

CLOSING THE CONCEPTUAL GAP IN EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

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Miranda Fricker's insightful work on epistemic injustice discusses two forms of epistemic injustice—testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when the victim lacks the interpretative resources to make sense of her experience, and this lacuna can be traced down to a structural injustice. In this paper, I provide one model of how to fill the conceptual gap in hermeneutical injustice. First, I argue that the victims possess conceptual resources to make sense of their experiences, namely phenomenal concepts. Second, I show how one might work the way up in a two-step process from a subjective, phenomenal concept to a novel, public concept. Finally, I discuss the conditions that have to be met for this process to be successful. The resulting model shows a way how the victims might alleviate hermeneutical injustice by developing novel concepts, given that the dominant group does not care about their predicament.

Keywords: epistemic injustice, hermeneutical injustice, conceptual gap, phenomenal concepts, experiences, public concepts, phenomenal knowledge.

In her insightful work on epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker (2007) analyses two forms of epistemic injustice—testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice happens when a speaker is suffering from a credibility deficit due to being a member of a socially marginalized group. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when the victim lacks the interpretative resources to make sense of her experience, and this lacuna is due to a systematic marginalization of the social group to which she belongs.¹ In this paper, I will focus on the phenomenon of hermeneutical injustice. In particular, I am concerned with analysing the conceptual gap that needs to be filled for eliminating the injustice.

¹ Fricker is not the first theorist who analyses the epistemic oppression of marginalized groups. For example, Collins (1999) discusses the exclusion of Black women's voices in knowledge production. Hoagland's (2001) notion of 'conceptual coercion' highlights strategies of epistemic oppression. Moreover, Code's (1995) account of *rhetorical spaces* explores hermeneutical marginalization.

As a paradigmatic example of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker (2007: 149–52) discusses the case of Carmita Wood, who suffered from sexual harassment at a time when the relevant concept of this social experience had not been developed. Due to the lack of a collective hermeneutical resource, Wood suffered a cognitive disadvantage when trying to make this experience intelligible to herself and to others. To understand the experience, the gap in the interpretative resources had to be filled. Thus, according to Fricker, hermeneutical injustice can be traced down to a lacuna of a concept that would help to make sense of the target experience.

In the following, I analyse the conceptual gap in hermeneutical injustice and provide one model of how to fill it. Let me say upfront that I think that there are various ways of closing the conceptual gap. The proposed model is one that shows how the victims of hermeneutical injustice can develop novel concepts, given that the dominant group does not care about their predicament. Importantly, this does not mean that the burden of dissolving epistemic injustice falls on the victims. Rather, given the structural injustices of our society, the model aims to provide the victims with a powerful tool to alleviate their predicament.

I proceed as follows. First, I investigate what kinds of concepts victims of hermeneutical injustice possess and what kinds of concepts they lack. In particular, I argue that subjects suffering from hermeneutical injustice do possess some conceptual resources to make sense of their experiences, namely *phenomenal* concepts. Second, I show how one might work the way up in a two-step process from phenomenal concepts to a novel *public* concept, thereby providing a model of how to close the conceptual gap in epistemic injustice. Third, I elaborate on the crucial role that this model assigns to experiences, and I discuss the question of whether this precludes the dominant group from participating in the concept-generating process. Finally, I discuss the challenges that we face in our effort to overcome hermeneutical injustice.

I. THE CONCEPTUAL GAP IN HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE

Examples of hermeneutical injustice are widespread and illustrate the harm done due to a lacuna in hermeneutical resources. For instance, before the concepts of ‘workplace bullying’ (Fricker 2010: 168), ‘sexual harassment’ (Fricker 2007: 149ff), or ‘homosexual desire’ (Fricker 2008: 70) had been developed, the victims of hermeneutical injustice were unable to make these phenomena fully intelligible to themselves and to others. This failure was due to a lack of hermeneutical resources, a deficit that can be traced down to a structural injustice: the society the victims live in does not care about the victims’ experiences and, hence, has no interest in generating or using novel concepts that capture these particular experiences. According to Fricker, hermeneutical

injustice manifests itself as a ‘lack of conceptual-interpretative resources’ (Fricker 2013: 51), and, hence, for this injustice to vanish, the conceptual resources had to be developed.²

So, what kind of concept³ is needed to fill the gap eventually in hermeneutical injustice? Plausibly, the conceptual lacuna has to be filled by a concept that helps (i) to understand the target experience and (ii) to communicate it to others.

The requirement of (i) becomes clear by considering the following feature about concepts: If one possesses a concept *F*, then one can experience an object or event or state of affair, etc. *as F*. Accordingly, the victims of hermeneutical injustice at the time were not in the position to experience e.g. sexual harassment, *as* sexual harassment, due to the lack of the relevant concept (Elzinga 2018: 63–4). To understand their experience, a novel concept had to be developed that capture key aspects such as the causes and the normative significance of the target phenomenon.

The requirement of (ii) points towards the need for a *public* concept that can be shared. Let me clarify what I mean by the notion of a ‘public concept’. A public concept is a concept that has the *potential* to be widely shared and to become part of the collective hermeneutical resources. It has this potential, since—even if it picks out an experience (e.g. the concept ‘postpartum depression’)—it can be acquired without having undergone the target experience. Importantly, a public concept, as I understand it, need not already be part of the collective hermeneutical resources. This distinction is crucial, since it allows that a public concept is generated and used within certain groups without being acknowledged by the powerful. (In Section IV, I discuss ‘willful hermeneutical ignorance’ (Pohlhaus 2012) as an instance of such a case).⁴ Therefore, the kind of concept needed to fill the hermeneutical gap is a public concept that helps make sense of the target phenomenon in a way that includes understanding the phenomenon’s nature and normative significance. On the received view, victims can fully understand and communicate the target experience only if this public concept is found.

