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Epistemic injustice and epistemic positioning: towards an intersectional political economy

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of epistemic positioning to theorize the relationship between identity-based epistemic judgements and the reproduction of social inequalities, including those of gender and ethnicity/race, in the academia. Acts of epistemic positioning entail the evaluation of knowledge claims based on the speaker's stated or inferred identity. These judgements serve to limit the scope of the knowledge claim, making it more likely speakers will be denied recognition or credit. The four types of epistemic positioning – bounding (reducing a knowledge claim to elements of personal identity), domaining (reducing a knowledge claim to discipline or field associated with identity), non-attribution (using the claim without recognizing the author) and appropriation (presenting the claim as one's own) – are mutually reinforcing. Given the growing importance of visibility and recognition in the context of increasing competition and insecurity in academic employment, these practices play a role in the ability of underrepresented groups to remain in the academic profession.

Keywords

Citational justice, epistemic injustice, epistemic positioning, 'leaky pipeline', Matthew effect, recognition

Introduction

It is no longer controversial to assert that the academia is hardly a meritocracy (Littler, 2017; Nielsen, 2016). Sociological research has been instrumental in drawing attention

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to how processes of academic selection and recruitment reflect, reproduce and amplify social inequalities (e.g. Boliver, 2017; Bourdieu, 1984, 1996; Lamont, 2009). Yet, as access to primary, secondary and tertiary education continues to expand, the sites and mechanisms of exclusion continue to shift.

Among the most extensively documented areas of inequality is the percentage of women dropping out of academic careers, a phenomenon dubbed the ‘leaky pipeline’ (Monroe and Chiu, 2010; Rivera, 2017; Winslow and Davis, 2016). Recently, more attention has been paid to the intersectional character of exclusion (Ahmed, 2012, 2017; Collins, 2015) and specifically the experience of Black and minority ethnic (BME) women in the academia (Rollock, 2019; Williams et al., 2015). Multiple policy initiatives at institutional, national and international levels address gender- and race- or ethnicity-based discrimination and ‘implicit bias’ in hiring and promotions. Yet, they miss a key mechanism: informal practices of judgement or evaluation that link the identity of ‘knower’ with the value of the knowledge they produce.

This article develops the concept of ‘epistemic positioning’ to conceptualize these practices. While experiences ranging from being ‘mansplained’ to having one’s work credited to another (often male, White, senior) scholar have been the subject of extensive commentary and discussion, including on social media,¹ this concept is the first to explicitly link the literature on epistemic inequalities (Dotson, 2011, 2013, 2014; Medina, 2013; Pohlhaus, 2011; Fricker, 2007; Mills, 1999, 2007) with that on forms of e/valuation, recognition and promotion in academic settings (e.g. Angermüller, 2017; Hamann, 2019; Hamann and Beljean, 2021; Lamont, 2009, 2012; Rivera, 2017; Hammarfelt, 2017; Schulze-Cleven et al., 2017). Extending further the framework for understanding links between epistemic subjects and epistemic objects (Bacevic, 2019), it aims to lay the foundations of an intersectional political economy (Folbre, 2020) of knowledge production.

Epistemic positioning builds on feminist and intersectional theories of positionality (e.g. Anderson, 1995, 2012; Collins, 2015; Harding, 1991; Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Wylie, 2003, 2011) as well as positioning theory (Baert, 2012; Lawson, 2016). Yet, while positionality emphasizes standpoints as a source of epistemic value, I argue that in contemporary academic contexts positioning is often used as a practice of *devaluation*. In this sense, I draw on the work on epistemic injustice (Dotson, 2011, 2012, 2014; Fricker, 2007; Kidd et al., 2017; McKinnon, 2016) to develop a typology of epistemic positioning that reduce the value or worth of certain speakers’ knowledge in ways that make it easier to deny them recognition or credit, something that has special bearing on the increasingly reputational economy of academic knowledge production (Bacevic, 2018).

