categorisation. Conscientisation of the historical roots of our discursive practices is certainly often timely, and there is a responsibility attached to participating in serious conversations about – and education which disrupts – privilege and marginalisation. It is not my intention to object to any of those points. However, this call does demand rigorous discursive attention, because in order to labour to alter harmful discursive practices in a meaningful way, one must have knowledge of the ways in which language relates to oppressive structures, and insight into the mechanisms which lie at the basis of claims that what is at stake is more than 'just words'. In a fast moving, and highly ignited debate such as, for instance, the ones currently being had globally about racism

and colonialism, it might be hard to keep up – even for someone enveloped in these debates. The de facto result may be that the speaker’s use of terms triggers an assumption of positionality in a debate the speaker is unfamiliar with. If the struggle over terms is harsh (which it absolutely can be in this realm), it will almost certainly render a conscientious speaker wary of ‘getting it wrong’.

Now, there is nothing wrong with a little wariness, especially in the department of causing harm to others. However, the demands placed on participants by a call to alter citational practices go beyond concern – that is the whole point. Concern must be translated into action. Something is at risk when participation in these conversations is conditional upon being familiar with thick discursive history, the intertextuality of how terms have been debated, and the sociocultural and historical contexts which are invoked with purported harmful effects (perhaps we could call this a form of discursive literacy). What we risk is that those who are, or even suspect they are, unable to keep up, withdraw from the conversation for fear of condemnation, or ridicule, or just not being taken seriously.

If enough people withdrew, two spiral movements would be set in motion. First, the intertextuality of the conversation where only the initiated participate would be allowed to continue pretty much undisturbed. Second, the ones excluded from the conversation because they lack (or feel like they lack) sufficient discursive literacy, would be at a disadvantage with regard to familiarising themselves with the conversation, because they were not taken seriously, or they were lumped together with people who actively refrain from altering their citational practices. Such a mechanism, while set on raising awareness of implicit privilege, may end up inhibiting people from scrutinising their own roles in reproduction of oppressive discursive mechanisms. Further, both ‘sides’ might miss out on the lines of reasoning of the other, further alienating them from one another. What is described here is a spiral of

polarisation. When this occurs on a societal scale, pertaining to questions with public interest, it poses a serious challenge to democratic debate.

Again, one might argue, is it not only fair that people who perpetuate harmful discursive mechanisms are excluded from the conversation? Should we not be more concerned with the victims of their harmful language? This objection is important and deserves a thorough answer. I will do so as I now move on to the second point of critique, which is the risk of losing sight of intention when focusing on discursive performance.

3.2 The lack of credit to intention

Using the first critique as a starting point, we have a situation where a call to alter citational practices serves to gatekeep the conversation – or at least who is taken seriously. Remember that this situation is brought about with the aim of challenging and transforming oppressive practices; of protecting and giving voice to marginalised groups. Is it so bad to exclude people who oppress others from the conversation? The problem is that framing the situation thus, conflates two kinds of violation: intentional and unintentional. An approach which puts so much stake on performance, inhabits a risk that under-performance caused by misunderstanding, lack of familiarity with the issue discussed, or other non-culpable shortcomings are received as oppressive violations on a par with unwillingness to consider the damaging nature of one's speech.

There may be several reasons why this happens. Philosophically, one may argue that the difference is not of consequence, as does Applebaum (2007), because our individual intentions do not free us from our structural complicity. Practically, one may have decided to prioritise the protection of the marginalised party, perceiving the situation such that the harm caused to the recipients of harmful language is greater than the potential harm caused by shutting a comparatively privileged party out of a conversation they have less of a stake in

participating in. The latter may very well be the case. However, it does frame safe and meaningful discursive participation as a zero-sum game. The following argument aims not to.

Intention, in such instances as described, is a key differentiator on what I see as a sliding scale between honest misjudgement and wilful ignorance. I hereby argue that there is a need to apply a nuanced concept of credit to intention – not as a binary where we either credit intention (and the accused go free of all charges), or we do not (and the accused is culpable *in equal measure* as those who perpetuate ignorance wilfully). This does not mean we cannot consider unintended discursive violations part of the problem – we absolutely can, and should.

