

Disability and Knowing: On Social Epistemology's Ableism Problem

By Joel Michael Reynolds and Kevin Timpe*

for *The Oxford Handbook of Social Epistemology*

Eds. Jennifer Lackey and Aidan McGlynn

THIS VERSION IS A PRE-PRINT.

Abstract:

This chapter canvases a number of ways that issues surrounding disability intersect with social epistemology, particularly how dominant norms concerning communication and ability can epistemically disadvantage some disabled individuals. We begin with a discussion of how social epistemology as a field and debates concerning epistemic injustice in particular fail to take the problem of ableism seriously. In section two, we analyze the concept of an individual's "knowledge capacity," arguing that it can easily misconstrue the extended, social nature of both knowledge and capacity/ability. In section three, we turn to issues of testimony and their relation to debates concerning disability and well-being. We address how the regular lack of uptake of disabled people's testimony can lead to a number of structural rather than merely individual epistemic injustices, and we also consider how the very nature of some disabilities make testimonial issues more complicated. In our fourth and final section, we discuss various norms of social interaction and how they systematically disadvantage Autistic people.

Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* famously focuses on harms against a person "specifically in their capacity as a knower" (1). In the wake of her book, discussions of epistemic injustice have largely involved, if not centered upon, *capacities* or *abilities*. Though the literature has grown to address issues of epistemic injustice going far beyond the interaction of individual knowers and their particular abilities—ranging from the role of institutions to embedded cultural practices to dynamic systems and even complex technologies—the harms in question typically trace back to their impact on, and assumptions concerning, the *abilities* of knowers.

* Authorship is equal.

While there is increasing scholarship on disability and epistemic injustice, there has been comparatively little reflection on the way that assumptions concerning the abilities of knowers are baked into the very framework of the literature on epistemic injustice as a whole. That is to say, whether the proximate cause of epistemic injustice is identity-based prejudice, unjustly distributed hermeneutic resources, or willful ignorance, it is assumptions about others' *abilities* that underwrite the very concept of epistemic harm in the majority of cases. Such assumptions, especially when left uninvestigated, run the risk of being ableist. We term this *the ableism problem* in the literature on epistemic injustice and in social epistemology more generally, and our primary aim in this chapter is to describe and elaborate the stakes of this problem. Insofar as a given academic field engages in debates concerning 'abilities,' or its cognate term 'capacities,' without taking the problem of ableism seriously, then the door is opened to discrimination against people with disabilities, and the many ramifications of such discrimination.

We proceed in four steps. In section one, we address the ableism problem in social epistemology, which is to say, we address how the literature on epistemic injustice has neglected the ways in which uncritical assumptions about ability (a) underwrite most forms of epistemic injustice and (b) can lead to discriminations against people with disabilities. In section two, we turn to critically analyze the concept of an individual's "knowledge capacity," showing how it misconstrues the extended, social nature of knowledge and of capacity/ability. In section three, we turn to the issue of epistemic injustice, testimony, and intellectual disability. In the closing section, we discuss the latter in terms of the relationship between Autistic people and communication norms.

I. The Ableism Problem

We claimed above that assumptions about others' *abilities* underwrite the very concept of epistemic harm in the majority of cases and that such assumptions run the risk of being ableist. By 'ableism,' we use the definition by Talila "TL" Lewis, as developed "in conversation with Disabled Black and other negatively racialized folk, especially Dustin Gibson":

A system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, colonialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and "behave." You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.¹

¹ Lewis 2020.

Insofar as a given academic field engages in debates concerning ‘abilities,’ or its cognate term ‘capacities,’ without taking the problem of ableism seriously, then the door is opened to discrimination against people with disabilities, and the many ramifications of such discrimination. Given the ways in which ableism can negatively impact people—and insofar as everyone, if they live long enough, will experience disability—there is the possibility of discrimination against any number of people. Furthermore, it’s possible that a person can be discriminated against on the basis of perceived disability.² As a result, ableism can negatively affect people regardless of disability status.

One reason the ableism problem persists in social epistemology is that the literature, on the whole, often eschews larger metaphysical or ontological questions concerning ability; that is to say, issues concerning not how we come to know or can know things, but how we are *able* to know things, what forms of embodiment are capable of knowing what, and what the concept of “ability” means in the first place.³ The concept of ‘ability’ or ‘capacity,’ to the contrary, is typically treated as an objective, if not paradigmatic property of agents. Yet, for decades now, scholars from the large, interdisciplinary field of disability studies as well as the more focused field of philosophy of disability have interrogated assumptions concerning human ‘capacity’ or ‘ability’ in great detail, including arguments that the idea of “individual capacity” is indefensible in the first place (Reynolds 2019; Timpe 2019). There is also comparatively little discussion of the relationship between the “capacities” of an epistemic agent and the affordances of their environment. Put more bluntly, social epistemology has yet to ask the question of the meaning of ability.

