Expanding Testimonial Injustice
Beyond Externalism and the Deficiency View

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Introduction

Our beliefs, whether true or false, can undoubtedly be influenced by our social environment. Power relations and social oppression can have a great impact on our beliefs, for example through knowledge exchange with other agents via testimony or scientific research, as it has been extensively discussed.[1] What has been seldom discussed in the literature are epistemic injustices in situations that do not directly involve multiple agents. That is, how our social environment impacts the attitude we maintain toward our own beliefs.

In this essay, I argue that an important way in which our attitudes toward our beliefs are impacted by the social environment is instantiated in cases where a subject has diminished credence in her reliability because of being stereotyped, and some of her beliefs and/or memories are modified consequently. I call such cases self-deficit of credibility due to stereotypes (henceforth SDCS) and I argue that it is crucial to pay attention to them.[2] This short chapter will assess the following question: *do we need a positive account of epistemic injustice*. The answer, to my view, is yes. I will thus

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1   For the former, see e.g. Daukas, Nancy: Epistemic Trust and Social Location, in: Episteme, 3 (2006) 1–2, 109–124; Dotson, Kristie: Tracking Epistemic Violence. Tracking Practices of Silencing, in: Hypatia, 26 (2011), 236–257; Fricker, Miranda: Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing, Oxford 2007. For the latter, see e.g. Longino, Helen: The Fate of Knowledge, Princeton 2002.

2   Note that this phenomenon goes further than a lack of self-trust (for discussions of epistemic injustice and self-trust, see e.g., El Kassar, Nadja: The Powers of Individual and Collective Intellectual Self-Trust in Dealing with Epistemic Injustice, in: Social Epistemology 35 (2021) 2, 197–209, or Leefmann, Jon: Social Exclusion, Epistemic Injustice and Intellectual Self-Trust, in: Social Epistemology, 36 (2022) 1, 117–127.). The subject experiencing SDCS is not merely lacking confidence in her capacity: she is 'self-gaslighting' herself (Dandelet, Sophia: Epistemic Coercion, in: Ethics,131 (2021), 489–510), that is, she might be deceiving herself to some extent. This particular aspect sets the originality of SDCS and one of its philosophical interests since it is unclear if one can be said to deceive oneself.

motivate the need for such an account by showing that some cases remain unaccounted for by existent theories and that a lot is at stake. The argument supporting this answer is the following:

- (a) SDCS instantiates a way in which our social environment impacts our attitude toward our beliefs and memories.
- (b) It cannot be accounted for by existent literature: it calls for the definition of a novel concept: epistemic subjection. Epistemic subjection occurs when a subject S is being, unreliable, unreasonable, or irrational, because of power relations.
- (c) Being unreliable, unreasonable, or irrational because of power relations is equivalent to being undermined in one's capacities as a knower.

Therefore, epistemic subjection is a kind of epistemic injustice.

Here, I first clarify SDCS. Then I specify the *desiderata* for a proper account of SDCS and motivate the need for a novel account. Finally, I discuss what is at stake in studying SDCS.

What is SDCS?

The case I aim to assess is the self-deficit of credibility due to stereotypes or SDCS. Note that it is distinct from testimonial smothering[3], or epistemic trustworthiness[4], since these only apply in the context of information exchange involving more than one agent, while SDCS does not involve any kind of information *exchange*. Existent theories cannot account for SDCS. This is because they lack y, call this y "epistemic subjection," to account properly for all its features. Consider the following case, introduced by Dandelet[5]:

The Beach Case: Imagine a subject S who has been the victim of an event E, a sexual assault. After E, she holds a memory including the belief that she has been sexually assaulted (P). But then, she begins to doubt her own memory and to question P. She does that because she lives in a sexist environment, and in such a sexist environment women are commonly stereotyped as not trustworthy when reporting sexual assaults. She starts thinking that she might have misperceived E, or that she might misremember E. Eventually, she holds a memory different from E and the belief that she has not been sexually assaulted (¬P).