I agree that the development of novel public concept is crucial for closing the conceptual gap. However, I think that the victims of hermeneutical injustice are not as cognitively impoverished as one might think. In particular, there are conceptual resources that do not meet the requirement (ii) of being graspable by everyone but nevertheless fulfil the requirement (i), namely that they help

² Many philosophers (Crerar 2016; Dotson 2014; Mason 2011; Pohlhaus 2012; Simion 2019) think that the development of new concepts does not suffice to dissolve hermeneutical injustice. Rather, other factors such as concept application and the acknowledgement of the concept by the powerful are crucial to this aim as well. I return to this point in Section IV.

³ I understand concepts as mental representations that can be constituents of thoughts rather than as abstract entities.

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

the victims to understand the target experiences. Importantly, these conceptual resources are also helpful in the quest for a novel *public* concept.

In the literature, we find insightful discussions about the diversity of hermeneutical resources. For example, Medina points out that ‘we should be careful not to tie too closely people’s hermeneutical capacities to the repertoire of readily available terms and coined concepts, as if oppressed subjects did not have ways of expressing their suffering well before such articulations were available’ (2013: 99). Similarly, Mason (2011: 299f) holds that members of marginalized groups have hermeneutical resources that help them to grasp and communicate their social experiences within the social group. In her analysis of ‘contributory injustice’, Dotson acknowledges the existence of multiple hermeneutical resources as well and points out that ‘those who experience contributory injustice find that they can readily articulate their experiences. However, those articulations generally fail to gain appropriate uptake according to the biased hermeneutical resources utilized by the perceiver’ (2012: 32). Moreover, Fricker points out that her account of hermeneutical injustice allows ‘the existence of localised interpretive practices that may perfectly capture a given range of experiences but whose meanings are not sufficiently shared across wider social space’ (2016: 167).

I share the view that there are multiple hermeneutical resources, and I aim at explicating it further by analysing special conceptual resources that the victims of hermeneutical injustice possess and might use in their quest for developing the novel public concept. Notably, each of these conceptual resources figures in different hermeneutical capacities to make an experience intelligible—namely to oneself, to others within one’s group, and to those who cannot have the target experience.

The ways of making an experience intelligible are manifold and nuanced. Hence, on the path of closing the conceptual gap, intermediate steps towards understanding the target experience can be taken. My purpose is to show that there is a way of conceptualizing an experience that can be used as a starting point on the way to closing the gap. This way to conceptualize an experience as such-and-such does not require a public concept but rather uses a token of the very experience in the conceptualization. In the next section, I explain this key claim of the proposed model.

II. PHENOMENAL CONCEPTS

On the view developed here, there is a kind of concept that the victim of hermeneutical injustice often possesses before the target notion has been coined, namely a *phenomenal* concept. Phenomenal concepts are special concepts that refer to experiences in terms of what these experiences are like.

Phenomenal concepts figure most prominently in the physicalism/anti-physicalism debate, i.e., the debate about whether mental states can be reduced to physical states or not. One strategy to defend physicalism from anti-physicalist arguments [e.g. the knowledge argument (Jackson 1982) or the conceivability argument (Block 1980)] is to claim that these arguments involve two different ways of conceptualizing a phenomenal state: On the one hand, we can think of the target experience in terms of objective, physical concepts (e.g. a neurophysiological concept), and on the other hand, we can think of the (same) experience in terms of subjective, phenomenal concepts (i.e., a concept of what this experience is like). Since these two kinds of concepts are conceptually isolated from each other, we can be misled into thinking that the referents of these concepts are distinct too. According to physicalists, considering the special characteristics of phenomenal concepts helps to explain away this (false) intuition.

In the literature, we find sophisticated accounts of the particular nature of phenomenal concepts. Some think that phenomenal concepts are ‘inner demonstratives’ (Horgan 1984; Levin 2007). Others defend ‘constitutional accounts’ and hold that phenomenal concepts are partly constituted by a token of the experience to which they refer (Balog 2012; Papineau 2007). Still others (Loar 1990/1997) argue that phenomenal concepts are special ‘recognitional concepts’ insofar as a token of their referent serves as their mode of presentation or that they play distinct conceptual roles (Hill and McLaughlin 1999).⁵ Despite the controversy about how exactly to explain the direct reference function and the semantic stability of phenomenal concepts, there is wide agreement upon two crucial characteristics of phenomenal concepts: First, they pick out their referents in terms of their referents’ *phenomenal character*. Second, they have *special acquisition conditions*. In particular, to acquire a phenomenal concept, one has to undergo the very experience attentively. Notably, having a particular experience and attending to it is not only necessary but also *sufficient* for gaining a phenomenal concept.⁶ Hence, what speaks in favour of the view that victims of hermeneutical injustice often possess a phenomenal concept of the target experience is that for its acquisition it suffices to undergo the relevant experience attentively.

The view that victims of hermeneutical injustice possess a phenomenal concept of the target experience is compatible with various accounts of phenomenal concepts. For example, on the demonstrative accounts, the subject has a concept of the form ‘this_____’ in which the blank is filled with a token of the experience. On the constitutional accounts, the subject has a concept that

⁵ For an overview of the sophisticated accounts that can be found in the literature, see Balog (2009).

⁶ More precisely, these conditions are sufficient for gaining a ‘pure’ phenomenal concept that picks out an experience directly. I discuss the varieties of phenomenal concepts in the next section.

uses a token of the experience either to mention it or to serve as its mode of presentation. On the recognitional accounts, the subject deploys the concept when she recognizes an experience as one of *those*, without relying on further theoretical knowledge. Here I remain neutral about which account of phenomenal concepts captures their main characteristics best.⁷ I prefer to stick to the minimal and uncontroversial assumption that phenomenal concepts have special acquisition conditions and that they refer to experiences in terms of their phenomenal character. I see no reason why victims of hermeneutical injustice should not be able to develop such a concept. That is all I need for the present purpose.

