

***Reply to José Medina***

**Laura Beeby, California State University at Fullerton**

In “Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Responsibilities”, José Medina suggests some refinements to Miranda Fricker’s notion of hermeneutical injustice. As Medina sees it, Fricker “pays insufficient attention to the interactive and performative dimension of hermeneutical injustice, which is treated [by Fricker] mainly as a *semantic* phenomenon concerning the intelligibility of experiential contents”.<sup>1</sup> While Fricker develops the idea of hermeneutical injustice as “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding”<sup>2</sup>, Medina wants us to consider the thought that the notion of a collective understanding may be insufficiently complex to capture the social dynamics present in so many of our communicative exchanges. I think Medina is right to point out some difficulties presented by the idea of a collective understanding. However, I don’t think these difficulties necessarily preclude us from making any use of the idea at all.

First, let’s look at some background to the idea of a collective understanding. In her account of hermeneutical injustice, Miranda Fricker draws our attention to one disadvantage stemming from women’s situation within an unjustly structured society. This particular disadvantage has to do with something that Fricker calls ‘social power’ and its influence on what she calls ‘collective forms of social understanding’.

One way of taking the epistemological suggestion that social power has an unfair impact on collective forms of social understanding is to think of our shared understandings as reflecting the perspectives of different social groups, and to entertain the idea that relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources so that the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible.<sup>3</sup>

It seems reasonable to take Fricker as suggesting here that different social groups each contribute their perspective on various concepts like gender roles, workplace conventions, racial stereotypes, and other socially constructed concepts to a communal resource, which is then used by society at large as a tool to understand and interpret various situations and experiences relevant to those concepts. Because some social groups have more power (social, economic, etc.) than others, these powerful groups will not only contribute more information to the communal resource (a situation which sets conditions for later ‘eruptions’<sup>4</sup> of hermeneutical injustice), but they will also find it

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<sup>1</sup> Medina (2012), 210, original emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Fricker (2007), 155.

<sup>3</sup> Fricker (2007), 148.

<sup>4</sup> Fricker’s (2007) term, 159.

easier to use the resource when they need to understand some aspect of their social experience. This is presumably because powerful groups and individuals have more authority over social conventions and over which perspectives shape our norms, and therefore are also able to relate to the communal resource more easily since it contains familiar materials. Over time, the communal resource will come to reflect the perspective of powerful groups more than that of less powerful groups. Less powerful groups will have more and more difficulty understanding their own social experiences because they, and the community at large, lack the resources that are supposed to help them form such understandings. This is a rough sketch of the situation that Fricker suggests is both present in our society today and responsible for hermeneutical injustice.

Fricker illustrates the consequences of this situation with an example about the origins of the term 'sexual harassment'. A woman named Carmita Wood worked for a Cornell University in the early 1970s, at a time when significant numbers of women had not been members of 'the professions' long enough for us to develop a nuanced understanding of professional gender relations.<sup>5</sup> At a time when we had no concept of what sexual harassment was, Carmita Wood's boss made unwanted sexual advances to her in their place of work. Carmita did everything she could to avoid or alleviate the situation before succumbing to stress and trauma and quitting her job. Her subsequent claim for unemployment insurance was denied because she could not name or describe to her (or anyone else's) satisfaction the reason for her unemployment. This moment, the moment when Carmita struggled and failed to find words to describe her experience, was the point when she became a victim of hermeneutical injustice. She could not find words to describe her experience because that experience, one we now understand as an instance of sexual harassment, was "obscured from collective understanding".<sup>6</sup>

Medina builds on Fricker's work on hermeneutical injustice by situating it in the framework of polyphonic contextualism. Polyphonic contextualism is Medina's way of paying attention to the range of dynamics present in our communicative practices. He is troubled by Fricker's narrow focus on the intelligibility of certain social experiences, and he advocates a broad focus on communicative dynamics across different social contexts.

But the problem remains in the ambiguity of the expression "the *intelligibility* of experience" as a semantic category detached from particular communicative dynamics. The multifaceted aspects of the *struggles to make sense* of one's experiences to oneself, to those who undergo similar experiences, and to other groups are obscured by simply talking about the intelligibility or unintelligibility of experience without specifying to whom, in what communicative context and with what dynamic...<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fricker (2007) cites journalism, politics, academia, and the law as examples of 'the professions'. See page 152.