The article identifies four types of epistemic positioning: bounding, domaining, non-attribution and appropriation. What they have in common is the evaluation of speakers’ knowledge based on their stated or inferred identity. Positioning most frequently takes the form of speech-acts, that is, can be spoken (said) or written. Conversely, it can also take the form of silence, in the sense of *not* being said (cf. Ahmed, 2017). In this sense, epistemic positioning has family resemblances with practices of testimonial smothering or silencing (Dotson, 2011). Yet, another kind of speech-act is implied in this silence, one that implicitly or explicitly attributes the knowledge claim to another knower. In this most apparent form, this is what we call plagiarism; but, as I argue, not only are many

cases of plagiarism never recognized or publicized as such, they also rely on interconnected forms of epistemic devaluation that make plagiarism more difficult to identify, prove and eventually address.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first part, I develop the concept of epistemic positioning to describe how relational judgements frame certain kinds of knowers as differently capable of possessing or contributing certain kinds of knowledge. The second part describes four types of epistemic positioning: bounding, domaining, non-attribution and appropriation. It draws on three recent cases from the media, and one from the history of sociology, to conceptualize the relationship between speakers' (stated or inferred) identity and the valuation of their knowledge claims, arguing that all these cases use the speakers' identity as a *qualifier* of epistemic worth. The third part considers the implications of this categorization for further research and theorization of the relationship between (e)valuation and (in)equality in knowledge production.

From epistemic valuation to epistemic injustice

Sociologists have long argued that academic selection processes, from university admissions through grant competitions to professorial appointments, apply a mix of epistemic, social and cultural criteria, often reproducing the cultural standards of those who make the assessment (Bourdieu, 1984, 1996; Gross, 2002; Lamont, 2009, 2012). However, valuation also takes place through more 'mundane' elements of knowledge production (Brighenti, 2018). These include conferences (Henderson, 2015), book reviews, citations (Ahmed, 2017), obituaries (Hamann, 2016) and even corridor talk (Downey et al., 1997). If judgements of similarity or 'homophily' play a role in formal selection procedures, such as job interviews or admissions, it makes sense to assume they play a role in other, less formal kinds of evaluation too.

Quantitative analyses seem to confirm this hypothesis. There is substantial gender bias in teaching evaluations (Boring, 2017; Mengel et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2016). Students of all genders rate teachers perceived as female systematically lower than teachers perceived as male, even when course material, content, and delivery are virtually indistinguishable (MacNell et al., 2015). Women's articles spend longer in peer review (Bransch and Kvasnicka, 2017; Hengel, 2017; Krawczyk and Smyk, 2016). This could be contributing to the 'publication gap': the fact women publish fewer articles in peer-reviewed journals (Bird, 2011; Bright, 2017; Østby et al., 2013). Hengel (2017) suggests that 'women spend too much time rewriting old papers and not enough time writing new ones' (p. 3). A gendered publication gap turns into a gendered citation gap: women are cited less often than men (Hengel, 2017; Maliniak et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2013; Østby et al., 2013; Borsuk et al., 2018), particularly when 'female-sounding' names are in positions that denote primary authorship, such as single, first or last author (West et al., 2013: 3). Men cite themselves and other men more often (King et al., 2017; Masuoka et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 2013); however, women who promote their own work risk being perceived as 'pushy' (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010; Correll et al., 2007).

This strongly suggests the lack of diversity at the top of the academic profession cannot be explained by historical effects alone. Since 1990, women have been the majority of undergraduate (bachelor) and master-level graduate students globally (UNESCO

Institute for Statistics, 2019). In the EU, women make up 54% students and 58% graduates at B. Sc and MSc levels (or equivalent), 48% students and graduates at doctoral level, but only 24% grade A (professorial) academic staff (European Commission (EC), 2019: 115). In the United Kingdom, women are nearly half (46.8%) non-professorial academic staff, yet less than 20% of the professoriate (University College Union (UCU), 2012). The representation of BME scholars is similarly skewed: in the United Kingdom, BME academic staff make up 13% non-professorial academic posts, yet only 7.3% professorial roles.