There is, however, nothing to gain from being unable to distinguish honest misjudgements from culpable violations. As long as citational practice is the performance which 'counts', judgement will tend to prioritise action over intention when, instead, honest misjudgements and wilful ignorance should evoke different degrees of blameworthiness. The lack of nuanced credit to intention, then, has a risk of collateral damage, where people who are genuinely willing to adjust their convictions, are subject to judgement of their competence or moral character, based on their discursive performance, and risk being framed as perpetrators in equal measure as people who are unwilling to do so. The risk of being judged on one's action regardless of one's intention, is another mechanism which might lead to withdrawal from the conversation, leading, again, to spiralling polarisation. Moreover, conflating honest mistakes and wilful ignorance is not only analytically inaccurate, but also risks watering down the severity of wilful ignorance, the deliberate avoidance of considering the harmful effects of discursive practices, which is a huge and prevalent problem in its own right. In fact, mixing the two does a disservice to the anti-oppressive cause exactly because enabling a differentiation serves to underline the structural nature of harmful citational practices (Fricker, 2017, p. 54): it denies us the opportunity to explain all instances of harmful discursive practices with individual bad intentions. I will substantiate this argument in section 5.2.

Indeed, these are muddy waters, and the act of differentiating is no easy feat. Let me hasten to point out that I am not arguing for the opposite solution: to always value intention over action in the ascription of blameworthiness. Down that road, of course, lie all kinds of bad excuses for bad behaviour. I am, however, arguing that the question ‘should the speaker have known better?’ brings important analytical and practical nuance.

While, as I have stressed above, the call to alter citational practices is important and well argued, its requirement of discursive literacy and lack of nuanced credit to intention entails a risk of inadvertently backfiring – shutting potential allies out of the conversation. There is a need for a theoretical space which grants nuanced credit to people’s intentions. I will now show how such a space may be found in the concept of epistemic injustice, developed by Miranda Fricker (2007, 2017).

4 Epistemic injustice and its call to train our perceptive sensitivity

In her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), Miranda Fricker explores the mechanisms leading to what she terms epistemic injustice. Taking an interpersonal point of departure, Fricker aims to develop a framework for understanding and combatting injustices inflicted upon persons as ‘knowers’ (Fricker, 2007, p. 60). This distinguishes her notion of epistemic injustice from notions which focus on the distribution of epistemic goods, such as knowledge or credibility (e.g. Hookway, 2010, Coady, 2017). Fricker’s account is rich and complex, and cannot be fully recounted here. We will have to make do with a condensed outline.

Fricker (2007) presents two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical. Testimonial injustice can be understood as undue credibility deficit in communicative exchange. Fricker’s line of reasoning regarding this notion, goes as follows: in discursive exchange, we apply judgement of credibility all the time, often spontaneously. So, we aid

ourselves by using stereotypes – discursive constructions, widespread generalisations of characteristics of people belonging to this or that social group. While generalisations are necessary, and often helpful, tools for judgement, whenever stereotypes are based on prejudice, they may cause a hearer to make an unduly deflated judgement of the speaker’s credibility (Fricker, 2007, p. 16-17). Hermeneutical injustice can be understood as a gap in what Fricker terms the collective hermeneutical resources, rendering some (marginalised) social experiences unavailable for articulation. Fricker (2007) points out how unequal power relations are reflected in collective social understandings (p. 147), so that the powerful tend to have the hermeneutical resources to express their experiences at the ready, whereas the marginalised have it less so. They are more likely to be deemed unintelligible, and furthermore, they may have a hard time making sense of their own experience for this lack of hermeneutical resources.