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3   Dotson: Tracking Epistemic Violence.
4   Daukas: Epistemic Trust and Social Location.
5   Dandelet: Epistemic Coercion.

Dandelet defends that S's belief change is due to a reasonable elevation of S's epistemic standards. She indeed argues that S raises the norms by which she assesses her belief, e.g., she casts doubt on the reliability of her memory to meet the (alleged) epistemic standards of her community. Those standards are qualified as unfair by Dandelet: they are caused by social injustice and unjust stereotypes. Still, she holds the view that S is acting *reasonably*, namely, that being willing to meet the epistemic standards of one's community is reasonable. She states that the epistemic community is *coercing* S to raise her epistemic standards, thus responsible for the misleading memory. Dandelet then sets the concept of epistemic coercion.[6]

This case perfectly exemplifies the complex phenomenon of SDCS. Although I share with Dandelet a great interest in the mentioned phenomenon, I do not however subscribe to all of her conclusions. She claims that S is reasonable, but it is unclear how she supports that claim. S is now holding a false and *a priori* unjustified belief, which should be enough to question its reasonableness. This project aims to push further this inquiry. I claim that it is possible to consider S both unreasonable and suffering an unfair situation, by defending that she is the victim of some kind of epistemic injustice, namely, epistemic subjection.

Another important feature of SDCS is the *stereotype*. A stereotype is defined by Puddifoot as a "social attitude that associates members of some social group more strongly than others with certain trait(s)."[7] In SDCS, it seems that S is holding the attitude of associating *herself* with some social group and certain social traits. The question of whether a self-deficit of credibility can be caused by something else than a stereotype is an important one. Indeed, there are surely such cases, and their distinction with SDCS should be done. However, these are not the cases I focus on. This essay is dedicated to motivating an account for a *systematic* kind of epistemic injustice, and not incidental epistemic wrongs, as distinguished by Fricker.[8]

The justification for premise (a) is as follows: There are cases in which a subject's attitude toward her beliefs and memories is influenced by stereotypes. This results in a self-deficit of credibility due to stereotypes. Therefore, there are SDCS.

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6   The term 'coercion' has been criticized by Sally Haslanger in an online discussion of Dandelet's paper. She argues that coercion refers to 'a response to an action', i.e to repress that action, and is thus not right here. She proposes the term 'subjection' in reference to the unfairness of power's relation's normativity developed by among others Michel Foucault (Foucault, Michel: Surveiller et Punir, Paris 1975.). The term subjection indeed allows conceiving power as not merely repressive but productive, which seems to be the case in SDCS. Dandelet fully agrees and seems ready to change her concept's name; so do I. For more on the online discussion, see https://peasoup.deptcpanel.princeton.edu/2021/04/ethics-article-discussion-forum-sophia-dandelet-epistemic-coercion/ (09/04/2024).

7   Puddifoot, Katherine: How Stereotypes Deceive Us, Oxford 2021, 3.

8   Fricker: Epistemic Injustice, 27.

Now that we have a better understanding of what SDCS is, and why it is important to push further its inquiry, let us move to the next point, that is to determine what is required to account for SDCS and that no existent theory can do so.

What is required to explain SDCS?

Epistemic injustice theory and epistemology of stereotypes which may in principle be applicable to SDCS fall short. Indeed, the field of social epistemology has not consistently discussed the kind of case that SDCS instantiates. More or less close cases have been sporadically introduced, such as "doxastic coercion,"[9] "false confessions," [10] or "anticipatory epistemic injustice,"[11] First, no systematic discussion of those cases has been held, which seems yet necessary. Second, while those cases share features with each other and with SDCS, they are not analogous. A distinction is required, which will provide us with some elements to work toward the explanatory *desiderata* for SDCS.

The literature on testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice (e.g., Fricker 2007) is also relevant to that question. Indeed, I suggest that some features are shared between classical cases of epistemic injustices and SDCS; however, a distinction would again be necessary. As I mentioned above, SDCS is neither about testimony nor collective hermeneutic resources. It thus cannot be accounted for by those theories.