II.1 Step 1: from pure phenomenal concepts to community relational concepts

There are good reasons to think that the victim of hermeneutical injustice can possess a phenomenal concept of the target experience: After all, having an experience and attending to it suffices to gain a phenomenal concept. Unfortunately, phenomenal concepts are inadequate as means for communicating the phenomenal character of an experience to others and, hence, bad candidates for the public concept sought. For example, Pohlhaus holds that ‘a concept that in principle can be followed by only one person is not really a concept’ (2012: 718). If so, then a phenomenal concept would not be a real concept and obviously ill-suited to close the conceptual gap. Therefore, the next question is: are there any interesting relations between phenomenal concepts and public concepts that could help in the search for a novel public concept? I think there are such relations. To see these connections, I provide a model of a two-step process that bridges the gap from the most basic, subjective phenomenal concept to a novel, public concept. To reach this aim, I build on Chalmers’s (2003) insightful classification of phenomenal concepts.

Chalmers distinguishes four kinds of phenomenal concepts: non-relational, pure phenomenal concepts; and three kinds of *relational* phenomenal concepts: community relational, individual relational, and demonstrative relational phenomenal concepts. For the present purposes, two of these kinds of phenomenal concept are particularly relevant: first, *pure phenomenal concepts*, which *directly* pick out the target experience in terms of its intrinsic phenomenal character; and second, *community relational phenomenal concepts*, where the reference is fixed by relations to external objects. A community relational phenomenal concept (henceforth, CR-phenomenal concept) of, for instance, red ‘can be glossed roughly as the phenomenal quality typically caused in normal subjects within my community by paradigmatic red things’ (Chalmers 2003: 224). In what follows, I use ‘CR-phenomenal concept’ in a wider sense. In particular, I assume that the reference of CR-phenomenal concepts can be fixed also by *actions or*

⁷ In Fürst (2014), I defend a constitutional account of phenomenal concepts.

events that are the cause of an experience. [I leave individual relational and demonstrative relational phenomenal concepts aside for the following reason: Individual relational phenomenal concepts pick out an experience in terms of what causes this experience in an *individual* (thus, they can account for inversion cases). Accordingly, these concepts cannot capture the fact that an experience is shared and tight to the situatedness of marginalized groups. The same applies to demonstrative relational phenomenal concepts.]

Let me apply this analysis of various types of phenomenal concepts to the case of hermeneutical injustice. The first step from a pure phenomenal concept (which one gains by having the target experience and attending to it), towards a novel, public concept (that closes the hermeneutical gap), is to acquire a CR-phenomenal concept.

The starting point of this process is that, in a given case, the victims possess a pure phenomenal concept of their experience that highlights its phenomenal features and thereby motivates them to share their experiences among each other. This is what seemed to happen in the case of sexual harassment.⁸ At some point, the women tried to communicate their experiences, which until then had only been phenomenally conceptualized. How is this possible with only a pure phenomenal concept at hand? The women cannot simply communicate the pure phenomenal concept of their experience since the content of pure phenomenal concepts is commonly held to be ineffable (because pure phenomenal concepts use a token of an experience to refer to its type).

Fortunately, there are ways of talking about subjective experiences. Think of standard ways to communicate a kind of experience that your interlocutor has not had, e.g. the experience of diving in the ocean. What could you do to communicate this experience? You can try to capture the experience by describing and comparing it with *other experiences in the vicinity* that the interlocutor has experienced and phenomenally conceptualized. For instance, you might say: Diving in the ocean is like diving in a wide and peaceful, enormous swimming pool, etc. To apply this to the case of sexual harassment, a person might talk about the feeling of strong unease, intimidation, and threat, caused by a sexual behaviour from another person. Note that the situation described differs from the former example insofar as the interlocutor *did* have the target experience. The problem of communicating the experience is rather rooted in the lack of a public concept that expresses this experience. Thus, mentioning

⁸ In the literature, we find further cases that can be accounted for in terms of phenomenal concepts. For example, Dotson considers a man suffering from an under-researched medical ailment: 'Though dominant hermeneutical resources may remain behind on conceptualizing his ailment, his knowledge may not be lagging at all, in terms of the ability to render it intelligible. What is barred, then, is gaining the appropriate uptake by those utilizing dominant hermeneutical resources as opposed to the alternative resources he and others in his same position have developed' (2012: 40). CR-phenomenal concepts can be one such hermeneutical resource that those suffering from the ailment possess.

similar experiences, for which public concepts exist, guides the hearer towards the target experience that they had, but cannot publicly express either.

The process takes the following form: First, the pure phenomenal concept highlights key aspects of the target experience and thereby helps the speaker to find similar experiences for which public concepts exist. The speaker can use these public concepts of nearby experiences to guide the hearer towards the target experience.

Second, to demarcate further which experience is meant, the speaker can also refer to its *causes*, e.g. by mentioning the behaviour of the harasser. As a result, the hearer might reply that she has an idea what the speaker is talking about since she had such experience too. In this way, even without the public concept at hand, (indirect) communication about the experience becomes possible among those who share the experience.

Third, by finding out that this experience is shared by others, the victims will gain a *community relational* phenomenal concept that refers to the particular kind of social experience shared by those facing such-and-such behaviour. The case of Wood illustrates this process:

And then Carmita Wood comes in and tells Lin her story. We realized that to a person, every one of us—the women on staff, Carmita, the students—had had an experience like this at some point, you know? And none of us had ever told anyone before. It was one of those click, aha! moments, a profound revelation. (Brownmiller 1990: 280)

On a plausible assumption, the victims of sexual harassment used various descriptions in telling their stories. They described their emotions, thoughts, and feelings, but they also mentioned the behaviour and actions of the harassers. The connection of the experience to its causes already suggests that the kind of experience is likely shared by those exposed to the particular behaviour of the aggressor, and communication among the victims confirms its shared character. Thus, the victims move from a pure phenomenal concept (of what the experience is like) to a CR-phenomenal concept (of the experience typically caused in members within my community by such-and-such behaviour). The CR-phenomenal concept has the advantage over the pure phenomenal concept that due to its communal aspect it captures also the situatedness of those sharing the experience. Moreover, by highlighting that their experience is shared, it strengthens the self-trust of the victims. (This is also an advantage of the CR-phenomenal concepts over *individual* relational phenomenal concepts, since the latter does not imply that the experience is shared.)