While there are important differences in appearance and implications of the two forms of epistemic injustice, they both occur on the basis of prejudice against social groups (Fricker 2007, p. 155); they are both (in their systematic forms) rooted in structural inequalities of power (Fricker 2007, p. 156), and they often occur together. Clearly, they mutually influence one another, although there has been some discussion regarding the connection between the structural and individual levels in Fricker’s account (e.g. Maitra, 2010). I will return to this in section 5.1. In the following it is primarily testimonial injustice which comes into play, although they are, again, connected.

The survival of a prejudicial stereotype is possible whenever the ‘social imagination’ persists in the hearer’s mind (Fricker, 2007, p. 37). Prejudicial, stereotypical constructions of various social groups are, as Fricker puts it, ‘in the air’ in human society (2007, p. 96), and so they are highly likely to affect our spontaneous judgement. She argues that we invoke stereotypes in an immediate, unreflective manner, which is how they may well survive *in spite of our*

consciously, reflectively and critically developed moral or epistemological convictions

(Fricker, 2007, p. 32-41). This is important: prejudices may prevail in our minds even though they no longer guide our intentions.

The notion of epistemic injustice provides a tool for nuancing our epistemic judgement. This tool consists of training our testimonial sensibility (Fricker, 2007, p. 72-73). By continuously trying to correct the prejudicial images feeding into our deflated or unforgiving judgements, we may correct for the influence of stereotypes (Fricker, 2007, p. 169), striving to achieve the characteristics of a virtuous hearer. This requires a critical social awareness, not only of the social identity of the speaker, but also of oneself as ‘judge’ (Fricker, 2007, p. 91). Here, anti-oppressive education theory makes a similar point – the ‘inward-gazing’ mentioned above.

There is, however, a key difference between them: the call to alter citational practices urges us to pay attention to our discursive performance; the critical social awareness required to train our perceptive sensibility is directed toward our reception of *other* people’s discursive performance. Entrenched in Fricker’s endeavour lies an opportunity to search for, and grant a degree of credit to, people’s intentions, in spite of their lack of hermeneutical resources, in spite of prejudicial stereotypes I may carry against them.

Remembering the two mechanisms which I contend inhabits a risk of polarisation – many people’s less than perfect discursive literacy, and the risk of conflating wilful and unintended violations – I argue that Fricker’s (2007) notion, which explicitly provides a theorising of unintended, yet culpable, violations, is a fruitful approach to mitigate this risk. While this notion may relate to both shortcomings outlined above, it is most clearly and readily related to the second one, which is directly concerned with the question of intention. Before moving on to discuss the fruitfulness of applying the notion of epistemic injustice in conversations about anti-oppressive education, I will clarify some points regarding Fricker’s notion, to establish its relevance here.

4.1 Some points of contestation regarding the notion of epistemic injustice

In recent years, many scholars have taken up Fricker's work and commented, supplemented and criticised it on various points (e.g. Beeby, 2011, Byskov, 2021, Coady, 2017, Frank, 2013, Hookway, 2010, Kidd, Medina and Pohlhaus Jr., 2017, Maitra, 2010, McKinnon, 2016, Medina, 2013, Origgi, 2012, Pohlhaus Jr., 2012, Sherman, 2016, Walker, 2019). While entering an overall discussion about meanings and implications of epistemic injustice is beyond the scope of this article, I find that a brief outline of some points of discussion may serve to clarify Fricker's position, in preparation for the subsequent argument.

The first and most central characteristic of epistemic injustice as outlined by Fricker (2007, 2017), is that it is indeed distinctly epistemic – it affects a person as a *knower*. Later contributions have suggested that we should expand the notion of epistemic injustice to include instances not directly related to testimonial exchange (Hookway, 2010), and Fricker (2010) has conceded that testimonial injustice should be considered a broad category including various forms of prejudicial exclusion from discursive participation (2010, p. 176). While some have argued that a distinction between epistemic and other forms of injustice may downplay the entanglement between discursive mechanisms and distributive and relational forms of oppression (Allen, 2017), Fricker (2017) wishes to refrain from moving too far along such lines. She argues against conflating epistemic and other forms of power: 'On such a reductionist view there could be no distinctively epistemic injustice, for there could be no contrast between the way power deems things to be and how they are' (2017, p. 56). There is, however, still ample space to outline how the different forms entangle (Byskov, 2021, p. 118) and, thus, there is good reason to keep it analytically distinct from other forms of injustice.