Women disproportionately drop out of academia, in all disciplines and across career stages, regardless of income, parental or marital status (Weishaar, 2017; Monroe and Chiu, 2010; Winslow and Davis, 2016; Benard and Correll, 2010; Correll et al., 2007). B(A)ME and other 'minority' staff face additional challenges related to implicit (or explicit) racial prejudice, bullying and harassment (Arday, 2018, 2021; Rollock, 2019). The social nature of scientific knowledge production means success depends not only on performing certain actions, but also on those actions being *recognized* and *interpreted* as worthy.

The concept of *epistemic injustice* was coined specifically to address structural arrangements where the capacity of certain speakers to generate knowledge claims is substantially impacted, reduced or denied by the virtue of others' perception of their characteristics, such as skin colour, gender or age. Miranda Fricker (2007), who provided the first formalization of the term, distinguished between two types: testimonial and hermeneutic. In this article, I will be primarily building on the first; the concept of hermeneutic injustice will be revisited in the conclusions.

Fricker offered two illustrations of testimonial injustice. One is the testimony of Tom Robinson, a Black man accused of sexually assaulting a White woman in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*; the other is that of Marge Sherwood, the girlfriend of Dickie Greenleaf, murdered by Tom Ripley in the film *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Both Tom Robinson and Marge Sherwood are in positions where their testimonies are disbelieved because of who they *are*. Tom's testimony is disregarded in (his own) trial because his word is pitted against those of White man and a White woman; Marge's is discredited because it contradicts that of a man (Tom Ripley, the murderer), allowing Dickie's father to discard it as 'just female intuition', a category, in his narrative, opposed to 'facts' (Fricker, 2007: 17–33; McKinnon, 2016: 438–439).

Fricker's argument is situated at the intersection between epistemology and ethics: who and what is recognized as a proper or equal creator of knowledge – epistemic subject – is not separate from who can be recognized as an equal participant in the public realm. In the context of academic knowledge production, however, the crucial question is how judgements of this sort situate different kinds of 'knowers' *relative to* other knowers and, further, how this impacts their professional standing. This brings us to evaluation as a practice of positioning.

Originally developed in ordinary-language philosophy (e.g. Austin, 1961, 1975; Wittgenstein, 1953), 'positioning' denotes the social process through which humans and other entities are situated in specific 'wholes' or totalities.² Positions are normally defined by rights and obligations (Baert, 2012; Harré, 2012; Haslanger, 2012; Lawson, 2016). For instance, being positioned as a lecturer at a university entails the obligation to perform certain types of work (teach students, attend meetings and so on) and the

corresponding rights (e.g. to be paid, to take holiday leave, to be free from harassment and discrimination). Yet, rights and obligations are not always formally encoded. For instance, Jane's position as a lecturer in history does not entail the right to be treated as an authority on mediaeval manuscripts by the Head of Department, nor the right to be identified as particularly knowledgeable about a certain historical period by the students. While not *formal*, these perceptions certainly shape Jane's career. Being recognized as an authority has consequences for grant proposals, Jane will be invited to contribute to; being recognized as an authority in the classroom has consequences for teaching evaluations, which, in turn, will be used as evidence in Jane's promotion.

This highlights the role of reciprocity (Hornsby, 1994, 1995) or mutuality in academic recognition. Being able to (literally *in position* to) evaluate another's epistemic claim reflects inequalities of status and power. This is not only the case in obviously hierarchical relationships (student–teacher, interview panel member–job applicant), but also, for instance, in endorsements on book covers or book reviews. In other words, the question is not *whether* someone's identity or social position influences how their work will be judged, but *how*.

The following part introduces four kinds of positioning: bounding, domaining, non-attribution and appropriation. The first two, bounding and domaining, are forms of *epistemic reduction*: they acknowledge the positioned party as a knower (epistemic subject), but substantially limit or reduce the value of their knowledge claim. The third and the fourth, non-attribution and appropriation, are acts of *epistemic erasure*: they deny someone's epistemic subjectivity by failing to credit them as authors of a specific claim and, in the second case, attributing the claim to another knower.