This is further evidenced by the fact that many of the storied distinctions in the literature on epistemic injustice—whether concerning testimonial, hermeneutical, contributory, or related forms—make fundamental assumptions about communicative norms. They assume that the epistemic actors in the situations under consideration both *know* and are also *able* to comprehend and comply with the norms at play. Such assumptions are thrown into question, as well as the very concept of ‘knowledge’ in relationship to ‘ability,’ when one considers various forms of disability, as the discussion in section 4 will illustrate in detail. Insofar as the concept of ‘knowledge capacity,’ ‘individual capacity,’ and various communicative norms are central theoretical constructs of social epistemology writ large, the methods of social epistemology as well as the operative concepts in the field may require revision.

² The Americans with Disabilities Act was specifically written to provide protections from this option: “To be protected by the ADA, one must have a disability, which is defined by the ADA as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.”

³ At the current moment, debates concerning the concept of ability or capacity play out primarily in the field of philosophy of action and in philosophical work relating to ecological psychology, both of which we discuss below.

Arguably, the most pressing issue here is that ableism underlies many forms of epistemic injustice insofar as group- and identity-based prejudices *cash out* in terms of assumptions about and specific valuations of *abilities* and *disabilities*. It is to this issue that we will now turn.

II. A Knower's Capacities

Given that the field of social epistemology invariably relies upon the concept of capacity or ability, let us begin by discussing that concept in more detail. As Barbara Vetter writes:

When appealing to abilities, philosophers tend to start with some everyday example such as the ability to play the piano or to hit the bull's eye with an arrow. They then point out some general points about those abilities, and go on to transfer those general points onto the more difficult but philosophically more interesting cases that they are interested in: the ability to make choices for reasons or to act otherwise than one did, or the cognitive abilities relevant for virtue epistemology. But this direct projection is illicit if there is no one characterization that covers all abilities. We must have some independent reason for thinking that our preferred characterization of, say, the ability to play the piano applies to the cases that are of interest in the respective philosophical debate. But often that is precisely what is at issue.⁴

In social epistemology writ large, the *capacity* or *ability to know* has typically been characterized as an ability of all the epistemic agents worth talking about. This is problematic for at least two reasons. First and most obviously, it leaves out people who do not “possess” those abilities as they are typically understood. Second, epistemic harms should not be limited to harms in people's capacity as knowers if there are people who can be harmed epistemically but not with respect to their individual capacity as a knower. As we discuss in far more detail below, there are people whose knowledge is fundamentally symbiotic—mediated through a caregiver or caregivers (whether they be human or nonhuman animals) or through a piece of technology (and thereby through the facility, or lack thereof, of another using it to communicate).⁵ To tack harms solely to “individual capacities as a knower” is *both* to actively exclude people with disabilities whose knowing practices involve others in particular and *also*, as discussed above, to misconstrue the social, extended nature of knowing in general.

To place a finer point on these concerns, let us turn to the famous example discussed by Miranda Fricker: the trial of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee's *To Kill*

⁴ Vetter 2019, references omitted. The literature which Vetter here references largely ignores questions raised by or grounded in experiences of disability. Given the aims at hand, we will, on the whole, focus far more heavily on literatures explicitly informed by such experiences.

⁵⁵ To be clear, we consider knowledge to be fundamentally social and in that sense symbiotic—the question at hand is one of form and degree.

a Mockingbird. There is a mountain of literature interpreting this courtroom scene, yet there is an illuminating disability angle that is too rarely discussed. One reason the white jurors do not believe the testimony of Tom Robinson and one reason his physical disability is ignored is because he is considered psychologically *unable* to tell the truth and *unable* to resist certain desires. Miranda Fricker explains:

As it turns out, the members of the jury stick with their prejudiced perception of the defendant, formed principally by the racial stereotypes of the day. Atticus Finch challenges them to dispense with these prejudicial stereotypes; to dispense, as he puts it, with the “assumption—the evil assumption—that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women.” But when it comes to the verdict, the jurors go along with the automatic distrust delivered by the prejudices that structure their perception of the speaker. They find him guilty. And it is important that we are to interpret the novel so that the jurors really do find him guilty.⁶

Fricker places a significant amount of the blame for the indefensible verdict on prejudicial stereotypes. But of what, more precisely, do these prejudices consist? It is made obvious to everyone through the course of the trial that “Tom Robinson’s left arm is disabled, having been injured in a machinery accident when he was a boy.”⁷ And not just any machinery accident—his arm had been caught in a cotton gin. With one functioning hand, how could he have carried out the act she claimed he did? And yet, the *inability* of his body to engage in the act of which he was charged (rape) did not matter because as a black man, he was considered to be both *unable* to tell the truth and also *unable* to resist the urge to rape a white woman.⁸ The psychological disabilities that were tied to him being racialized as Black overdetermined any other assessments of his physical “abilities.” This is in many ways a paradigmatic case of how prejudices such as racism can be rooted in ableism and how their intertwining can be determinate to understand the *meaning* of particular actions, abilities, etc., in a given case.