An important point in SDCS concerns whether S is epistemically virtuous or not. We have already evoked in the first section that the "reasonable" aspect of S's behavior, alleged by Dandelet, is to be discussed. However, this point goes further than that. It will be required to specify whether S is *justified*, both in her original memories and beliefs (P) and her modified ones (¬P). We can already see that she might be justified in P since we are usually justified in believing our memories and the beliefs formed upon them. Although following Dandelet, it would seem that S is also justified in ¬P, since she is, in her words, *reasonable*. There is then an intrinsic tension here: can one be justified in believing both P and ¬P? Is SDCS an instance of epistemic *akrasia*?[12] A proper explanation of SDCS requires to answer those questions.

The epistemology of stereotypes, with the work of e.g., Puddifoot, will be a useful resource for understanding SDCS. In the Beach Case, a stereotype is involved in S's

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9   McMyler, Benjamin: Doxastic coercion, in: Philosophical Quarterly 61 (2011) 244, 537–557.

10   Lackey, Jennifer: False Confessions and Testimonial Injustice, in: J. CRIM. L. and CRIMINOLOGY 43 (2021).

11   Lee, J. Y.: Anticipatory Epistemic Injustice, in: Social Epistemology, 35 (2021) 6, 564–576.

12   A state of epistemic akrasia is a state where you believe you ought not to hold a belief, but you hold it anyway. See e.g., Owens, David: Epistemic Akrasia, in: The Monist 85 (2002) 3, 381–397.

process of belief acquisition. However, it also seems that she is the first (and maybe only) victim of holding such an attitude. Puddifoot claims that stereotypes deceive us in many ways. It is thus necessary to figure out if, in SDCS, someone is deceiving someone (themselves), and how.

This point leads us to the literature about doxastic voluntarism and pragmatic encroachment. The question of whether S is *voluntarily*, *unconsciously*, or *pragmatically* changing her beliefs and memories is indeed central. Ultimately, what agency has S, if she is, as Dandelet suggested, *coerced*? Does *someone else* have the agency to modify S's beliefs and memories? These questions need a proper explanation, and the mentioned literature will contribute to it.

The question of the subject's agency in SDCS could benefit the study of the concept of *epistemic innocence* set by Lisa Bortolotti.[13] A belief is epistemically innocent if it is (i) epistemically irrational, (ii) has epistemic benefits for the subject and (iii) there is no alternative.[14] SDCS is (i) to be determined whether it is rational or not, (ii) has epistemic benefits for the subject and (iii) there is no alternative; it is thus so far a good candidate to be qualified as epistemically innocent. However, the very fact that we can also qualify this phenomenon as an epistemic injustice, as I will argue, implies that someone is to be held responsible for harming someone else. There is thus a tension between the innocence of the belief and the blame for the injustice. Moreover, the rationality alleged by Dandelet seems to be conflictual with the irrationality discussed by Bortolotti; it is unclear if they appeal to the same idea of "rationality," and it might be useful to clarify that point.

The justification for the premise (b) is as follows:

SDCS shares features with existent concepts in the literature. However, no existent concepts in the literature can explain all the features of SDCS. Therefore, SDCS requires a new concept to explain that epistemic practice can be subjected to power relations, namely, epistemic subjection. Epistemic subjection occurs when a subject S is being, unreliable, unreasonable, or irrational, because of power relations.

Now, we can see that our explanatory path has encountered ethics at several points, which leads us to the third and last point of the hypothesis.

Is SDCS an epistemic injustice?