Second, epistemic injustice in Fricker's account, is not considered distributive (Fricker, 2007, p. 19). It has been suggested, for instance by Coady (2017), that it be viewed as a form of distributive injustice, since, in Coady's argument, assigning more credibility to someone will

(nearly) always lead to less credibility assigned to someone else. Similarly, Medina (2013, p. 62) argues that, distributive or not, credibility must be considered contrastive and comparative – that is, credibility should be seen as assigned in relation between groups who, in a sense, compete for it. While allowing for the point that there are many tangential cases of injustice which may be considered epistemic and are distributive in nature, Fricker, however, remains insistent that there are cases of what she, refining her terminology somewhat, calls *discriminatory* epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2017, p. 53), which are not subject to this competitive logic.

The separation between distributive and discriminatory epistemic injustice does not, however, silence all criticisms arguing that there is an intimate connection between credibility deficit and credibility excess (Medina, 2013, p. 62). Since conceding credibility to the stories of the oppressed means that someone has to give up a share of credibility they have thus far been granted, there will be resistance against such concessions. We may note a resemblance to the point made by Kumashiro (2002), that troubling knowledges will lead to resistance. This connects to arguments regarding wilful ignorance (Applebaum, 2020), which leads to the third and final point I wish to outline in this section: the question of intention.

Facing criticisms that she focuses too little on the fact that ignorance of oppressive structures actually benefits the privileged, and may be perpetuated wilfully (Pohlhaus Jr., 2012, Applebaum, 2020), Fricker (2017) has remained insistent that the label of epistemic injustice be reserved for *unintended* acts of prejudicial deflation of credibility or intelligibility. This way it remains distinct from acts of wilful epistemic ignorance, proposed, for instance, by Pohlhaus Jr. (2012) and Applebaum (2020) to be a more prominent and analytically important mechanism. This will be an important point of contestation moving forward. As we shall see, the delineation between unintended and wilful deflation of credibility is central to determine whether epistemic injustice is a useful concept to discuss and challenge oppressive practices

in education. Moving on, I aim to discuss its usefulness to enrich the conversation about the reproduction of oppressive structures.

5 Can the notion of epistemic injustice fruitfully mitigate the risks in the call to alter citational practices?

So far, I have outlined central arguments in anti-oppressive education theory, and Kumashiro's (2000, 2002) call to alter harmful citational practices. Further, I pointed to two shortcomings inherent in his call: I contended, first, that it risks creating a requirement of discursive familiarity and rigour which is unrealistic and potentially excluding for many people. Second, I claimed that focusing too heavily on discursive performance risks granting too little credit to intention when people get it wrong. Both these mechanisms, I argued, risk leading to a polarised conversation. Then, I moved on to outline Fricker's (2007, 2017) notion of epistemic injustice, showing how it has been discussed and developed in recent years. I pointed to how striving for the characteristics of a virtuous hearer entails doing critical and performative work on one's own prejudice.

There is an interesting parallel in the two points of view: Kumashiro's (2002) account rests on an assumption that our discursive performance may sometimes be at odds with our conscious intentions and calls for conscious alteration in the face of such a realisation. Fricker sees that our judgement of people's discursive performance may (in a similar discrepancy) be based on prejudice that we are not fully aware of. It seems the way is paved for discussing the central question in this article: Can the notion of epistemic injustice mitigate the risks inherent in Kumashiro's call to alter citational practices? In the following I will argue in support of the contention that Fricker's endeavour can be applied fruitfully when judging someone's discursive performance as complying with or contesting oppressive structures. I will do so by taking up three important points of discussion which can be identified in literature

surrounding epistemic injustice and discursive reproduction of oppression, showing how a notion of differentiated culpability can enrich these conversations. The three are: the role of structural mechanisms, the problem of wilful ignorance, and the question of whether the notion of differentiated culpability addresses an important enough problem.