Historian Douglas Baynton Jr. writes

While disabled people can be considered one of the minority groups historically assigned inferior status and subjected to discrimination, disability has functioned for all such groups as a sign of and justification for inferiority...a common argument for slavery was that the impaired intelligence of African Americans made them incapable of equality with other Americans. Medical authorities explained that it is the ‘deficiency of cerebral matter in the cranium, and an excess of nervous matter distributed to the organs of sensation and assimilation, [caused] that debasement of

⁶ Fricker 2007, 25.

⁷ Fricker 2007, 23.

⁸ Curry 2017 and Smith 2011.

mind, which has rendered the people of Africa unable to take care of themselves'.⁹

And ableism did not merely ground assumptions concerning racial difference. Disability-negative arguments were routinely used, and typically underwrote, attempts to block social and political equality for women.

During the debate over women's suffrage, suffrage opponents pointed to women's physical, intellectual, and psychological defects. Paralleling slavery arguments, they claimed both that women's disabilities made them incapable of equality and that its burden would result in even greater disability. Their 'great temperamental disabilities,' the fact that 'woman lacks endurance in things mental,' that 'she lacks nervous stability,' meant that political participation would lead to 'nervous prostration' and 'hysteria.' A prominent neurophysiologist, Charles L. Dana, estimated that enfranchising women would increase insanity among them.¹⁰

Why is this the case—why, according to these arguments, has ableism so powerfully underwritten racism and sexism historically? Jackie Leach-Scully argues that, under the auspices of ableism, the perception of disability can lead to the belief in a “global epistemic incapacity” (2018). It can erase all other factors about a person, however palpable or relevant.¹¹ Insofar as Tom Robinson is interpreted by the white jurors as “Black *therefore* disabled” in the sense of being *unable* to tell the truth and *unable* to not be a rapist, all of the evidence obviously demonstrating him to be innocent falls by the wayside.

In other words, the disabilities that become relevant under the light of ableism are refracted through other prejudices. This is one explanation for why Robinson's physical disability is made moot in light of the racially inflected disabilities the white jurors perceive him to have—disabilities which render his knowledge not only untrustworthy, but effectively null. In this light, one could say that the ultimate, or at least a foundational, mechanism for oppression is ableism. For whether tied to race, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, gender, class, nation-state, community, tribe, or what have you, assumptions about abilities have the power to *determine* the very being of a person, including *how*, *whether*, and *what* they can know, whether that knowledge matters, and what role it can and should play socially.

If unexamined assumptions about ability can play such a profound role, then literatures that use this concept without further critical reflection will invariably run into problems. Closer investigation concerning the concept of ability is thus paramount for future work in social epistemology. To help further demonstrate

⁹ Baynton 2001b.

¹⁰ Baynton 2001b.

¹¹ Cf. what Peña-Guzmán & Reynolds 2019 call 'epistemic erasure,' which is closely related to Dotson's concepts of 'epistemic quieting' and 'epistemic smothering.'

this point, we will now turn to discuss the relationship between cognitive disability and testimony.

III. Epistemic Injustice, Testimony, and Intellectual Disability

While, as seen above, issues related to testimony relate to disability in general, they become particularly complex when the focus is not on physical disability, as in the Robinson case, but when one instead heeds the lived experiences of those who are cognitively disabled.¹² In some cases involving cognitive disabilities, the disability itself might result in the impossibility of the kind of testimony that the previous section argues is important. A number of philosophers of disability have previously noted how certain cognitive disability can be more complex than other forms of disability on a number of fronts. Furthermore, Eva Kittay notes that “cognitive disability remains among the most stigmatized forms of disability.”¹³