Finally, once the CR-phenomenal concept is formed, the victims can connect it with the pure phenomenal concept in the following way: *the experience that is typically caused in members of my community by such-and-such behaviour (CR-phenomenal concept), feels so and so (pure phenomenal concept)*. As Chalmers (2003) points out, connecting these phenomenal concepts and learning about their co-reference is cognitively significant. For example, when Jackson's Mary finds

out that the CR-phenomenal concept of ‘red’ (i.e., the quality typically caused in members of her community by red things) co-refers with her pure phenomenal concept of red (i.e., such-and-such quality), she acquires a cognitively significant new belief. In the case of hermeneutical injustice, this connection is particularly important for the following reason: If the victims described their experience only by mentioning its cause (the behaviour of the harasser), without tying it also to the phenomenal character of the experience, then this would not reflect the target phenomenon adequately. For example, the description of the experience as ‘the experience caused by behaviour X’ (e.g. him trying to kiss me) would not capture key aspects of the experience, such as the feeling of threat and unease. The experience could be even wrongly counter-interpreted as an experience of flirting. Thus, if the victims communicated about an experience only via CR-phenomenal concepts, without connecting it to pure phenomenal concepts, then the normative aspect of the phenomenon would be missing.

The possibility to connect the CR-phenomenal concept to the pure phenomenal concept is restricted to the community of those who share the predicament. Importantly, gaining and connecting these phenomenal concepts already alleviates the victims’ cognitive disadvantage. This amelioration can be put in terms of Goetze’s (2018) helpful distinction between *cognitive harms*, which prevent one to understand the target experience, and *communicative harms*, which prevent one to make the experience intelligible to others. Pure and CR-phenomenal concepts help to mitigate the cognitive harm insofar, as they allow a better understanding of the experience by highlighting its phenomenal character, its causes, and the fact that the experience is shared. Moreover, CR-phenomenal concepts diminish the communicative harm, since they facilitate communication about the experience *among the victims*. Finally, communication via a CR-phenomenal concept and, thus, the awareness that this kind of experience is shared by others, might strengthen the self-trust of the victims, helping them to take their experiences seriously, and motivating them to search further, for a novel public concept.

II.2 Step 2: from community relational phenomenal concepts to public concepts

The key step for fully closing the conceptual gap is to find a novel *public* concept that expresses the target phenomenon.⁹ Again, let me turn to the

⁹ Goetze (2018) offers an elaborated classification of hermeneutical resources that highlights also the limits of some of these resources. By considering the extent of hermeneutical gaps relative to various social groups, he outlines six species of hermeneutical injustice. One kind of injustice pertinent to the point here is *hermeneutical ghettoization*, which ‘occurs when the subject belongs to a hermeneutically marginalized group whose members have engaged in hermeneutical dissent in order to acquire knowledge of their distinctive experience and to communicate about it amongst themselves. But, because of this group’s marginalization, no other communities have acquired

example from Wood to illustrate the step from a CR-phenomenal concept to a public, non-phenomenal concept of the target phenomenon.

The ‘this’ they were going to break the silence about had no name. ‘Eight of us were sitting in an office of Human Affairs,’ Sauvigne remembers, ‘brainstorming about what we were going to write on the posters for our speak-out. We were referring to it as “sexual intimidation,” “sexual coercion,” “sexual exploitation on the job.” None of those names seemed quite right. We wanted something that embraced a whole range of subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviors. Somebody came up with “harassment.” Sexual harassment! Instantly we agreed. That’s what it was. (Brownmiller 1990: 281)

Once the victims share a CR-phenomenal concept, the need for a public concept to communicate the target phenomenon to those who do not share the experience becomes even more pressing. This may strengthen the victims’ motivation to engage with others to develop such a novel concept.

Similar to the first step, this search can draw upon *other concepts in the vicinity*, such as ‘unwanted sexual attention’, ‘exploitation’, ‘coercion’, or ‘intimidation’. Phenomenal concepts again play a crucial role in finding these nearby public concepts. Since the pure phenomenal concept highlights the phenomenal features of the target experience and the CR-phenomenal concept highlights its causes, they help finding nearby phenomena that share these features and for which public concepts already exist. In this way, phenomenal concepts serve as a guide on the path towards finding nearby public concepts that help to generate a novel public concept. Importantly, the nearby public concepts may reveal aspects of the target phenomenon that until then remain unnoticed. For example, in the case of sexual harassment, the nearby concept of ‘exploitation’ can reveal that relations of power and the situatedness of the victims are part of the phenomenon of sexual harassment.

The final step that closes the conceptual gap can take different forms. In the paradigmatic cases, none of the existing public concepts seem adequate to capture the target phenomenon. In these cases, the phenomenal concepts are a helpful guide towards generating a novel public concept.

First, the pure and the CR-phenomenal concepts highlight the experiential and causal aspects of the phenomenon. Novel concepts can be tried out against the background of these salient features. For example, an evaluative component to the target concept might turn out to be crucial for adequately capturing the phenomenon. As Romdenh-Romluc (2016) argues, the concept of ‘sexual harassment’ has an important evaluative component as a wrong action that counterinterpretations such as ‘flirting’ do not have. Thus, in the light of phenomenal concepts, many options will be rejected because they do not capture key aspects of the phenomenon adequately.

such an understanding, so the subject cannot make her experience intelligible to members of other groups’ (2018: 89). CR-phenomenal concepts can illuminate the conceptual resources possessed in case of hermeneutical ghettoization.

Second, the phenomenal concepts help to find nearby public concepts that highlight further aspects, as, for example, the role that situatedness plays for the target phenomenon. In the light of these nearby public concepts, the novel concept can be again shaped and refined. The more aspects of the target phenomenon are revealed in this way, the easier it will be to find the novel concept that captures the phenomenon adequately.

