**Hermeneutical Injustice and Depression**

**Preamble**

Persons diagnosed with major depression usually report negative epistemic experiences – inability to properly make sense of their experiences, or to find the words to communicate what they feel to others.

How should we understand the predicament of persons experiencing depression? What concepts might be most useful? What sorts of methods and styles of explanation are most relevant?

**Epistemic injustice.**

An obvious candidate for a useful concept is that of an *epistemic injustice*—in the original sense of that term articulated by Miranda Fricker or those later expanded forms (see Kidd, Spencer, and Carel forthcoming):

* reports of not being listened to or not being taken seriously
* inabilities to make sense of one’s experiences
* frustration of failing to get others to take seriously what one has to say, and so on.
* rhetorics of being ‘silenced’, of ‘voices’ unheard and complaints of injustice.

Generations of sociological research confirms the persistence of systematic prejudices targeting people with psychiatric conditions.

Epistemic justice and the pursuit of social justice form a natural conceptual and political pairing.

But we should ask the following questions:

1. Can the concept of an epistemic injustice give us a comprehensive account of the nature and significance of the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression?
2. Are there aspects of that predicament that are not properly captured by analyses in terms of epistemic injustice?
3. Can use of the concept of epistemic injustice occlude certain aspects of the predicament in question?
4. What other concepts might also be relevant to understanding that predicament?

**My claim**: *epistemic injustice* is limited as a tool for articulating the predicament of those persons diagnosed with depression.

That predicament must be explained in terms of *phenomenological psychopathology.*

**Hermeneutical injustice.**

Fricker 2007:

Hermeneutical injustice is:

*the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.*

(Fricker 2007: 155)

Subsequent revisions (Mason, Pohlhaus etc.) and we can say:

* there can be cases of gaps in a shared collective hermeneutical resource.
* there can be local resources apt for the task of interpreting certain experiences which fail to get wider uptake.
* there can be cases of dominant groups, actively suppressing local resources.

José Medina’s four parameters for distinguishing varieties of hermeneutical injustice:

1. *Sources of hermeneutical injustice*:

*Semantically produced*, where relevant labels and concepts are unavailable; there are ‘gaps’ or ‘lacuna’, in the terms used by Fricker.

*Performatively produced*, where subjects are judged an unintelligible or less intelligible in relation to other subjects because of their use of specific communicative performances and expressive styles (certain accents, ‘eccentric’ interpersonal styles, and so on).

(Medina 2016: 45-46)

1. *Dynamics of hermeneutical injustice*:

*Interpersonal* *dynamics* either structural conditions and/or institutional designs which tend or are intended to (i) prevent the use of certain hermeneutical resources or expressive styles and/or (ii) favour certain hermeneutical communities and practices and disadvantage others.

*Interpersonal dynamics* are committed in and through interpersonal dynamics – exchanges, conversation, or interactions characterised by what Medina (using micro-aggressions as his example) dubs *hermeneutical* *intimidations*.

1. *Breadth* – how far the injustice reaches across the social fabric. Fricker had distinguished an *incidental* from a *systemic* injustice and later added *radical* (or *maximal*) cases in which no one, even the subject themselves, can achieve understanding.
2. *Depth* – defined in terms of ‘how deep the hermeneutical harm goes in undermining or destroying the meaning-making and meaning-sharing capacities of the victims of such harms’ (Medina 2016: 47). These range from ‘skin-deep cases’ – that leave intact the subject’s interpretive capacities – through to ‘marrow-of-the-bone cases’.

These parameters help us to appreciate salient features of the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression:

* The epistemic predicament can have both *semantic* and *performative* sources. It can be caused the absence of interpretive and expressive resources and practices and/or the negative reactions of other persons to one’s hermeneutical performances.
* The epistemic predicament can have both *interpersonal* and *institutional* sources, as caused by the negative reactions of others and unjust structural and institutional and social arrangements. In most cases, there will be no firm distinction here, of course.
* The epistemic predicament can vary in its *breadth*—ranging from being confined to some specific area of one’s life through to more radical cases where *every* encounter and *every* situation entails a hermeneutic injustice: *no-one*, even the *subject*, is able to make sense of their experiences.
* The epistemic predicament can vary in its *depth*—and the most severe will be those ‘marrow-of-the-bone’ cases that could be tantamount to what Medina in other work has called *hermeneutical death*.