One of the reasons that cognitive disability can be especially problematic in academic discourse is that the power dynamics, which affect all forms and experiences of disability, become especially crucial. Not only in terms of scholarship but also in terms of the history of disability rights movements, cognitively disabled individuals have been exceptionally marginalized. Drawing on feminist epistemology, Jackie Leach Scully argues that power functions epistemologically in at least three ways. First, “the epistemic resources available to members of a society are generated and maintained within existing structures of power and domination.”¹⁴ Second, power is differentially distributed and leads to the need for what DuBois calls ‘double-consciousness’, a fixed ability to consider one’s self from the perspective of the oppressed and disadvantaged (in DuBois’ context, ‘the Negro’) and from that of the oppression (in DuBois’ context, white American Jim Crow culture). “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of

¹² Not everyone uses the language of cognitive vs intellectual disability in the same way. For instance, ‘intellectual impairment’ is the preferred locution of much of the medical and psychological communities, as evidenced by the definition manual of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), which is closely followed by the DSM. In the introduction to their *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, Licia Carlson and Eva Feder Kittay write that “we’ve chosen the term ‘cognitive disability,’ under which we include conditions like autism, dementia, Alzheimer’s, and [what has historically been called] mental retardation, rather than ‘intellectual disability.’ The former is broader. Also, some forms of cognitive disability do not imply diminished intellectual capacity (e.g., autism)” (Carlson and Kittay 2010, 1 note 1; see also Carlson 2010 and Francis 2009). Even the definition used by the AAIDD includes more than just strict intellectual functioning: “a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive heavier as expressed both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills” (American Association on Mental Retardation 2002, 1). In what follows, we use the language of cognitive disability and intend our use of the term to cover the wider category of disability, though it should be noted that many of the sources on which we draw focus primarily on the more restricted class. But it should also be kept in mind that the boundaries of this class are both instable and permeable (Carlson 2010, 317).

¹³ Kittay 2019, 95.

¹⁴ Scully 2020, 3 in manuscript.

others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."¹⁵ Double-consciousness, for DuBois, is not just a sensation; it is a striving to integrate these two ways of looking at the self into a coherent whole while losing neither of the original views of the self.

Finally, Scully argues that “the ‘generic knower’ of traditional epistemology is socially disembodied in a way designed to ensure its universal applicability. But in reality, no epistemic agent can be decontextualized to that extent, and so the figure of the generic knower ensures that only the aspects of the world experienced from a dominant position make it to any prominence in the collective resources.”¹⁶ As mentioned above, all three of these points have application to disability in general, but they're especially significant when it comes to cognitive disability. Because of how individuals with cognitive disability are currently disenfranchised in educational and social environments, they'll often have fewer such epistemic resources—and often fewer than those with other sorts of disabilities. Those with cognitive disabilities have a similar need to understand themselves ‘from the inside,’ as it were, but also from the outside perspective of a culture that stigmatizes, devalues, and often demeans disabled lives; but this striving might be made more difficult by assumptions made by able-bodied people about one's impairment as well as, in some cases, by the impairment itself. Third, intellectual disability and other forms of neurodiversity call into question the supposed objective neutrality of ‘the view from nowhere’ that much of philosophy assumes or explicitly endorses with respect to the assumed knowledge capacities of an agent.

These structural issues mean that cases of cognitive disability raise a number of issues that can be defensibly sidestepped with other kinds of disability. Here, let us mention two. First, cognitive disability has been taken to undermine autonomy to a greater degree, and perhaps in a different kind, than, say, many forms of physical disability. While a wheelchair-user may not be able to access a workplace without environmental accommodation, cognitive disability is often taken to rule out the kind of autonomy that most forms of labor presuppose. The history of disability advocacy is one in which advocacy on behalf of those with cognitive disabilities has had profound effects on the lives and opportunities of many intellectually disabled individuals. Licia Carlson argues that such advocacy is epistemically important to prevent supposed disengaged neutral philosophers from ruling out autonomy and the possibility of giving (and having others receive) epistemic input on one's own life.¹⁷ But, to connect back to the earlier discussion of the problematic focus on ‘individual capacity’, such advocacy shows that in at least many cases agency, epistemic or otherwise, isn't just a function of individuals but can also be fundamentally cooperative and symbiotic. Beginning

¹⁵ DuBois 1997, 38.

¹⁶ Scully 2020, 3 in manuscript. For further criticisms of the assumption that we can do philosophy from the detached ‘view from nowhere’ when discussing such issues, see Carlson 2010b, especially chapter 4; Panchuk 2019; and Barnes 2016, introduction.

¹⁷ Carlson 2010a.

theoretically with an “individual” agent and their “abilities” can fundamentally misconstrue the nature of autonomy for individuals with certain cognitive disabilities.

