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Complicit Knowers: Epistemic Injustice and the Doctoral Researcher

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Abstract

This paper develops the argument that the contemporary university is not merely a site at which epistemic injustice occurs but an institution actively engaged in its production through the everyday administrative artefacts of doctoral education. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) distinction between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, Medina's (2013) account of active ignorance, and Santos's (2007, 2014) concept of the abyssal line, the paper examines three institutional sites – research requirements, institutional strategy, and ethical review – as mechanisms by which particular epistemologies are reproduced as universal standards. It argues that doctoral researchers occupy a position of structured complicity: trained in the standards by which the system reproduces itself, they are also those soon authorised to maintain it. The paper closes not with a programme of reform but with a question concerning the limits of awareness as a corrective to participation. It is offered as a reflexive provocation to doctoral and early-career researchers and to those who shape their formation.

Keywords: epistemic injustice, doctoral education, Critical Autism Studies, decoloniality, research ethics, reflexivity

Introduction

It has become commonplace in critical scholarship to attend to the ways in which universities participate in epistemic injustice (Dotson, 2014; Pohlhaus, 2017). The bulk of this attention

has been directed outward toward the communities universities study, the participants they recruit, and the knowledge they marginalise in the process. This paper turns the analysis inward. It argues that the university is not only a place where epistemic injustice is reproduced toward others but also a place where particular kinds of knowers, researchers, scholars, and doctoral candidates are themselves manufactured according to norms whose contingency is concealed by their apparent neutrality. The argument is offered to doctoral and early-career researchers who are presently subject to those norms and who will shortly be invested with the authority to apply them. The argument unfolds in four stages. First, it situates the discussion within Fricker's (2007) framework of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, with particular attention to how the latter operates as a structural rather than an individual phenomenon. Second, it examines three sites at which the university enacts epistemic injustice through ordinary administrative practice: requirements, strategy, and ethics. Third, it draws on Medina (2013) and Santos (2007, 2014) to consider why these mechanisms persist in institutions populated, in the main, by thoughtful and well-intentioned actors. Finally, it offers a reflexive note from the author's positionality as an autistic researcher (Connolly, 2020) before closing with a question that the paper deliberately does not answer.

Epistemic Injustice, Beyond the Encounter

Fricker (2007) names two forms of harm done to a person specifically in their capacity as a knower. Testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer accords reduced credibility to a speaker on account of prejudice attaching to the speaker's identity. Hermeneutical injustice is the harm done when the collective interpretive resources available to a community are inadequate to render a particular experience intelligible, typically because those whose experience it is have been historically excluded from the production of those resources.

Much of the institutional literature on epistemic injustice has focused on the testimonial form, where the locus of harm is the dyadic encounter between speaker and hearer (Pohlhaus, 2017). Hermeneutical injustice, by contrast, has a more diffuse character: it is enacted not by individuals but by the shape of the shared conceptual world. This makes it both harder to localise and, I will argue, more deeply implicated in the everyday operation of the university. Where testimonial injustice can in principle be addressed by individual epistemic vigilance, hermeneutical injustice cannot because the very tools by which one might recognise it are the tools whose adequacy is in question.

Three Sites: Requirements, Strategy, Ethics

Institutional requirements present themselves as quality controls: proposal templates, methods training, and the conventions of the doctoral viva. These artefacts are characteristically defended in the language of rigour and standards. But each encodes a prior and contestable commitment about what knowledge is and how it is properly produced. When a research methods curriculum positions the researcher's presence as a contaminant to be minimised, it has implicitly endorsed one particular epistemology over others (notably, the situated, embodied, and relational ways of knowing discussed by Haraway, 1988) and has done so under the cover of methodological hygiene. What is presented as a checklist is, in effect, a metaphysics.

Institutional strategy, the impact agenda, the priority area, and the funding alignment operate as a less visible but equally consequential filter. A doctoral researcher quickly learns which projects are "fundable" and which are "interesting, but". The adjustment that follows is rarely articulated; it occurs in the privacy of the researcher's own deliberation. Questions are preemptively shrunk to fit available apertures, and the researcher comes to describe this contraction as realism. There is no refusal here, properly speaking. There is, instead, self-refusal on the institution's behalf, registered internally as practical wisdom.