5.1 The role of structural mechanisms

The first point concerns the role of structural mechanisms in Fricker's (2007) account. Endeavouring to correct our prejudices is an individual task, but it is an uncontroversial insight that prejudices are structurally produced, and discursively mediated. Working to change them must surely involve critical awareness not only of oneself, but of discursive mechanisms, historical and social contexts which create and sustain those prejudices. One could even go as far as Coady (2017), who has argued that in order to understand how some groups are systematically epistemically devalued, we must focus on the insight that other groups are systematically ascribed excess credibility. Coady (2017) argues that Fricker's analysis is hampered by her downplaying of structural mechanisms which allow systematic epistemic injustice to continue.

However, Fricker does acknowledge the influence of structural mechanisms, because, as she puts it, epistemic marginalisation is 'no accident' (Fricker, 2007, p. 153). She underlines that both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are systematic, in the sense that they 'stem from structural inequalities of power' (Fricker, 2007, p. 156). Nevertheless, it might be that an account of the mechanisms creating the conditions for epistemic injustice could be enriched through applying some of the basic insights of poststructural theories, such as attention to the legitimising and delegitimising effects of discourse, whereby types of knowledge are organised hierarchically, in specific historical and institutional events, setting limits to what can be 'within the true', and who are possible as qualified 'knowers' (Allen, 2017, p. 192).

Such a line of thought seems to address mechanisms mentioned only briefly by Fricker when speaking of ‘the whole engine of collective social meaning [being] effectively geared to keeping [...] obscured experiences out of sight (Fricker, 2007, p. 153). Working to identify and change our prejudices does not require that we ignore structural mechanisms and, as I will argue later, rather than treating the virtuous hearer and the conscientious speaker as opposing roles, insights from one could serve to strengthen the other.

Still, there is another way in which the question of individual agency comes into play, and that concerns the possibility of correcting one’s own prejudice. Some have argued that the effort of striving toward the virtuous hearer is futile since it involves challenging unconscious mechanisms through conscious action. As pointed out by Alcoff (2010): ‘if identity prejudice operates via a collective imaginary, as [Fricker] suggests, through associated images and relatively unconscious connotations, can a successful antidote operate entirely as a conscious practice (Alcoff, 2010, p. 132)?’ It has even been argued that the very effort is likely to do more harm than good, because if we put ourselves up to the task of judging our own judgements, it might create a self-reassuring, but false, assumption of a mission accomplished (Sherman, 2016).

Fricker has, however, noted that empirical studies suggest that critical reflection about one’s own prejudice may indeed lead to self-regulation (Fricker, 2010, p. 165). Of course, success is never guaranteed, and for practical purposes, a person striving for the virtues of epistemic justice has so much ground to cover that any ‘end point’ would be nowhere in sight. Critics worrying about the ultimate aim of epistemic justice being unattainable, may be relieved to know that the eventual eradication of hermeneutical injustice is neither the only, nor even the primary role of the virtue of epistemic justice. The primary role of the virtues of epistemic justice is to *mitigate* negative impacts of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 174-75). Thus, while such a self-reassuring misconception is possible, it can hardly be said to be an

inevitable outcome of Fricker's theory, but rather, an outcome of conceding to an underestimation of the structural nature of prejudice. Further, while the delineation between conscious and unconscious may indeed be very hard (impossible?) to detect in real life, the same empirical difficulty can be said to pertain to Kumashiro's (2002) notion of resistance. This connects to the question of how to distinguish wilfulness from unintended-ness. I will explore that further in the next section.