Many persons with cognitive disability are able to do significantly more epistemically than one might initially think, so long as we are willing to broaden our understanding of the relevant epistemic states. Leslie Francis, for instance, argues that cognitive disability is compatible with autonomy. Though her focus isn’t on epistemically autonomous agents, the arguments she gives are relevant for showing how epistemic autonomy is more degreed and complex than it is often taken to be.¹⁸ Often cultural and philosophical definitions of knowledge are too narrow, focusing, at times almost exclusively, on propositional knowledge and the ability to communicate it in culturally preferred ways (verbally or in writing). But knowledge can be found in know-how and can be accessed by others through practices that might be required to in the case of cognitive disability but merely advantageous in other cases. While the need for care is in one sense logically distinct from the previous concern for autonomy, the two are closely connected.

Licia Carlson argues that “there is a presumption of authority on the part of the disengaged moral philosopher, and a corresponding dismissal of the authority of those who are in embodied, concrete relation to persons with intellectual disabilities.”¹⁹ This is true not only of philosophical discussions of intellectual disability, but culturally as well, and plays out in educational access, interactions with medical personal, and other situations. The epistemic limitations that some cognitive disabilities cause can be modified, at least to a significant degree, through a range of practices that we can label, follow Eva Kittay, as practices of caring.

Among philosophers of disability, Kittay has done a significant amount of work to develop this insight. As she shows in a number of places, one can often gain epistemic access to another’s experience and interior world through practices of care. “Seeing how much care my daughter requires and the impact on her caregivers has led me not only to think of the obligations others have to caregivers but also to consider what can go wrong in the nested dependencies in which care is embedded.... I have come to see how easily one can draw the *wrong* lesson from the particularly of a caring experience.”²⁰ This is why, for Kittay, we need to differentiate attempted care from care as a success term—that is, a normative sense of the word care that picks out “care as it ought to be practiced if it is to do what care is supposed to do” (137). Kittay uses small caps, CARE, to refer to this normative sense of the term. While *to care* can be used to describe action or comportment regardless of consequence and without reference to the normative framework in which those actions or comportments are judged, to CARE refers to acts or needs as understood relative to the normative framework of care ethics.

¹⁸ Francis 2009.

¹⁹ Carlson 2010, 320.

²⁰ Kittay 2019, 140.

For Kittay, then, “our relationships to others come with additional (although not always privileged) epistemic access to the other—and with such knowledge come special responsibilities to respond to that individual’s CARES.”²¹

As the existence of Willowbrook and other similar institutions²²—many of which were rampant with abuse in the supposed service of care, and the prevalence of filicide both illustrate all too well—the attempt to offer care on behalf of another often goes incredibly wrong. Similarly, closeness to cognitively disabled individuals can aid in the offering and reception of testimony and other epistemic goods on their behalf, also isn’t guaranteed to be efficacious. It needs to be admitted that closeness can sometimes be part of the problem. One example of this is when the care relationship leads to the substitution of the carer’s beliefs or agendas for those of the cared-for individual. In some contexts, interpersonal distance might actually serve the cared-for’s needs better. Eva Kittay writes, for instance, that “the sense of independence disabled people hope to attain is, according to some, best served by a paid stranger with whom one has a thin relationship of employer to employee instead of the thick relationships of family.”²³

In such a case, closeness might actually increase the likelihood of overruling or properly interpreting the cared-for’s testimony. One involved in offering testimony on behalf of another who has cognitive disabilities thus needs to make sure that they’re not allowing their attempt at care to contribute to testimonial swamping or injustice:

Not only negligent or abusive behavior, but even good intentions borne of the carer’s own needs and desires to be helpful, to do what she is sure is good for the cared-for even if the cared-for has good reason to reject these ministrations, can interfere with the care that is genuinely needed.... I have come to see how easily one can draw the *wrong* lesson from the particularity of a caring experience.²⁴

This particular issue isn’t unique to carers; there’s a similar risk involved with individuals with one kind of disability speaking on behalf of individuals with other disabilities. Susan Brison writes about “the dilemma of speaking only for oneself versus speaking, without warrant, on behalf of a larger group”²⁵ in the context of the trauma of sexual assault, though the dilemma applies to disability as well. She elaborates:

The hazard of presuming to speak for all members of a group, for example, for all women (something white, middle-class academic

²¹ Kittay 2019, 175. Also relevant here is Barrett Emerick’s work on empathy as a corrective to testimonial injustice; see Emerick 2016.

²² See Shapiro 1994, 158ff and Solomon 2012, particularly chapters 4 and 7.

²³ Kittay 2019, 158.

²⁴ Kittay 2019 140.