<sup>6</sup> Brownmiller (1990), 180-181, as cited by Fricker (2007), 149-150.

<sup>7</sup> Medina (2012), 208, original emphasis.

In other words, an understanding of our experiences is not either obscured from or available to collective understanding. Instead, there are degrees and shades of understanding and intelligibility that come through different communicative dynamics. What's more, it is unhelpful to think of this struggle as happening between an individual and society. Instead, the struggle happens most often between individuals or groups of people who communicate with each other for various reasons and in various contexts. These particular reasons and contexts will do more to shape the success of the conversation than any collective understanding stemming from a collective interpretive resource. Also, Medina is careful to point out, social power may turn out to be more of an obstacle to understanding one's experiences than a help, as in the case of white ignorance.<sup>8</sup> In the end, the crucially important thing for Medina is that we are trying to make ourselves intelligible to someone in particular, not to society in general. And if this is the case, a collective understanding will be less important than a localized one.

In addition to this focus on the particularities of our listeners, Medina challenges Fricker to account for all of the smaller steps that we take on the way to intelligibility. Fricker's theory is (perhaps fairly) characterized here as an all-or-nothing affair: either we all share the same cognitive deficit due to the gaps in our collective interpretive resources, or there is no gap and therefore no deficit or possibility of injustice. However, Medina claims that we can find ways of rendering an experience intelligible in some way while still remaining a victim of hermeneutical injustice. For example, it seems plausible that Carmita Wood may have fumbled towards some kind of limited understanding of her experience before she left her job and applied for unemployment insurance. This understanding would not have been as robust or easily communicable as the understanding that came after the creation of the term 'sexual harassment' and its attendant concept, but it seems plausible to call it an understanding nonetheless. This, then, is the advantage offered by polyphonic contextualism: with it, Medina can allow for the possibility of levels of intelligibility that are inextricably bound up with the social dynamics present between different speaker/listener pairings throughout the community.

Medina's most serious challenge to Fricker comes, then, in the form of a question:

But *whose* "collective understanding"? And *whose* "collective hermeneutical resource" (in the singular!)?<sup>9</sup>

It seems right that many of our experiences may be understood in degrees of intelligibility, and that we will struggle to articulate our experiences in different ways with different audiences. However, if we admit to these degrees then must we also change Fricker's picture of our collective hermeneutical resources? The resource as Fricker describes it does not allow for foggy half-articulations, nor for articulations more available to one audience than another. For Fricker, Carmita Wood and her harasser share the same cognitive deficit, regardless of whom they speak with about sexual harassment.

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<sup>8</sup> See Medina (2012), 212-214.

<sup>9</sup> Medina (2012), 210, original emphasis.

Given Medina's exploration of communicative dynamics and social power, this seems unlikely to be the best characterization of their experience. So must we abandon a collective interpretive resource in favor of a series of smaller localized resources? I suggest that one consequence of adopting polyphonic contextualism is that we will shift our discussion away from talk of interpretive resources and towards a context-based parsing of politically significant communication failures. Resources will cease to hold the significance that they do for Fricker. The interpretive resources of people only tangentially connected to a situation will not play a role in our analysis of communication failures; instead, we will be concerned almost entirely with localized power dynamics and communicative practices. It may not be the case that we must abandon a collective resource, or even that we must decide between a range of resource models. Instead, we might find ourselves moving away from resource talk altogether.

One consequence of this shift is that we lose a sense of shared responsibility for politically significant communication failure. Although Medina develops the idea that Fricker's understanding of hermeneutical injustice does not allow for agency and individual responsibility (for Fricker, hermeneutical injustice is a *purely structural notion*<sup>10</sup>), there is a sense for Fricker in which we all are responsible for the epistemic virtue and vice present in *our* social and political institutions. These structures may be more difficult to change than the hearts and minds of individual communicators, but they are nonetheless our institutions and structures. The responsibility to shape and improve them lies with each of us. If we no longer feel this sense of collective responsibility to society, then we are held only to standards of responsibility relative to each individual conversational context. And it is much easier to ignore the importance of an individual communication failure than it is to deny our part in shaping a shared resource accessible to sympathetic and unsympathetic listeners alike.

**Contact details: [laurabeebyis@googlemail.com](mailto:laurabeebyis@googlemail.com)**

## References

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<sup>10</sup> Fricker (2007), 159.