

A Problem for the Social Sciences: A Comment on James McCollum on Hermeneutical Injustice

Sandra Marshall, University of Stirling

In Miranda Fricker's own account of 'hermeneutical injustice' two features seem to be particularly salient: that hermeneutical injustice is to be understood as structural and as involving a failure of communicative *intelligibility*. As Elizabeth Anderson usefully puts it: "Hermeneutical injustice occurs when a society lacks the interpretive resources to make sense of important features of a speaker's experience ... Hermeneutical injustice is structural, because hearers are not at fault for not being able to *understand* [my emphasis] what the victims are saying" (2012, 166) What is argued here is that this is a very particular kind of wrong and one which not simply reducible to other kinds of injustice, nor, presumably, to other kinds of wrong. We should be clear then that simply having one's views, ideas, concerns or experiences ignored will not amount to hermeneutical injustice, but maybe, rather, a case of testimonial injustice. Or, it may not be any kind of injustice at all. So, if hermeneutical injustice is to be a useful tool for assessing the social sciences, and the applications of social scientific theories in trying to solve real world problems, as McCollum's paper argues that it may, then both the core features mentioned above need to be kept firmly in view.

The first thing to say is that the application of Fricker's idea to the broader context of policy and the social sciences, as McCollum proposes, looks entirely plausible. However, if it is to be effective rather more work needs to be done in fleshing out the nature of the structural aspect of hermeneutical injustice and the way these structures affect intelligibility. As it stands, Fricker's own characterisation of the idea of structure in play is rather minimalist. There are hints of a more developed characterisation in McCollum's argument but it is not always clear which of the different ways we might think of "structure" are in play at the various stages in the argument. In focusing on the activities of various international development agencies McCollum's argument seems to highlight what I shall very crudely call "organisational structures" which themselves structure the decisions made by such agencies. So one might see how it is that the internal organization of large, powerful bodies such as the IMF and central banks for instance, detrimentally affect the way they deal with some individuals and groups. As McCollum suggests, the interests of those who are dependant upon the operations of these large bodies are frequently (always?) subordinated, lost sight of, because there is no easy way in which the views of these groups or individuals can get into the picture. It is a familiar enough problem that bureaucratic procedures, not all of them unnecessary, can result in inadequate decisions producing absurd situations on the ground. What is not immediately obvious is that this sort of structural problem involves hermeneutical injustice.

Let us take a familiar kind of example, one mentioned in the paper itself: that of the unfortunate inhabitants of Kanyama, who had no real way of getting to the health clinic which was meant to serve them. (A situation that is, in any case, also frequently to be found in highly developed polities with very sophisticated systems of health care). The way in which a resource like a health clinic gets to be located may well be the result of a

number of decisions being made by agencies on the basis of considerations which taken by themselves make sense, but which are insufficiently co-coordinated. Thus, although the clinic is sufficient to serve a population of a certain size, and at a manageable cost, it fails because those whom it should serve are unable to get to it, or at least not easily. No one noticed that the area lacked the kind of transport infrastructure necessary or, in the case of the people of Kanyama, the lack of security at night. This looks like a kind of stupidity, or carelessness but what is needed for this to be case of hermeneutical injustice is for there to be a “failure of communicative intelligibility”. In this example there is nothing that looks like that kind of failure: there is nothing in the characterization of the problem — having no way of getting to the clinic because of lack of suitable transport and general conditions of security at night — by the inhabitants that suggests they had a difficulty *conceptualizing* their problem. Moreover, it does not even require the Kanyama people to point it out for it to be *understood* as a problem. Anyone could make the point, though no doubt it is the case that it needed the Kanyama people themselves to make the point that the clinic is inaccessible because others will not in fact notice. McCollum implies at least, that the Kanyama lacked “a chance to conceptualize the conditions that *they* regarded as necessary for their own well-being” (original emphasis, 197). That, I suggest, is not the problem. Suppose the “structure” were such that this kind of failure to notice an important aspect of the location of the clinic did not occur and the clinic had been suitably located or some further work done to also improve the infrastructure so that they could travel more easily to it. But there had been no input from the Kanyama, would there still be an argument for saying that they suffered an injustice, hermeneutical or otherwise? The issue then is about simply being ignored, not included, even though there is no difference at all between their view of their situation *vis-à-vis* the clinic and that of the planners. If there is any sense here in which there is an epistemic injustice i.e. they suffer a “wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (Fricker 2007, 1) then it looks more like the testimonial kind.

Perhaps the point to make about the “structural” aspect of the organisational kind is that it seems to be more or less contingent, so that it is possible to imagine how the organisation might be changed so as to minimise the possibility of injustice. The solution McCollum himself offers looks like such an attempt: “Projects like ‘Voices for the Poor’ allow the subjects for whom development policy is implemented to speak from their own experiences and for that reason are hermeneutically just” (198). Yet, one strand of his argument suggests that such inclusion, even if one buys in to the idea of “positional objectivity” (198) to characterise the nature of the local judgements, will not be enough to preserve the role of the social sciences in policymaking, for at various places his argument seems to suggest that there is a different kind of “structure” which constitutes hermeneutical injustice, one which is not contingent. This comes out most clearly in his characterisation of the impact of neoliberal and neoclassical economic theory on development theory and policy. Here the problem is at the level not of organisation but conceptual structure. The point being that the very concepts employed in these economic theories are such that they have hermeneutical injustice built into them. These are, as McCollum indicates, old points but worth making in this connection: it is the very concept of “individual” and “development” which belongs with it cannot include the

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experiences of actual people, which is to say those experiences will not be intelligible in the theory. It will not be possible for people to understand their experiences in the light of such theories. If this is so then this will be a deep and intractable case of hermeneutical injustice. The question is how far this constitutive form of hermeneutical injustice runs in the social sciences. McCollum, for the most part, refers to economics in this way and it might well be argued that the “social sciences” are a somewhat eclectic group of disciplines, so that what might be said of one area will not follow for another. Nonetheless McCollum’s proposal to apply the idea of hermeneutical injustice to the social sciences if taken up would surely require a more detailed look at the conceptual structure of more than just neo classical economics before we can be sure that there really is any useful place for the social sciences in policy making, or whether they really are best left in the vacuum where they may be interesting and harmless (190).

Contact details: s.e.marshall@stir.ac.uk

References

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