From epistemic reduction to epistemic erasure

Bounding: or, 'grievance studies'

Bounding is a form of positioning where one speaker's knowledge claim is interpreted by other speakers as constrained – 'bounded' – by the person's perceived identity, social position, personal experience, or combination of these characteristics. This serves to connect the knowledge claim to the *personal identity* or *experience* of the subject. This type of epistemic positioning is frequently levelled at women, whose knowledge claims are interpreted as 'emotional', 'subjective' or 'personal', based on the distinction that associates (default) masculinity with objectivity and neutrality (Haraway, 1991; Harding and Hintikka, 1983; Pateman and Gross, 1986).

What 'bounding' shares with 'regular' testimonial injustice is the evaluation of the reliability or validity of an epistemic claim in relation to the speaker's (perceived or stated) identity. In the context of this article, however, what is more relevant is how this type of valuation positions certain people – and whole disciplines – vis-à-vis the field of academic knowledge production *as such*. Maria do Mar Pereira (2019) describes how opponents to the institutionalization of gender studies in Portuguese academia framed knowledge claims in the field as 'musings of sexually frustrated women' or 'rants of lesbians' (p. 349). Related framings include the pejorative designation of certain vocational and arts and humanities programmes as 'Mickey Mouse courses' (e.g. BBC, 2003).

This kind of reframing does more than just insult or belittle scholars associated with fields, such as cultural or gender studies. Reducing the knowledge claims of those working in this field to a personal or emotional experience ('frustration') serves to argue that it does not count as 'proper' academic knowledge. Positioning certain forms of knowledge as 'personal' rather than 'academic' can be seen as a form of boundary-keeping (Longino, 2002). Traditionally, boundary-keeping in science was used to exclude things like conspiracy theories or homoeopathy (Gieryn, 1983; Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Yet, bounding only exceptionally denies certain speakers' epistemic subjectivity *in toto*, or tries to exclude them from the epistemic community *a priori*. Rather, by seeking to reduce the value of what is being said, bounding positions speakers and fields as not *sufficiently* scientific, thus casting doubt on their academic validity as such. This has obvious implications for status and position within the field.

A recent illustration of bounding is offered by the 'grievance studies' controversy. Drawing inspiration from the 'Sokal hoax', the controversy revolved around scholars who had submitted articles they considered short of academic standards to peer-reviewed journals in fields, such as cultural studies or critical theory, and a few subsequently got published. In an article 'revealing' the 'affair', they argued that these fields are 'corrupting academic research', and that 'open, good-faith conversation around topics of identity such as gender, race, and sexuality (and the scholarship that works with them) [wa]s nearly impossible', so their intention had been to 'give people – especially those who believe in liberalism, progress, modernity, open inquiry, and social justice – a clear reason to look at the identitarian madness coming out of the academic and activist left' (Lindsay et al., 2018).

In this excerpt, Pluckrose, Lindsay and Boghossian clearly position themselves as the arbiters – or, at the very least, defenders – of (good) academic research. They do this despite the fact the said journals have formal peer review (in fact, reviewers rejected or required major revisions for most of the nonsense they had submitted). But they do more than just call out certain journals or editorial practices. As they state, '[. . .] we call these fields "grievance studies" in shorthand because of their common goal of problematizing aspects of culture in minute detail in order to attempt diagnoses of power imbalances and oppression rooted in identity' (Lindsay et al., 2018).

There is hardly anything odd in problematizing aspects of culture in minute detail to offer diagnoses power imbalances and oppression. Quite a bit of contemporary sociology, anthropology, political philosophy and economics would probably qualify for this description. The 'rooted in identity' element, however, suggests that the problem with these fields is that they associate oppression *with* identity. This serves to position whole fields and objects of research as *nothing but* reflections of personal concerns or 'grievances'. Furthermore, the association of these fields with 'identitarian madness . . . coming out of the left' (Lindsay has since branched out into similar attacks on critical race theory) suggests that they frame these 'grievances' as motivated by politics, rather than by 'genuine' scholarship.