In some cases, in searching for the novel public concept, one might notice a tight connection to an existing public concept. Then one might try to *semantically ameliorate* this existing concept (Haslanger 2020: 10), rather than to develop a novel concept. If this effort succeeds, then it has the advantage that the relevant public concept already exists, has a high standing, and includes practices that are widely acknowledged. For example, one might analyse the case of ‘workplace bullying’ as an instance where the existing concept of ‘bullying’ was ameliorated and extended not only to refer to behaviour in schools but also in other social realms. Importantly, in both ways of filling the conceptual gap—either by developing a novel public concept or by semantically ameliorating an existing public concept—the phenomenal concepts serve as helpful guides to the public target concept.

Let me summarize the merits of phenomenal concepts in the concept-generating process:

In the first step, pure phenomenal concepts motivate the victims to talk about the experience since they highlight the phenomenal character of the experience. Moreover, pure phenomenal concepts and CR-phenomenal concepts help finding nearby experiences of which public concepts exist and thereby guide those who share the experience towards the target experience. This allows for communication about the experience among the victims and highlights the shared character of the experience. Finally, pure phenomenal concepts can be connected to CR-phenomenal concepts, thereby facilitating a better understanding of the target phenomenon. In the second step, pure and CR-phenomenal concepts help to find nearby public concepts. They highlight the experiential and causal aspects of the target phenomenon such that the novel concept can be shaped and refined to capture the phenomenon adequately.

III. THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCES

Next, let me further clarify the role that experiences play in the process of closing the conceptual gap. Some conceptual gaps are directly closed by concepts of *experiences* (e.g. in the case of ‘homosexual desire’ or ‘postpartum depression’), others by concepts of *actions* and still others by concepts of a *complex phenomenon*

that involves both behavioural and experiential aspects. With regard to the latter possibility, one might hold that concepts such as ‘sexual harassment’ refer to actions but get their normative content from the very experience of the victims.¹⁰ In this sense, the experience can be seen as an essential part of the public concept as well. Whether the novel public concept refers directly to an experience or to a phenomenon that is either constituted solely by a set of behaviours or both by a set of behaviours *and* the experience of the victims varies from case to case. Accordingly, the role of the experience might differ insofar as it either directly or only indirectly figures in the target concept. The decisive point is that in all these cases, the experience plays a crucial role insofar as the phenomenal concept of the experience facilitates the development of the novel public concept that captures the target phenomenon adequately (regardless of whether this public concept refers to an experience or to an action). In most cases, hermeneutical injustice is rooted in the unwillingness of the powerful to give proper weight to the experiences of the members of marginalized groups. The proposed analysis, based on the view that the victims’ experiences play a crucial role in closing the conceptual gap, accounts for this fact.

Notably, once the novel public concept is coined, the experience becomes less important. In certain respects, this is an advantage. First, with the novel public concept at hand, we can recognize the target phenomenon itself (and not only the *experience* of those suffering from it); e.g. the concept of ‘sexual harassment’ enables us to see an action *as an action of sexual harassment*. Second, with the public concept, a way to render the target phenomenon *intelligible to others* is finally found. The experiences in core cases of hermeneutical injustice are confined to marginalized groups. Thus, members of the dominant group might be unable to have this kind of experience. If so, then the relevant phenomenal concepts are unavailable to them (though some nearby phenomenal concepts might be. I return to this point in the next section). However, since the public concept is not a phenomenal concept, it can be grasped and deployed also by members of the dominant group. This shows why developing a public concept is indispensable not only for the victims to fully understand the phenomenon but, importantly, for making it also *intelligible* to those who do not share this kind of experience. Third, with the public concept, we can finally *communicate* the target phenomenon to members of all kinds of social groups.

Before proceeding, let me make a clarificatory remark on the relationship between the analysed concepts. Plausibly, there are interrelations between the pure phenomenal concepts, the CR-phenomenal concepts, and the novel public concepts. In the analysis so far, I focused primarily on the impact phenomenal concepts have on the novel public concept. But the reverse holds too. For example, a novel public concept deepens our understanding of the

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this interpretation.

experience by recognizing an experience *as* an experience of, e.g. sexual harassment.¹¹ This helps us to notice features of the experience that, otherwise, we were unable to notice (e.g. that the experience of sexual harassment relates to power and gender-related oppression). This insight not only leads to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, but might influence the very experience as well. For example, learning that one's experience is an experience of sexual harassment that is against the law might reinforce one's anger and outrage and add the sense that these feelings are justified. Therefore, just as the phenomenal concepts help finding the novel public concept, the latter one can influence the phenomenal concepts of the experience. Moreover, even if the novel public concept is a concept of an experience (rather than of an action), one might continue using the phenomenal concept when thinking about the experience. One reason for using the phenomenal concept is that it captures in a special way the phenomenal aspects of the experience that every public concept has to leave out.¹²

III.1 Does the model assign the burden to the victims?

At this point, one might object that the role this model assigns to experiences precludes the dominant group from developing the public target concepts. Therefore, in some sense, it relieves the burden of resolving hermeneutical injustice from the dominant group and puts it instead onto the victims. It is important to clarify why this is not the case.

The proposed model is *one* model of how to close the conceptual gap in hermeneutical injustice. I do not claim that it is the *only* model of how to succeed in this aim. But given the structural injustice in our society, the victims of hermeneutical injustice will often find themselves in a situation in which the dominant group does not care about their experiences. The proposed model then is one that ascribes hermeneutical resources and a way to alleviate their predicament to the victims, given that the dominant group does not care.

Furthermore, if members of the dominant group cared about closing the conceptual gap, then the key idea of my proposal—to start with phenomenal

¹¹ The public concept can deepen our understanding of *other* experiences as well. Consider someone who has not experienced sexual harassment oneself. For this person, the public concept of 'sexual harassment' can help to direct the attention to the world in a particular way, to notice instances of sexual harassment, and to better understand the experience of outrage when witnessing sexual harassment. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

¹² One might think that full understanding of the target experience requires the possession of *both* the novel public concept and the phenomenal concept. As Fricker (2007) shows, without the public concept, one does not fully understand the target experience. Plausibly, without a phenomenal concept that highlights the experience's phenomenal character, a *full* understanding is not possible either. For the lack of space, I leave the task of analysing in detail the conditions for a full understanding of the experiences in hermeneutical injustice to another paper.

concepts to generate a novel public concept—would not preclude them from participating in this process. Let me explain.