5.2 The problem of wilful ignorance

As mentioned briefly in section 4.1, the role of those in an epistemically dominant position, is an important point of discussion when exploring the usefulness of the virtuous hearer in the face of oppressive structures. Proponents of the notion of wilful epistemic ignorance claim that epistemically dominant actors actively protect their position, by resisting and refusing available knowledge which would challenge their position. Scholars have argued that the survival of a prejudicial stereotype involves resistance to counter-evidence (Maitra, 2010) and have questioned the saliency of the unintended, 'clouded' devaluations of which Fricker speaks. Mason (2011) suggested a distinction between what she terms 'two kinds of unknowing', namely 'hermeneutical injustice suffered by members of marginalized groups, and epistemically and ethically blameworthy ignorance perpetrated by members of dominant groups' (2011, p. 294). Similarly, Pohlhaus Jr. (2012) described the notion of wilful hermeneutical ignorance as 'instances where marginally situated knowers actively resist epistemic domination through interaction with other resistant knowers, while dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the world (2012, p. 716). From a standpoint theoretical point of view, it has been argued that 'those with dominant situatednesses fail to develop their epistemic resources in order to better perceive the world and others' (McKinnon, 2017, p. 170), and even that 'dominantly situated knowers wilfully refuse to recognize any epistemic resource that challenges the dominant epistemic

framework’, through techniques such as dismissing, minimising and mocking. Therefore, Applebaum, drawing on Pohlhaus Jr. (2012), argues that dominantly situated knowers are culpable (Applebaum, 2020, p. 450-51).

There is no doubt that wilful ignorance exists, nor that it is a salient mechanism in situations of social privileging and marginalisation. Research exploring such mechanisms in education using post- or decolonial or critical, anti-oppressive frameworks suggests hesitancy and resistance on the part of dominantly situated knowers against including marginalised knowledge (see e.g. Ekeland, 2017, Eriksen and Stein, 2022, Masta and Rosa, 2019, Mikander, 2016, Pitts, 2017, Schaepli, 2018). Schaepli (2018) rightly characterises ignorance as ‘a social and political phenomenon in its own right’ (2018, p. 4), not merely the absence of knowledge.

However, there is a difference between agreeing that wilful ignorance is a salient and analytically important structural mechanism and claiming wilfulness in individual instances of testimonial exchange. Determining the degree of wilfulness in someone’s unforgiving interpretation is not something which can be done lightly or easily. While Applebaum (2020) wishes to distinguish between wilfulness and intention, claiming that ignorance can be wilful even though knowers are unaware of it (Applebaum, 2020, p. 451-52), this distinction, for practical purposes, is bound to be muddy. In such cases we would do well, I think, to allow for differentiated ascription of culpability, instead of claiming, as Applebaum (2020) seems to do, that dominantly situated knowers are, by definition, culpable. Fricker’s account allows for such a differentiation. She distinguishes between culpable and non-culpable ignorance, albeit conceding that

[t]he slippery slope to bad faith, and self-interested or plain lazy denial, is an ever-present factor in situations where the nascent content of the attempted

communication is potentially challenging to the hearer's status or, for whatever other reason, outside of their epistemic comfort zone (Fricker, 2017, p. 55).

Further, arguments that wilful ignorance exists should not cut us off from discussing other phenomena which may also be important. Exactly because wilful ignorance is real and serious, we are doing a disservice to the anti-oppressive cause if we conflate it with honest mistakes. Analytically, because they are different phenomena, and ignoring that deprives us of theoretical nuance and hollows out the concept of wilful ignorance. Pragmatically, because we risk alienating potential allies, who end up leaving the conversation, dominated by a discursively highly literate crowd – and we need those people to discover the necessary space for realising, and taking action against, their own complicity in the reproduction of oppressive discursive practices. If we are too unforgiving in our judgements of people based on their mastery of discourse without paying heed to their intentions, we risk inadvertently contributing to a spiralling polarisation which may, in turn, be equally damaging as the situation we are trying to avoid. Thus, training our perceptive sensitivity and granting nuanced credit to people's intentions, holds the potential to mitigate the risk of polarisation inherent in the call for discursive action.