As suggested above, SDCS has a highly ethical dimension. Is S *wronged*? If so, by whom, and how? I suggest that S is being wronged and that she might be wronged in a particular way. I argue that S is wronged *in her capacity as a knower*, that is, her agency to acquire (and maintain) true beliefs is undermined. S is indeed missing a

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13   Bortolotti, Lisa: The Epistemic Innocence of Irrational Belief, Oxford 2020.
14   Ibid., 26.

true belief (P), due to an unfair stereotype against her. But, and that is an especially interesting feature of SDCS, S is also *producing a false belief* (¬P). In a sense, she is doubly wronged: she is first unfairly missing knowledge, which constitutes an epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), but she is also unfairly put in a position where she produces false beliefs.

Such a feature goes beyond epistemic injustice's classical framework. However, being put in a position to produce more false beliefs than we would have otherwise surely constitutes an undermining of one's capacity *qua* knower. This will constitute the central feature of epistemic subjection, by reversing the classical paradigm of epistemic injustice that assesses *deficit* of knowledge.[15] The Foucauldian idea of subjection allows thinking of power not as merely repressive but also positive, creating norms and behaviors. It will be argued, using SDCS as a central case, that epistemic practices can be *subjected* to power relations.

Moreover, S's capacity to acquire and maintain accurate memories is also threatened, which will allow us to explore the possibility of a kind of *mnemic injustice* that has not been assessed by Puddifoot yet[16].

The justification for premise (c) is as follows: SDCS undermines S's capacity *qua* knower. Undermining one's capacity *qua* knower is an epistemic injustice. Therefore, SDCS is an epistemic injustice.

What is at stake?

I have thus demonstrated that epistemic subjection exists as a kind of epistemic injustice and that it cannot be explained by the existent literature. As evoked in the previous section, the most substantial benefit of studying epistemic subjection would be the expansion of the epistemic injustice's framework by allowing it to account for the positive exercise of power in epistemic practices, by opening the possibility of the production of false belief to count as epistemic injustice. The concept of epistemic subjection is needed to do this.

A secondary, but not so trivial benefit is the reinforcement of links between ethics, epistemology, and the philosophy of memory by developing the idea that ethics, as it has been for epistemology, might be a useful resource to understand memory. SDCS illustrates that it is possible to misremember due to power relations

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15   Such a move has been made by Arianna Falbo in: Falbo, Arianna: Hermeneutical Injustice. Distortion and Conceptual Aptness, in: Hypatia 37 (2022) 2, 343–363, to conceptualize a positive form of hermeneutical injustice. She argues that the profusion of some hermeneutical resources and the way we use them can also create hermeneutical injustice.

16   Puddifoot 2021; Puddifoot, Katherine: Mnemonic Injustice, in: Wright, Stephen, and Goldberg, Sanford (eds.): Memory and Testimony: New Essays in Epistemology, Wright, Stephen/ Goldberg, Sanford (eds.), Oxford forthcoming.

and stereotypes. This question might urge philosophers of memory to reconsider their subject and her alleged social location. To illustrate this proposition, recall that it is highly common in the philosophy of memory to use psychiatric subjects as cases; however, I suggest that such subjects are highly susceptible to epistemic subjection.

Last, but not least, it remains unclear if the theories mentioned in this chapter and epistemic subjection are fully compatible. This study might reveal high incompatibilities between epistemic subjection and existent theories, which might urge these philosophers to reconsider certain aspects of their theories. To illustrate this proposition, recall that Puddifoot's epistemology of stereotype proposes to use an evaluative dispositionalism to assess how we use stereotypes to acquire belief. However, she does so in the context of acquiring belief by stereotyping *someone else*, and not oneself. Her theory seems thus too narrow to account for SDCS, while SDCS is a way to acquire belief involving stereotypes.

The mentioned points show that solving this issue will require interaction with several debates that are found at the intersection of epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of mind. The conceptual engineering of a notion such as epistemic subjection will surely help create new perspectives on those subjects and might provide arguments to help push further their inquiry.

To conclude, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the social importance of the topic, and the substantial benefits that could be drawn from such research. Epistemic injustices constitute great harm, and so is subjection. Epistemic subjection needs to be understood, so we can change our epistemic practices to create fair epistemic environments.[17]