²⁵ Brison 2002, 29. See also Alcoff 1991.

feminists have been all too prone to do), can be avoided, at least to some extent, by making clear the background from which one writes and refraining from overgeneralizing in one's conclusion.... We need not speak *for* other survivors of trauma in order to speak *with* them.²⁶

Furthermore, this need to speak with, and to do so well, is of particular importance when thinking about social epistemology and cognitive disability. As many people who critique care ethics have argued, that framework can inadvertently undermine self-advocacy and can too easily center the voice and concerns of the carer over the cared-for. That is an omnipresent threat for symbiotic caring relationships and the complicated nature of communication such relationships present. This is a further reason why getting a more nuanced understanding of the unique ways in which cognitively disabled individuals are epistemic agents is a task social epistemology needs to take up. As we understand it, an increased focus on collaborative knowing could take at least two forms. On the more restricted view, two discrete knowers would enable each other's knowing through the kind of CARE we've been talking about in this section. Or one could seek to develop a more federation view in which it is a group—or federation—rather than individuals that know. Details of what, among other issues,²⁷ a community of care looks like will depend on which approach is pursued, though we don't have the space to unpack the details here.²⁸

IV. Autism and Communicative Norms

In this final section, we briefly explore another kind of epistemic failure that is rooted not just in epistemic injustice but in another kind of epistemic framework, namely the functioning of communicative norms. Most generally, communicative norms are those communication patterns and practices that are assumed to be the default, if not the normative standard, for communication within a particular social domain. Communicative norms vary across cultural contexts; but even within a particular culture, variation in communicative practice can function to exclude individuals for whom those norms are either not possible or require significantly more effort. More specifically, communicative norms that are often taken for granted by non-disabled individuals systematically disadvantage certain disabled sub-populations. While this point can be true for a number of disabilities, here we focus on autism.

²⁶ Brison 2002, 30. Thus her advice: "Those of us writing (and using in our scholarship) first-person narratives of group-based trauma have to be careful not to speak only for ourselves, while avoiding speaking, without adequate knowledge or authorization, for others" (94).

²⁷ For instance, Emerick's account of empathy more closely aligns with the first of these two approaches.

²⁸ See, for instance, Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018.

Speaking of autism is itself complicated, given the significantly wide-range of experiences to which the term refers.²⁹ It is both a contested diagnosis and an identity that people claim, including those who have great pride around it. In what follows, we will focus first on issues surrounding diagnostics. At present, an autism spectrum diagnosis is given on the basis of behavioral symptoms, rather than underlying physiological differences.³⁰ Educational diagnoses of autism in the United States under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (*IDEA*) are distinct from medical and psychological diagnoses, which use the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, currently in its fifth edition). The DSM-V diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder include “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts” and “restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities” that “cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.”³¹

Reflecting on the earlier DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for autism, David DeVidi writes that it “looks rather like it might make it a matter of definition that the goal of enabling meaningful reciprocal relationships for those with autism is quixotic.”³² DeVidi also notes that “it is unfortunate ... that so many discussions of autism in the philosophical literature focuses on those with Asperger’s syndrome and others at the ‘high functioning’ end of the autism spectrum.”³³ This runs the risk of “distort[ing] the picture of what autism involves”³⁴ and further marginalizes the input of others on the spectrum in ways continuous with the previous section of the present paper. And while apparent disabilities have their own dangers (e.g., infantilization, offensive beneficence, pity), invisible

²⁹ Cf. the work of Lydia X.Z. Brown. “Based on the work of Lorna Wing and Judith Gould in their 1979 Camberwell study, autism was reborn as a so-called *spectrum disorder*. Autism was, in other words, reconceived of, not as a single disorder with fixed deficits, but as a conglomeration of several disorders and syndromes with many deficits.... Interestingly, in the most recent version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*—the newly released DSM-5—these separate diagnostic labels have been collapsed under a singular designation of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Autism is now explicitly measured in terms of gradation of severity. Rejecting a strict categorical diagnosis (i.e., either one meets criteria or not) and moving toward a dimensional one (i.e., to what degree does one meet criteria), the DSM-5 version of autism is not so much a coherent group of pathological signs and symptoms but is rather understood as a spectral range of pathological referents anchored by oppositional poles of severity” (McGuire 2016, 50f). Jami Anderson and Simon Cushing go so far as to suggest that “the term ‘autistic’ might meet the fate of the outdated term ‘neurotic’, which turned out to be a pseudo-scientific term for an inexact clumping together of unrelated phenomena” (Anderson and Cushing 2012, 5; see also 10). In individual work, Cushing argues that “we do not have a clear conception of what autism is.... If autism is to be a *collection* of such [psychological] modules (or defects in various modules) then we either need to know the justification for grouping them together (the ‘bundle’ problem again) or we need a common explanation at the level of neurology” (Cushing 2012, 38).

³⁰ See Sample 2013, 76.