Being unable to have the relevant experience entails the failure to gain a phenomenal concept of it, but it does not imply that no phenomenal conceptualization of the target experience is possible. This can be illustrated by using Cath's (2019) insightful distinction of various grades of knowledge of what an experience is like (KoE). On the *Gold-standard KoE*, a subject knows what an experience is like 'in a phenomenal way in the sense that her concept of that way originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of her own experiences' (2019: 16). In contrast, on the *Silver-standard KoE* a subject knows what an experience is like 'in a phenomenal way in the sense that her concept of that way originated in acts of directly attending to the phenomenal properties of her own experiences distinct from, but relevantly similar to, the [target] experience [...] which she has not had' (2019: 16). *Silver-standard KoE* might be achieved not only by relying on similar experiences, but also by trying to take the victim's perspective by employing imaginative capacities.¹³ Finally, on the *Bronze-standard KoE*, the subject knows what an experience is like in a purely descriptive, non-phenomenal way.

Adopting this distinction, we can say that members of the dominant group cannot acquire *Gold-standard KoE* of the target experience, but they can still gain *Silver-standard KoE* by using phenomenal concepts of similar experiences that facilitate some understanding of the target experience.¹⁴ Plausibly, understanding comes in degrees and a *full* understanding of the experience might require also having a pure phenomenal concept of it. However, knowing similar experiences such as, e.g. experiences of unease, intimidation, or threat and employing imaginative capacities can help to *partly* understand the experience of sexual harassment. This partial understanding should suffice to see that the target experience is harmful and that we have a moral obligation to prevent such experience.

Let me illustrate the possibility of partial understanding by considering the (reverse) case in which the dominant group shares experiences that the marginalized group cannot have; for example, the visual experience of men looking in a particular way at a woman's body. For women, it is of interest to understand this particular experience, since grasping the predatory male gaze might help them to act in ways that prevent potential harm. Let me emphasize

¹³ For example, Kind (2020) argues that via 'imaginative scaffolding'—a process that draws upon past experiences and builds from them by combining, adding, or subtracting—one can imaginatively access an experience one has not had.

¹⁴ Depending on the target experience, phenomenal concepts in the vicinity will be easier or harder to find. Experiences that are crucially tied to the societal situatedness of the experiencing subject might turn out to be hard cases. But even in these cases, there are other conceptual frameworks and tools available that enable an understanding of the experience. For example, one might combine nearby phenomenal concepts with functional concepts to gain insight about experiences that depend on situatedness.

that women do not have any ethical obligation to understand this male gaze and should not have to shoulder the burden of trying to understand the perspective of a potential aggressor. However, the gendered power asymmetries in our society are such that women might find themselves forced to make the effort to acquire the relevant hermeneutical resources to protect themselves and others, and, I think, succeed in this attempt.¹⁵ Let me note that the capacity to grasp the male perspective on women's bodies is mostly the result of being constantly exposed to images in advertisements, movies, artworks, etc. that reflect this perspective. However, there are circumstances that require deliberately attending to and grasping the perspective of the dominant group. Consider the situation of a rape victim that testifies in court: If she grasps the male perspective, then she might, for example, expect male jurors to display 'himpathy' (Manne 2018: 196) with regard to the aggressor and prepare herself for this. Thus, the deliberate attempt of women to understand the male perspective and experience is a further possibility, though presumably not the main source of this capacity.

This reverse case highlights an important point: while it can be an advantage for members of a marginalized group to make sense of some experiences of the dominant group (in particular, of those experiences that involve the members of the marginalized group), the reverse does not hold. As Pohlhaus points out, 'it is not in the immediate interest of the dominantly situated to acquire and maintain epistemic resources calibrated to the marginally experienced world, since doing so moves epistemic power away from dominant situatedness and can make clearer the injustice that maintains dominant privilege' (2012: 721). For example, the lack of the concept of 'sexual harassment' enabled the harassers to conceptualize their behaviours as 'flirting' and, hence, the moral wrongness of the action was not made salient.

What is important for the present purpose is that the proposed model does not pose a *general* obstacle for the dominant group to phenomenally grasp—at least, partly—the experiences of the victims of hermeneutical injustice. In Cath's terminology, members of the dominant group could gain *Silver-standard and Bronze-standard knowledge* of what the experience is like. Even if some ways to conceptualize and fully grasp an experience are precluded for those who do not share the experience, there are still other ways available to hermeneutically approach the target experience. These ways of understanding should suffice to motivate the powerful to change the predicament of the victims. Accordingly, the main obstacle is not found in the inability of the powerful to grasp the target experience but rather in the lack of interest in understanding the experiences of members of marginalized groups.

¹⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

III.2 Closing the conceptual gap

Let me summarize the results of my analysis so far: The conceptual gap in hermeneutical injustice is closed when a novel public concept is generated. On the way towards closing this gap, there are variants of hermeneutical resources available that help to make the target phenomenon intelligible.

Initially, one might only be able to use a *pure* phenomenal concept to make the experience (partly) intelligible to *oneself*. The pure phenomenal concept highlights what the experience is like, and thereby makes one essential aspect (even if not all aspects) of the experience intelligible. In a succeeding step, one might be able to use a *CR-phenomenal concept* to make the experience intelligible to oneself *and* to those who share the predicament. This CR-phenomenal concept ties the experience to its external *causes*, e.g. the behaviour of the harasser. Finally, one might use the novel *public* concept to fully understand the nature of the target phenomenon, to communicate it to other victims, and to educate members of the dominant group who cannot undergo the relevant experience. With the public concept, we can now refer to a socially recognized phenomenon that goes beyond individual experiences. While the phenomenal concepts of the victims (and the phenomenal concepts involved in Silver-standard KoE) capture the phenomenal character of the target experience and thereby help in the search for the public concept, only the public concept captures the external causes, the situatedness of the victim, and the normative significance of the phenomenon.¹⁶ Thus, it is the public concept that eventually closes the conceptual gap in hermeneutical injustice.