We might therefore propose something like an account of the epistemic predicament of persons diagnosed with depression of this sort:

*Persons diagnosed with depression are victims of a complex sort of hermeneutical injustices whose scope is broad and whose harms are deep.* *These hermeneutical injustices find their sources in the interplay of interpersonal and/or institutional factors which systematically impede, erode, and even destroy – the meaning-making and meaning-sharing of those persons.*

I think *something like* this account is plausible. It is, however, importantly *limited* as an account of the *sources* of the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression.

Why?

1. The *deep source* of the predicament are *not* contingent epistemic injustices, gaps in a shared hermeneutical resource, wilful hermeneutical bad conduct etc.
2. Medina’s account does not accommodate an vital possibility: *hermeneutical frustration is integral to certain human experiences*.

**Phenomenological psychopathology.**

Phenomenological psychopathologists argue that many psychiatric conditions can be understood in terms of radical changes in the structure of one’s experience.

Phenomenological psychopathology argues that many psychiatric conditions involve disruptions to the structure of human experience.

Matthew Ratcliffe: depression involves loss of an ability to experience *kinds of possibility*:

Our access to kinds of possibility is itself integral to our experience […] To find oneself in a world is to have a sense of the various *ways* in which things might be encountered—as perceptually or practically accessible, as somehow significant, as available to others.

(Ratcliffe 2018:51)

Our experience of an object, situation, or person is part of a wider dynamic system of possibilities.

‘Renee’, *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*:

[W]hen we were outside I realized that my perception of things had completely changed. Instead of infinite space, unreal, where everything was cut off, naked and isolated, I saw Reality, marvellous Reality, for the first time. The people whom we encountered were no longer automatons, phantoms, revolving around, gesticulating without meaning; they were men and women with their own individual characteristics, their own individuality. It was the same with things. They were useful things, having sense, capable of giving pleasure. Here was an automobile to take me to the hospital, cushions I could rest on. […] for the first time I dared to handle the chairs, to change the arrangement of the furniture. What an unknown joy, to have an influence on things; to do with them what I liked and especially to have the pleasure of wanting the change.

(Sechehaye 1970: 105-106)

‘Renee’ again inhabits an experiential world rich in possibilities, a world where things *matter* once again, in ways the rest of us take for grante:

I now want to develop this idea to support the claims that

1. the epistemic predicament of those with depression is essentially *phenomenological* in character and, that being so
2. the concept of epistemic injustice has only a limited purchase on it
3. analyses of that predicament in terms of contingent interpersonal, social, institutional sources without appreciation of alterations to the structure of experience risk being *banal* (Kidd on banality as a kind of *pathophobia*).

**Predicaments.**

Here are my closing claims:

1. The epistemic predicament of depression can and usually do include various hermeneutical frustrations and harms.
2. The hermeneutical frustrations are *broad* and typically extend to what Fricker called those *maximal* cases where the subject is incapable of understanding their own experiences.
3. The hermeneutical frustrations are *deep*; they affect all one’s experiences and tend to cause severe hermeneutical harm..

The main problem with the hermeneutic injustice interpretation of the predicament of depression is that it identifies their source in contingent social, interpersonal, and institutional conditions:

* Certain experiences can be *intrinsically* difficult, even impossible, to articulate and describe.
* Certain experiences can *intrinsically* erode our hermeneutic capacities.
* Certain experiences can resist intelligible articulation because one of their characteristics is a loss of access to the kinds of possibilities which our everyday hermeneutical abilities, practices, skills, and resources presuppose.

My point: the hermeneutic frustrations typical of the epistemic predicament of those diagnosed with depression find their source, their causes, in alterations at the *phenomenological level*.

These ‘gaps’ are not caused by

* contingent lacuna in a shared hermeneutical resource;
* unjust refusal of uptake to marginalised-but-extant interpretive resources;
* Wilful discriminatory resistance to the communicative practices and expressive styles of the person diagnosed with depression.

Those hermeneutical injustices can occur, but the effect is to *exacerbate* the predicament, not *cause* it. If one tries to analysis the predicament in terms only of contingent social/interpersonal factors, the real source and nature of that predicament will be concealed.

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