Of course, standpoint epistemology (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991) and intersectionality (Collins, 2015) have long argued that marginalized individuals and groups have specific insight into mechanisms of power and oppression not normally accessible to those whose epistemic position aligns with the 'majority', dominant group. This would be the inverse of bounding – *grounding* one's claim in elements of identity or experience.

Yet, for grounding to work – to ‘succeed’ as a speech-act – other conditions need to obtain: most obviously, an academic culture that privileges first-person epistemic positions and subjective accounts, or at least considers them as valid as objectivist accounts. But even in contexts where this could be said to be the case, equal validity does not necessarily mean equal value. This brings us to the second type of epistemic positioning: domaining.

Domaining: must Black scholars write about ‘race’?

Domaining consists of limiting a person’s epistemic claim to a particular *domain* of knowledge. In academic knowledge production, ‘domains’ are usually coextensive with disciplines (Abbott, 2001; Becher and Trowler, 2001) or *fields*: relatively organized spheres of recognition, valuation and exchange (Bourdieu, 1993; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Fields are embedded in other fields; however, whether certain products can circulate between fields, or capital accrued in one translated to another, depends on general – and not always explicit – forms of valuation.

The history of human and social sciences can be read through the centring the White, Occidental, male epistemic subject and relegation of all other epistemic subjects and forms of knowledge to ‘the periphery’ (Connell, 2007; Mills, 2007; Santos, 2014). While this perspective has been extensively challenged, in part thanks to indigenous, post- and decolonial, and epistemologies from the South, certain knowers are still routinely associated with certain domains of knowledge.

As Jennifer Chisholm (2018) recounted in an article in *The Guardian*, Black academics are often encumbered by the expectation they should focus on ‘race’:

I know that my previous research qualifies me to talk about race regardless of my racial background, but I also know that studying race hasn’t been entirely my own choice – social pressures have led me to this route. On my undergraduate courses in the US, I was urged to bring my unique perspective to my essays. I realised that my instructors often wanted and expected me to provide a so-called black perspective.

As Chisholm argued, she was not opposed to writing on race, but found the expectation epistemically limiting. It was predicated on the assumption that the type of knowledge she can generate is pre-emptively bounded by her identity – or, rather, the identity that she was *seen* as embodying. BME scholars in White-majority institutions are often seen as ‘embodying diversity’ (Ahmed, 2012), which not only places additional expectations on the kind of work they are expected to perform – from membership on committees to supporting other minority scholars and students – but also pre-emptively frames the contributions they are able to make. As Chisholm framed it, ‘The assumption that minority students in the social sciences should research race severely restricts our scope – and what we’re expected to be knowledgeable about. It’s as damaging as the assumption that women naturally affiliate with gender studies’ (Ahmed, 2012).

Domaining, of course, can be seen as a consequence of the structural differentiation of the field of knowledge production (Abbott, 2001). Most academics position their work in relation to specific subfields, paradigms or problems; furthermore, successfully

carving out a 'niche' can bring not only recognition, but also funding, followers, even fame (Lamont, 1987). Yet, *who* is in position to carve out such domains is not independent from existing hierarchies of both scholars (epistemic subjects) and fields of research (epistemic objects). This hierarchy is visible in the distinction between 'general' knowledge and specialized subfields. The former is usually defined by the generic term, while the latter by their epistemic object in the form of 'theory X': feminist theory, theories of race, decolonial theory and so on (Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 1997, 2007; Halvorsen, 2018; Lugones and Spelman, 1983).

This shows that bounding and domaining are contiguous. Bounding consists of qualifying an epistemic claim based on the speaker's (asserted or inferred) identity; domaining frames it in relation to the speaker's (asserted or inferred) positioning within a field, subfield or discipline, itself often predicated on their identity. Being positioned as 'sociologist of race' or a 'feminist academic' signals not only specialization, but also limitation. A 'sociologist' can, obviously, teach a range of sociology courses; a 'sociologist of race', however, primarily teaches on race. Similarly, someone who specializes in theory can contribute to a range of theory-related programmes; someone who specializes in 'feminist theory', however, requires space in the curriculum dedicated to feminist theory. As Dotson (2013) shows, this itself is a form of boundary-keeping: conceptualizing a distinction between, for example, 'philosophy' and 'feminist philosophy' makes it more difficult for certain knowers to be recognized within the discipline, and thus easier to confine them to a single domain, subdiscipline, or field – what one academic described as 'stay in your lane'.