Ethical review is the sharpest of the three examples, because it is the site at which the university most clearly understands itself to be acting in the interests of those who might otherwise be harmed by research. The protection that ethics committees offer is real and should not be discounted. But ethics processes also encode a particular model of research relations: the researcher as detached, the participant as vulnerable, and the relation between them as a risk to be managed. For research that proceeds otherwise participatory, co-produced, and conducted with rather than upon (Connolly, 2020), the form has no adequate category. The work is not marked unethical. It is marked as confusing. This is hermeneutical injustice operating through an administrative artefact: a gap not in the work, but in the shared interpretive resources of the institution.

The three examples are not isolated. They are mutually reinforcing, and together they constitute what Santos (2007, 2014) terms an abyssal line, a division within the world of knowledge between what is acknowledged as legitimate cognition and what is consigned to belief, opinion, or anecdote. The violence of abyssal thinking, for Santos, is not that the relegated knowledges are contested but that they are placed beyond the field in which contestation is even legible.

Active Ignorance and the Comfort of Clear Sight

If these mechanisms are so consequential, why do they persist in institutions populated by reflective and well-intentioned people? Medina's (2013) account of active ignorance offers a partial answer. Active ignorance is not the passive absence of knowledge but its ongoing maintenance, an ignorance that is defended, kept comfortable, and rendered self-justifying because examining it would entail costs to those who benefit from it. The methods tutor, the strategy lead, and the ethics reviewer need not act in bad faith for the mechanism to function. It suffices that the easier path, repeatedly chosen, is the one that leaves the existing arrangement intact.

This points to a particular hazard for the critical scholar, which I want to name plainly. The temptation, having understood the mechanism, is to take the awareness itself as the achievement to feel that clear sight is a form of dissent. It is not. A scholar who diagnoses the abyssal line in writing while approving the conventional ethics application, marking down the unconventional thesis, and advising the doctoral student toward the fundable choice is not external to the system she critiques. She is, in operational terms, one of its more sophisticated products: critique without cost, which sustains the system by allowing those who reproduce it to feel themselves opposed to it. Awareness, in the absence of altered practice, is a complicity that reads well.

A Reflexive Note

I write as an autistic researcher (Connolly, 2020) and within a critical autism studies tradition (Davidson & Orsini, 2013) that has long contested the framing of autistic difference as deficit. I have come to understand much of what the academy calls 'rigour' as the codification of one cognitive style as a universal standard, which Chapman (2023) situates within a wider political economy of normality, and which Milton (2012) approaches from the other direction in his account of the double empathy problem. The injunction to a particular kind of concision, the assumption that professional networking is mere socialisation, the unwritten rules absorbed by osmosis: each of these has, on examination, the character of a culturally specific norm presented as a culturally neutral requirement.

I spent a long part of my training experiencing my friction with these standards as a personal failing rather than as an artefact of the standards themselves. The reframe was not available to me until others had done the hermeneutical work of constructing the frame I could borrow. This is not an exceptional autobiography. It is a structural observation. Every researcher who finds themselves at friction with the standards of the academy is in receipt of the same diagnostic question: is the gap in me, or is it in the shared interpretive resources of my

discipline? The question is not always answered in favour of the resources, but it is rarely asked with sufficient seriousness. The institutional incentive runs the other way.

Conclusion: The Question

I have argued that the contemporary university actively manufactures knowers according to standards whose contingency is concealed by their administrative neutrality; that three sites' requirements, strategy, and ethics illustrate this clearly; and that the persistence of these mechanisms is sustained not by individual malice but by the structural comfort of not looking. I have further argued that critical awareness, in the absence of altered practice, functions as a sophisticated mode of complicity rather than as a corrective to it.

I do not close with a programme. The shortage in this domain is not a shortage of programmes; it is a shortage of looking and a shortage of paying the costs that genuine looking would entail. I close instead with the question I cannot resolve for myself. Doctoral and early-career researchers and the more senior colleagues who shape their formation will be invested with the authority to draw the abyssal line in their own institutions: to decide what counts as knowledge and what does not for cohorts who will receive those decisions as the natural order of inquiry, exactly as we once did. That authority is coming, and it is real, and it will be exercised. The only question genuinely available is whether those who exercise it will be able to feel their hand moving. I am not confident that mine has or will. That is the part of the argument that this paper has not been able to resolve and that the awareness it has staged does not appear sufficient to resolve.

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