Let me note that even when the conceptual gap is closed by a novel public concept, this does not entail that everyone possessing this concept fully understands the target phenomenon. In particular, members of the dominant group might have difficulties fully grasping the novel concept.¹⁷ In such cases, trying to understand the victims' experiences also via Silver-standard KoE will prove helpful. Thus, even once the conceptual gap is closed, a phenomenal conceptualization of the victims' experiences can be a powerful tool for better understanding the target phenomenon.

Let me emphasize again that in proposing this model, the last thing I want to do is to put the burden of generating novel concepts solely onto the victims of hermeneutical injustice. It is a collective duty of the whole society to care about the experiences of each of its members and to put effort into understanding the victims' experiences and to develop hermeneutical resources to make

¹⁶ I do not take this list to be exhaustive. Presumably, there exist other hermeneutical resources that help understand the target phenomenon. However, since the goal of this paper is to provide a model of how victims of hermeneutical injustice can use the resources they already have in their quest for a novel public concept, I leave the task of elaborating on further variants to another paper.

¹⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this.

them intelligible. In particular, the powerful should make the effort to try to understand the experiences of members of marginalized groups by developing a ‘hermeneutical sensibility’ (Medina 2013: 99) and developing the ‘virtue of hermeneutical justice’ (Fricker 2007: 173). Furthermore, having the power and resources, the powerful could, for example, enable consciousness-raising activities and provide opportunities for the victims to speak-up. Giving the victims a voice is essential, since arguably only the victims can fully grasp the experience by having also phenomenal concepts of it. Unfortunately, as it stands, structural injustice still creates situations in which the victims are on their own to start this process. If so, besides the obvious efforts we all should make towards a more just and equal society—a model is helpful that indicates how the victims could alleviate hermeneutical injustice. The analysis above aimed at providing such a model.¹⁸

IV. OBSTACLES TO FULLY DISSOLVING HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE

Fricker (2007, 2013) holds that at the core of hermeneutical injustice lies a conceptual lacuna. I agree that the conceptual gap is key to hermeneutical injustice, and I proposed a way of filling this gap that highlights the importance of the victims’ experiences. Unfortunately, in the process of dissolving hermeneutical injustice, we face several obstacles. In particular, unjust social conditions might inhibit the very first step of the process, namely to acquire the relevant phenomenal concepts, the second step of coining the novel public concept, and the third, final step, which includes the application of the novel concept by the victims as well as the acknowledgement of the concept by the powerful.

Let me start with the obstacles faced at the first step of *acquiring* phenomenal concepts. Due to their social marginalization, the victims’ self-trust might be weakened, and they might even doubt whether their experiences are worth being focused upon. Moreover, they might see their struggling to articulate the experience as indicating that either the phenomenon is not real or that they simply lack ‘the ability to make sense of the world’ (Fricker 2007: 163). The empowerment of marginalized groups to focus on and value their experiences,

¹⁸ The structural injustice might be such that, in some cases, following the proposed model would be an additional burden for the victims. As Medina points out, sometimes it might come at a high cost to members of the marginalized group to communicate their experiences to the powerful. For example, in the US culture, Black women often were stigmatized as being sexually immoral. Hence, ‘to protect others and to protect themselves, (...) traditionally, black women reserved their discussion of sexuality to the confines of their own community, refusing to engage communicatively with other publics on sexual matters’ (2013: 102). Importantly, to fully establish hermeneutical justice, not only individual efforts but also structural changes are needed (see Langton 2010).

even when they have the feeling of not fully grasping the phenomenon, will have a positive effect at this stage of the process. Talking about these experiences with those who share the predicament is a further decisive step. Speak-outs and consciousness-raising exercises prove helpful, as the development of the concept of ‘sexual harassment’ shows. Recognizing that others share the kind of experience will help in taking the experience more seriously and will strengthen the self-trust of the victims. At this point, even if the victims are excluded from the social meaning production in the relevant society, they can be encouraged to generate new concepts within their community: first, a CR-phenomenal concept and, eventually, a novel public concept. As Langton points out, not only individual efforts but also structural remedies are needed to reach this aim: ‘For pioneer feminists, it was something structural that caused scales to fall from eyes: altering the structure of women’s environment to create consciousness-raising groups, pooling common experiences about, for example, harassment; brain-storming a name to match the common experience; creating the social—and let’s not forget, legal—momentum to make the name stick, and to make actionable the behaviour denoted by the name’ (2010, 463).

Moreover, structural injustice might also block early attempts to *convey* the experiences to others. For example, Carel & Kidd emphasize in their discussion of epistemic injustice in healthcare that ‘ill persons typically have non-dominant hermeneutical resources that are not recognized and respected by the epistemically dominant profession, but which are essential to the understanding of the illness’ (2017: 342). An obvious candidate for such non-dominant hermeneutical resources that are essential to understand the target experience are phenomenal concepts or concepts tied to phenomenal concepts. Since the content of phenomenal concepts is hard to express linguistically, an insensitive hearer might wrongly interpret the difficulties of conveying the experience as a sign that the experience is not real or not worth considering. Accordingly, as Medina points out, all members of the society should aim at ‘a hermeneutical sensibility with respect to embryonic and inchoate attempts at communicating about experiences that do not yet have standard formulations’ (2013: 99).¹⁹

A further obstacle to fully dissolving hermeneutical injustice is found in failures to *apply* the target concept on the relevant occasions. For example, Simion (2019) argues that not a failure in concept possession but rather a failure in concept application, brought about by unjust social conditions, is essential to hermeneutical injustice. This failure can be the result of the lack of the target concept, of not being in the position to gain the concept, or of not being able to apply it on particular occasions. (On her view, the failure in

¹⁹ Fricker argues that hearers should aim at the virtue of hermeneutical justice, viz ‘an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one’s interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to being a nonsense or her being a fool but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources’ (2007: 169).

concept applications is a failure of the victim ‘to base her beliefs on available reasons to believe’ (2019: 10) and, thereby, it is an instance of distributive injustice.)