Domaining, however, is not only epistemically limiting. The decline of public funding for social sciences and humanities at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century has had a particularly severe impact on precisely the fields with greater numbers of women and minority ethnic academics. In the United States, there has been a longer-lasting trend of defunding or closing down departments of ethnic, minority and women's studies. These trends are picking up in Europe, where the UK government has been vocally opposing critical race theory, and the French government criticizing it as an 'ideology imported from the US'. Regardless of the eventual outcome of this most recent iteration of 'culture wars', bounding and domaining has the potential to seriously limit the participation of women and other underrepresented groups in the academic profession.

Even when knowledge claims of women and ethnic minority scholars are not reduced to 'personal grievances' or constrained to specific subfields, they do not always get credit. The next two sections address practices of epistemic erasure: non-attribution and appropriation.

Non-attribution: 'we regret the omission'

Non-attribution entails invoking a knowledge claim while omitting to credit its author. Of course, not all knowledge claims are followed by references; many elements of disciplinary knowledge are routinely invoked by practitioners without the need to append a specific paragraph, page or even the item where it appears. Examples include the unconscious, habitus, Cartesian dualism, or Foucauldian concept of power.³ For many other

authors, however, attribution not only increases the circulation of their work and their own recognition: it also has direct consequences for employment and promotion.

A recent case of non-attribution in the US academia offers a good illustration of the intersecting effects of gender, seniority and job security. Sarah Milov (2019) is an assistant professor of history at the University of Virginia, and the author of *The Cigarette: A Political History*. In July 2019, shortly before the book was scheduled to come out, Milov heard two male historians, Nathan Connolly and Edward Ayres, discuss the topic on public radio – without crediting the book, or the author. As Milov said in an interview, ‘Every single word they said was from my book. Then I got to the end of [listening to] a nearly 10 minute segment and did not hear myself credited at all’ (Kitchener, 2019).

Milov’s story is hardly unique. In this case, it was possible to precisely reconstruct the process through which her work was ‘omitted’. The two historians, Connolly and Ayres, have their own history podcast, ‘BackStory’, funded by University of Virginia Humanities – the same school where Milov works. The researchers for the show helped them prepare their appearance on public radio, relying on Milov’s book in the process. After Milov’s reaction began making rounds on social media, the BackStory team Tweeted: ‘On this week’s Here and Now, Ed and Nathan used the work of Sarah Milov . . . However, neither Sarah’s name nor book were mentioned. We regret the omission’. The public radio show’s producers also chimed in, saying it was ‘unfortunate’ they did not ‘credit the author largely responsible for much of the content’ (Fleming, in Kitchener, 2019).

While Connolly and Ayres apologized to Milov, they also attributed the ‘omission’ of her work to the constraints of time on air. The editor and digital strategist for ‘BackStory’ explained ‘the accepted practice’: ‘If I read five books on the subject, I’m not going to say on air that I read these five people’s books . . . Historians are distilling the scholarship that’s available to them’ (Williams, in Kitchener, 2019).

It is certainly true that scholars do not always cite every source. However, who gets cited and credited has consequences. Under conditions of increasing competition for a declining number of permanent positions in the academia, appearances in the media are increasingly relevant as indicators of public engagement, service or ‘academic citizenship’. They also lead to further indicators of esteem – for instance, invitations to give public lectures, or consultancy opportunities. At the time, the show was produced, Milov was coming up for tenure and had recently become a mother. The public radio show on which Connolly and Ayres appeared is syndicated to 5 million viewers. Yet the producers never considered inviting Milov to the show, despite the fact she was working at the University of Virginia and had just published a book on the very subject they were addressing – the book the producers themselves used to prepare the segment.