It is worth noting here, that I am not arguing that we can or should minimize or ignore the seriousness of discursive mechanisms of marginalisation. I do not regard allowing prejudicial stereotypes of cultural, racial and ethnic categories to influence one's speech on the one hand, and accusing others of perpetuating oppressive practices without paying heed to their intentions on the other, as violations of equal severity. Treating them as equals would create a false equivalence, ignoring the structural mechanisms of dominance and marginalisation which we set out to disturb. This is a real risk, and I turn now to addressing it.

5.3 Is the notion of differentiated culpability addressing a marginal problem?

Should we really refrain from excluding people who perpetuate harmful discourse simply because they ‘try their best’? Does not, honestly, the notion of differentiated culpability address a marginal problem compared to the harm done to those subject to oppressive discursive practises? Conceivably, it entails a prioritisation of relatively less marginalised people than those whose cause is aided by the call to alter citational practices. Is not the collateral damage of judging someone’s discursive practice too harshly by not paying heed to their intentions a price we must be willing to pay to protect those who are the victims of discursive marginalisation sustained by wilful ignorance?

I argue that this need not be the case. Rather, granting nuanced credit to people’s intentions serves to underline the point that people who perpetuate harmful discursive mechanisms without being aware of it are part of the problem. However, it is neither analytically accurate to lump those instances together with unquestionably epistemically culpable discursive violations, nor would that, as I have argued above, be the most fruitful course of action in terms of countering increasing polarisation, which we are witnessing to frightening degrees these days. While being very careful not to treat harmful discourse and the accusation of harmful discourse as equally severe violations, ascribing both parties in the conversation a degree of epistemic responsibility of the virtuous hearer, accentuates the care and context-specificity which Kumashiro (2002) argued is needed in the application of his argument. Importantly, this should not be read as calling for marginalized knowers to act as teachers for dominant knowers, nor as a lazy excuse for dominant speakers to persist in holding on to culpable ignorance.

If we accept the mechanism that people may commit discursive violations unintendedly because they lack sufficient discursive literacy to avoid it, then the line of reasoning presented in this article, crafting a space for granting nuanced credit to people's intentions by applying the notion of the virtuous hearer, amends the shortcomings inherent in Kumashiro's argument outlined above. Through applying a notion of unintended epistemic injustice, distinct from wilful ignorance, the discussion of how to approach cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations in education is enriched.

Moving on, I will use social studies education as an illustration of the difficult balance teachers face in their efforts to prepare students to reflect critically about the prevalence and mechanisms of cultural, racial and ethnic categorisations in society – and help them engage in fruitful, respectful and constructive conversations about these issues. How could teachers maintain the balance of ascribing due credit to various social experiences and expressions, while pursuing an overall aim of transformative education? The following section does not discuss this question exhaustively but aims at illustrating one out of several practical applications for the theoretical argument made above.

6 Social studies education: An illustration

Social studies teachers regularly face situations where the question of how to address cultural and racial categorisations comes into play. Central subject topics such as citizenship, nationalism, human rights, gender roles, much of the history curriculum, the justice system, the political system or political issues, indigenous peoples, immigration, economics, (the social and political aspects of) geography (presumably, the list could go on) pertain directly to historical workings of ethnic, cultural and racial categorisations. In this way, cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations concern social studies didactics. There is a great deal of empirical research framing it thus, which provides insights into how cultural, racial and ethnic

categories are thought of, approached and at work in social studies education (e.g. Eriksen, 2021, Martell, 2018, Martell and Stevens, 2017, Martell, 2017, Scott and Gani, 2018, Crowley and Smith, 2015, Pelkowski, 2015). I wish to point here to two ways in which I believe that granting nuanced credit to intention may be a fruitful tool in anti-oppressive education: applied to teachers' own discursive practice; and as a didactical tool for teachers to apply in class. These are broad strokes, painted for illustrative purposes. No doubt there are nuances and sub-cases here, which could be interesting for further debate.