³¹ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition, 2013. Racial intersections of how we define disability in terms of adaptive function are discussed in Brosco 2010, 40ff.

³² DeVidi 2013, 187.

³³ DeVidi 2012, 189; it should be noted that many autistics find language of ‘high functioning’ vs ‘low functioning’ to be incredibly problematic.

³⁴ DeVidi 2012, 189.

disabilities (including some manifestations of autism) can be particularly problematic insofar as the non-disabled participant in communication may not be aware of the other's disability, and they thus assume default communicative norms that exclude or disadvantage the other.³⁵ This makes it easier to discount their testimony.

The characteristic communication deficits having to do with interpreting the pragmatic component of the communicative content of speech³⁶ have significant interpersonal implications. "The inability to grasp significant components of what is being said means that often, in the normal run of conversation, a person with autism will not be in a position to appreciate the range of [social] options actually on offer."³⁷ Autistics can often have difficulty understanding dominant social cues. This leads to difficulty understanding sarcasm, for instance, or how verbal insults between individuals sometimes function as a sign of friendship and closeness rather than true insults. But the breakdown for communicative norms isn't unidirectional. Forms of direct or blunt communication, often favored by autistics over the use of 'social lubricants' (e.g., indirectly saying "I'll think about it" rather than the more straightforward "no"), can be interpreted by neurotypical individuals as rude, and questions taken to be disguised suggestions or criticisms. Thus, the supposed "inability" cuts both directions—it is the inability of able-bodied people to understand and appreciate a wider set of social cues (or lack thereof) that is equally at play.

Or consider the following characteristic of many autistics, for whom the preference for routine and familiarity can impede social interactions:

One complicating factor [of social interaction for autistics] can (at some risk of oversimplification) be phrased thus: 'No' often doesn't mean no. While this is subject to a great deal of individual variation, when a person with autism is asked whether or not a particular activity (going for a walk, stopping in at the bank, etc.) would be a good idea, especially when the suggestion is outside of routine, the first response can be an 'automatic no'. Repeated discussion can be required before the routine-breaking activity can happen.... It is regarded as bad practice to accept the first response to such important questions.... But it takes someone who knows the person well to know when the fluctuation has settled into a decision.³⁸

The ability to 'read' Autistics sometimes requires a degree of interpersonal knowledge and trust that the presence of autism makes harder to establish.

While the differences in various forms of Autistic communication and interaction cause problems, those problems look to be a function of communicative norms,

³⁵ See Stramondo 2010.

³⁶ DeVidi 2013, 190.

³⁷ DeVidi 2013, 190.

³⁸ DeVidi2013, 191. See also Timpe 2016, 30.

not a characteristic or disposition inherent in an Autistic person. If Autistics are not able to satisfy neurotypical communicative norms, we then have reason to think that autistic testimony will fail to enter into usual social exchanges. And this is exactly what recent research finds. In a recent study, social communication was examined between Autistics and between Autistic and non-Autistic partners. Rather than focusing on video or specifically designed interactions, Morrison *et al.* evaluated real-world unstructured interactions for participant evaluation of their interlocutors. The study found that “autistic participants did not share the TD [‘typically developing’ or neurotypical] preference for TD over autistic partners, and in contrast to traditional conceptualizations of autistic sociability, reported feeling closer to their partners than did TD adults, and disclosed more about themselves to autistic partners relative to TD partners.”³⁹

Furthermore, autistic participants evidenced a “greater interest in future interaction with other autistic adults”⁴⁰ than did TD participants. Morrison *et al.* also connect their work to the DEP (double empathy problem) framework, which “posits a communication gap between autistic and typically developing (TD) people in which differences in social expression and understanding present barriers for cross-diagnostic interaction and connection” (2). They conclude that social motivation is thus a function of communicative social *norms*. As one of the researchers summarized, “these findings suggest that social interaction difficulties in autism are not an absolute characteristic of the individual.... Rather, social quality is a *relational characteristic* that depends on the fit between the person and the social environment.”⁴¹ This relational approach explains why both the social interactions between autistics and neurotypical individuals can be difficult for both participants, rather than simply an experience on the autistic side of the

³⁹ Morrison 2019, 10. Though the researchers don’t draw this connection, this finding relates to ‘access intimacy’, which is “that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs.... Access intimacy is also the intimacy I feel with many other disabled and sick people who have an automatic understanding of access needs out of our shared similar lived experience of the many different ways ableism manifests in our lives” (<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/>).

⁴⁰ Morrison 2019, 10.