Drawing on the distinction between ‘active commission’ and ‘passive omission’ (Scott, 2018), non-attribution can be considered a form of ‘active omission’: deciding to omit crediting someone’s work distributes value (or academic capital) in ways that reflect and reproduce inequalities of gender, race, seniority and security. In the case of ‘The Cigarette’, Milov’s knowledge claim – the epistemic *object* – was clearly deemed valuable enough to merit a mention. The author – the epistemic *subject* – was not. Regardless of whether it was Milov’s gender, age, parental status or position, that ‘made’ the producers, the professors, the script writers and the editors ‘forget’ to credit her, these acts

amount to cumulative disadvantage (Merton, 1973): they make it less likely certain knowers will achieve recognition, promotion or job security.

Of course, the tendency for recognition or reward to accrue to the most senior or established scientist in the field is a well-established phenomenon in sociology of science. It is known as the ‘Matthew Effect’ (after the parable of talents in Gospel according to Matthew, ‘For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away’, 25:29). Yet, possibly the most astonishing example of this effect in sociology is, precisely, the ‘Matthew Effect’.

Appropriation: or, the Matthew effect

Appropriation takes non-attribution one step further: it combines the failure to attribute the claim to its original author (or co-author) with its attribution to someone else.

Like non-attribution, appropriation is rarely the achievement of a single party or act of positioning. It rests on a series of interconnected judgements about ‘originality’, ‘contribution’ or ‘relevance’, performed by colleagues, peers, mentors, reviewers, editors, intellectual biographers and the public. Erasure, in this sense, often happens retrospectively: yet, it is equally perpetuated through mutually reinforcing assumptions concerning what kind of persons or bodies possess what kind of knowledge, and how they should (or should *not*) be acknowledged in virtue of that. Plagiarism is the most extreme form of appropriation; however, not all forms of epistemic erasure are plagiarism in the strict sense of the term – or, at least, are never revealed as such.

The concept ‘Matthew Effect in science’ first appeared in a study published in the journal *Science* under the name of Robert Merton (1968). Yet, the concept was jointly developed by Merton and his then-wife, Harriet Zuckerman (2011), later professor of sociology at Columbia. Zuckerman’s (1977) research on Nobel Prize winners provided key empirical material for the study; as often the case with husband-and-wife collaboration, it is difficult to establish which partner played a more decisive role in the construction of the concept.

Merton, in fact, explicitly acknowledged this. In the second printing of the article, he stated,

‘It is now belatedly evident to me that I drew upon the interview and other materials of the Zuckerman study to such an extent that, clearly, the paper should have appeared under joint authorship’ (Merton, 1973: fn. 1, 439); in the third version of the article, he added: ‘A sufficient sense of distributive and commutative justice requires one to recognize, however belatedly, that to write a scientific and scholarly paper is not sufficient grounds for designating oneself as its sole author’ (Merton, 1988: fn 2). For the remainder of his career (and life), Merton would refer to the article under their joint authorship. (Zuckerman, 2011: 131–132)

However, this did not change how the concept is remembered. To this day, ‘Matthew Effect’ is widely attributed to Merton, not to Merton and Zuckerman. The end of the first paragraph of the Wikipedia entry on ‘The Matthew Effect’, for instance, mentions that Merton credited Zuckerman as the co-author, but further on reverts to crediting Merton only.

Zuckerman (2011) insisted that she never felt ‘shortchanged’ by the omission. In a (very Mertonian) footnote, though, she added,

Would joint authorship have made any difference in my own ‘credit rating’? Probably not in the short run if the Matthew Effect is a valid depiction of the allocation of credit among senior and junior authors. Robert Merton was famous at the time and would very likely have been credited with the paper any way. Perhaps later, when I did work on my own, some measure of credit might have come but there are no guarantees of retrospective recognition. (p. 132, fn. 15)

Margaret Rossiter (1993) coined the term ‘the Matilda Effect’ to describe the tendency for scientific recognition to be awarded to men, rather than women, including in collaborative discoveries. ‘The Matilda Effect’ deliberately builds on the concept of the ‘Matthew Effect’. In this sense, Zuckerman may have been the victim of both ‘Matthew’ and ‘Matilda’; her success later in life, if anything, came *in spite of* the misattribution.