Similarly, Crerar (2016) discusses the injustice that results from being prevented to apply the target concept: certain *societal taboos*, such as the menstrual taboo that has been generated under conditions of marginalization of women. Discussing this taboo topic might elicit adverse reactions and comes at social cost. Accordingly, the menstrual taboo gives rise to hermeneutical injustice ‘where someone possesses the adequate conceptual framework but where these concepts and their potential hermeneutical benefits are disabled by the actions and responses of others in a significant number of communicative contexts. The relevant concepts are present, but they can’t be put to good hermeneutical effect’ (2016: 203). So, what is needed to resolve these instances of hermeneutical injustice is an ‘*expressively free environment* in which to put these concepts to work’ (2016: 205).²⁰

Finally, even once the novel public concept is coined and acquired by the victims, there are further challenges to fully dissolving hermeneutical injustice. It is one problem if the powerful are unaware of the conceptual gap due to not sharing the experiences and perspective of the victims. It is another problem if the powerful simply do not bother about the attempts of the victims to communicate their experiences and ignore the need for closing the conceptual gap. It is still another problem if the powerful disregard the novel public concept. This particularly hard challenge to dissolve hermeneutical injustice is captured by Pohlhaus’s (2012) insightful analysis of ‘willful hermeneutical ignorance’. Willful hermeneutical ignorance can take various forms, for example, hermeneutical neglect and counter-interpretations on the part of the powerful. The victims of hermeneutical injustice might be confronted with counter-interpretations of, for instance, sexual harassment as just flirting, showing romantic interest, or harmless sexual overtures. In the light of such counter-interpretations from the dominant perspective, the importance of phenomenal concepts becomes clear. Phenomenal concepts conceptualize the experience from the perspective of the victims, and, therefore, are an excellent basis for developing a novel public concept that adequately captures the target phenomenon.

The insightful analyses of failures of concept-application and acknowledgment that we find in the literature point towards hermeneutical injustice as

²⁰ Moreover, even once the target concepts are widely acknowledged, the established hermeneutical justice might be threatened again by certain developments. As Anderson (2017) argues, the post-racialist ideal of erasing race talk would lead ‘us into falsely believing we’ve undone the significance of race in decision-making, while in reality we’ve simply obscured the presence of race still at work in our everyday practices. Thus, it is not difficult to see that creating such a lacuna would result in the production of hermeneutical gaps that in turn give rise to hermeneutical injustices’ (2017: 145). Thus, hermeneutical injustice can result also from the suppression of widely acknowledged concepts.

a broader phenomenon that can take various forms, besides conceptual lacunae. Does the proposed account offer also some help in overcoming these other forms of hermeneutical injustice? Let me first note that developing the relevant public concepts is a *necessary* step towards hermeneutical justice. Moreover, developing novel public concepts *on the basis of the phenomenal concepts* of the experiences of the victims can also help mitigate hermeneutical injustice that manifests itself as failures of concept acquisition, application, and acknowledgement.

Taking one's experiences seriously, attending to them, and thinking about them in terms of phenomenal concepts prepares the ground for searching for and *acquiring* the public concept. The phenomenal conceptualization of the target experience motivates the search for a public concept and, if it already exists, thereby facilitates its acquisition. Moreover, developing a public concept out of a phenomenal concept and the deeper reflection that comes with this process can foster knowledge of how *to use and apply* the concept on the relevant occasions. Even if the usage is hindered on some occasions due to unjust power relations, one can still know how to use the concept within one's group. Finally, phenomenal concepts might also help in cases where the powerful refuse to acknowledge the public concept. Consider an instance of willful hermeneutical ignorance that takes the form of counter-interpretations. Since phenomenal concepts highlight essential aspects of the target experience that are left out by the counter-interpretation, they expose the inadequacy of the counter-interpretation and, thereby, emphasize the merits of the novel concept.

As long as structural injustice exists, the attempts to fully dissolve hermeneutical injustice may be limited because of the obstacles mentioned. As we have seen, the harm in the social-epistemic interaction is not confined to disinterest in developing adequate hermeneutical resources—even once these resources are coined and available, victims may continue to suffer epistemic injustice. To fully dissolve hermeneutical injustice, a lot needs to change. The whole society has to make the effort to grasp, enable the application of, and use the relevant concepts to mitigate the injustice. Until this social change happens, the proposed model provides a crucial step towards hermeneutical justice insofar as it shows how to narrow the conceptual gap that lies at the heart of most instances of hermeneutical injustice.

V. CONCLUSION

I offered a model of how to close the conceptual gap in hermeneutical injustice. This model is based on taking the experiences of members of marginalized social groups seriously and, thus, assigns these experiences the crucial role they deserve. But the model is not confined to an analysis of the subjective realm

of the victims. It also reveals how we can take the steps from a subjective, phenomenal conceptualization of experiences to an objective, public concept of the target phenomenon that, in principle, is graspable and deployable by everyone. For hermeneutical injustice to vanish, closing the conceptual gap by generating novel public concepts is necessary.

Unfortunately, closing the conceptual gap might not be sufficient. The acknowledgement and reception of the novel concept within the whole society is needed as well as social conditions that enable the victims to gain and apply the concept on the relevant occasions. But we must start our efforts to mitigate hermeneutical injustice somewhere. Taking the experiences of members of marginalized groups seriously is a good starting point. Conceptualizing and communicating these experiences in various ways and thereby finding novel public concepts are key steps towards mitigating hermeneutical injustice. The proposed model shows one way of how these key steps can be taken.

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