First, framed as a question of how to approach subject topics, social studies teachers face the dilemma of how to put injustice into words without perpetuating it, and this dilemma may cause some hesitancy on the part of the teacher – the aforementioned fear of 'getting it wrong'. While extreme examples of othering or marginalising ways of solving such dilemmas are not hard to identify, it is not that obvious what qualifies, at any given point, as neither perpetuating patterns of privilege and marginalisation on the one hand, nor culpably ignoring them on the other. Well-intentioned attempts at striking the balance may be misconstrued. While the risk of reification is addressed by anti-oppressive education theory as well, resulting, among other things, in the notion of partiality as a lens through which to view different perspectives and stories (Kumashiro and Ngo, 2007), the point here is to carve out some more space for teachers who try, but get it wrong sometimes. These situations may be highly uncomfortable for critical, reflexive, conscientious teachers, and there is ample research indicating that teachers hesitate to discuss such uncomfortable matters in the classroom (see e.g. Eriksen, 2020, Zembylas and Papamichael, 2017, Schaepli, 2018, Scott and Gani, 2018, Åberg, 2021). Such hesitancy not only perpetuates unjust structures but also, arguably, hampers epistemic diversity and, by extension, limits the development of collective hermeneutical resources (Robertson, 2013). Applying an ethos of granting nuanced credit to

people's intentions may provide some welcome wriggle-room to make attempts at, rather than shy away from, difficult conversations about cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations.

Second, as a tool for the teacher to apply toward their students, granting nuanced credit to intention bears similarities with well-established pedagogical principles of recognition. While it is true that pedagogical recognition and due epistemic credit do not always give the same results (see e.g. Kotzee, 2017), it chimes with arguments that children and young adults are in a process of becoming and should be granted a fairly wide space for trial and error while figuring things out. If the teacher succeeds in creating an atmosphere where it is safe to change one's mind (Iversen, 2014), the space for discussing and dealing with difficult questions about difference, discrimination, injustice and exclusion, will be wider. That is not to say that anti-oppressive education does not provide such space on its own, but rather that space is more clearly defined through the argument made above, which differentiates wilful ignorance from epistemic injustice.

This is also a question of how to prepare students to take part in democratic conversation and public debate, which is a central goal of social studies. Framed thus, approaching cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations becomes not just a matter of monitoring one's speech, but of listening as a democratic competence. Through seeing the virtue of epistemic justice in light of education for democratic competence, it becomes clear that the task of striving for it is a central concern for social studies aiming to prepare students to become active and responsible citizens and advocates for justice.

In addition to the theoretical argument above, I think we need to remember that both discursive performance and epistemic judgement do not take place in clean-cut, perspicuous situations. They take place in messy, unpredictable, unplanned situations. For teachers, it is absolutely necessary to be allowed the space to dwell in unpredictable, uncomfortable,

disruptive moments. While anti-oppressive education theory certainly argues so as well, I believe that the virtues of a charitable listener will grant some additional space for this effort.

7 Final remarks

In this article, I have contended that while the call to alter citational practices is important and well-argued, its inherent focus on language and lack of credit to intentions entail a risk of having a polarising effect on conversations about privilege and marginalisation in connection with cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations. Further, I argued that since the call to strive for the virtues of epistemic justice contains the imperative of giving nuanced credit to people's intentions, it creates a theoretical space which may mitigate this risk.

Facing cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations both as professional and didactical questions, teachers' ways of conceptualising, dealing with and talking about culture, ethnicity and race are immanently connected to patterns of privilege and marginalisation. Using social studies as an example (which, moreover, stands out as particularly relevant if we consider the argument above as connected to education for democratic citizenship), I have established an argument concerning how to construct a theoretical space which adheres to the need for anti-oppressive action, while at the same time taking the complexity and ambivalence of the teaching profession into account. Striving for the virtues of epistemic justice has some important strengths which, if embarked upon, may serve to strengthen our opportunities as teachers in the task of providing socially just education which prepares students to take part actively, conscientiously and critically in democratic conversation about cultural, ethnic and racial categorisations.

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