⁴¹ <https://www.utdallas.edu/news/health-medicine/autism-social-interactions-2020/> (italics added). These results shouldn’t be particularly surprising, as they were suggested by autistic self-advocate Jim Sinclair in his 1993 “Don’t Mourn for Us”: “[Autism] does not mean the child is incapable of relating at all. It only means you’re assuming a shared system, a shared understanding of signals and meanings, that the child in fact does not share. It’s as if you tried to have an intimate conversation with someone who has no comprehension of your language. Of course, the person won’t understand what you’re talking about, won’t respond in the way you expect, and may well find the whole interaction confusing and unpleasant.... It takes more work to communicate with someone whose native language isn’t the same as yours. And autism goes deeper than language and culture; autistic people are “foreigners” in any society. You’re going to have to give up your assumptions about shared meanings. You’re going to have to learn to back up to levels more basic than you’ve probably thought about before, to translate, and to check to make sure your translations are understood. You’re going to have to give up the certainty that comes of being on your own familiar territory, of knowing you’re in charge (https://www.autreat.com/dont_mourn.html).”

interaction. If that's the case, then the social difficulties can be ameliorated through accommodations in the social environment rather than just putting the entire burden on Autistics (e.g., the pressure to engage in masking behaviors).

Other disabilities can impact social interactions as well. Certain physical disabilities make it more difficult to dress in socially approved ways (e.g., having one's clothes be kempt or wearing makeup, etc.), and can also make it harder to get someone on time given increased transportation demands, lack of accessible transportation, fatigue or pain. Each of these plays directly into social norms and expectations regarding appearance and punctuality. Similarly, the need for directed/supported typing⁴² or the use of an augmented communication device can make social interaction dependent on the presence of a properly trained aid or functioning technology.

But it is not just the content or reception of testimony that depends on social factors and communicative norms. Similar issues can arise not just with testimony, but other epistemic situations—when conferences are organized in ways that make participation in that conference as an epistemic contributor that disadvantage autistics (e.g., by not having sufficient sensory breaks that may be needed) or those with other disabilities (e.g., when rooms are not setup so that Deaf audience members see both their interpreters and the visual aids). Sometimes the failure to have mutually accessible norms results in injustice, as found, for example, in the frequency of police shootings of autistic (especially Black and brown male) adults.⁴³

One way that Autistics have fought back against these norms is through Autistic pride and by support of the larger neurodiversity movement. Though even here, there is concern that the movement often excludes people who cannot substantively engage in it.

Conclusion

As indicated earlier, we in no way maintain that the issues canvassed here exhaust the issues related reflection upon the intersection of disability and social epistemology. On the contrary, we hope that this piece spurs further research and conversation in a number of directions related to that intersection. Here, let us also briefly mention a number of other epistemic issues related to disability that we haven't been able to explore in greater depth. We haven't considered, for instance, the ways that accommodations and communicative technology can open

⁴² On our view, directed/supported typing is distinct from facilitated communication, which we take to be problematic in at least some forms (see Hemsley 2018). Part of what is at stake in the latter qualification is that there is significant ambiguity in what the practice(s) of 'facilitated communication' refer to.

⁴³ See, for instance, McGuire 2016.

up opportunities for education.⁴⁴ Or how digital technologies are changing interactions between those with disabilities and those without.⁴⁵ Or how structural injustices impact finding out if one even has a disability in the first place, given current diagnostic practices. As with other kinds of social identities, there are also important issues of how the relationship of both disability and epistemology relate to social power.⁴⁶ If one of the primary tasks of social epistemology is to investigate “the epistemic effects of social interactions and social systems” as a step toward having “well-designed social and interpersonal practices and institutions,” then we need to give more collective attention to disability in the process.⁴⁷ We look forward to a deepening of work on these issues in the future.⁴⁸

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⁴⁴ See, for instance, Satterfiled et al 2015; and McDonald and Lopes 2014; and Bouck 2010.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Raja 2016 and Anne McGuire 2016: “The popularization of the Internet has also been a key technological development in the history of autistic self-advocacy. Insofar as it can be accessible to autistics who communicate solely via computer and to those who find sustained social stimulation stressful and/or impossible, the Internet represents a unique discursive space of autistic resistance” (62).

⁴⁶ See Tremain 2017, Tuana 2006, Scully 2020, Kafer 2013, McRuer 2018, and Piepzn-Samarasinha 2018. These issues are related to what Goldman refers to as the third branch of social epistemology: “assessing the epistemic consequences of adopting certain institutional arrangements or systemic relations as opposed to alternatives” (Goldman 2015).

⁴⁷ Goldman 2015.

⁴⁸ Thanks to Barrett Emerick and Magnus Ferguson for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, and the participants of the LATAM Agency project for useful discussions.

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