What stands out in this particular case is that the ‘omission’ of Zuckerman continued despite the (alleged) author himself (foot)noting that credit should have, in fact, been shared. Another famous ‘footnoter’ is Slavoj Žižek, who credited his first wife, philosopher Renata Salecl, for the original development of quite a few concepts that he is currently famous for.⁴ Yet, while Žižek attributes a great deal of ideas he engages with to philosophers from Hegel to Marx to Heidegger, Salecl’s ideas seem to have become ‘subsumed’ under his, that is, her name does not appear among the philosophers Žižek considers worthy enough to name in the main body of the text.

This tells us something important about the mutually reinforcing dynamics of bounding, domaining, non-attribution and appropriation. ‘Omitting’ to credit Milov as the author of the work her senior, tenured, male colleagues used on public radio and ‘forgetting’ to credit Zuckerman as the co-creator of the term ‘Matthew Effect’ results in credit going to senior, male and White scholars. Even when women, ethnic minorities and other differently constructed ‘Others’ are credited as knowers, their contributions often appear in footnotes, acknowledgments or, as it were, brackets. In some cases, their knowledge claims are reduced to empirical illustrations (‘drew upon the material’) of more general concepts. Alternatively, women are reduced to providing a ‘female’ perspective on ideas (whose origin is often attributed to men), while ethnic minority scholars are reduced to providing a perspective on ‘ethnicity’ or ‘race’. The bounding and domaining of these contributions makes it easier to ‘disembed’ them from their original context and use without attribution, thus redistributing epistemic value in ways that reproduce inequalities of gender, race, seniority and class.

Conclusion

Despite formal commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion in contemporary knowledge production, knowledge claims are still evaluated in relation to knowers’ (stated or inferred) identity characteristics. This article introduced the concept of epistemic positioning through which knowledge claims made by women and ethnic minority scholars are devalued in different forms of academic interaction, from citation to book

reviews to appearances in the media. While growing attention has been dedicated to correcting for implicit or explicit bias in situations of formal evaluation, like hiring or promotion practices, the article argued that *informal* judgements of epistemic ‘worth’ play a significant role in creating leaks in the academic pipeline.

The typology of epistemic positioning introduced in the article – bounding, domaining, non-attribution and appropriation – shows how these acts reduce the value of knowledge produced by certain kinds of speakers. The first two constitute practices of epistemic reduction, the last two practices of epistemic erasure. Intersecting and often implicit nature of these judgements – ‘forgetting’ to credit authors for work used by other speakers, ‘dropping’ co-authors’ names, crediting them only in footnotes – make them more difficult to identify.

While authorship, originality, innovation or ownership are highly contested in social sciences and humanities, where a great degree of knowledge production revolves around reworking and discussing ideas of other scholars. This ‘moral economy of openness’ (Bacevic and Muellerleile, 2017), however, can obscure other inequalities. As the cases presented in this article show, inequalities of gender, ethnicity/race and seniority work in ways that deprive certain knowers and make it less likely their ideas will be recognized or credited. In the context of increasing competition and increasing job insecurity in the academia, these forms of devaluation have direct consequences for their ability to achieve promotion or job security.

The typology introduced in this article has several implications. One is for the project of decolonizing sociology (e.g. Bhabra, 2014; Brunsmas and Padilla Wyse, 2019; Connell, 1997, 2007; Go, 2017; Puwar, 2020). The concepts of bounding, domaining, non-attribution and appropriation allow the tracing of processes through which certain authors and epistemic perspectives were included in, or excluded from, the disciplinary ‘canon’. Equally, however, they point to the need for an ongoing critical analysis of how citation, recognition and attribution of authorship intersect with the longer-lasting inequalities in higher education and research.

If epistemic injustice is seen as an individual ‘vice’, the discussion inevitably leans towards individual culpability and individual solutions (Anderson, 2012) – for example, practices, such as imploring scholars to exercise diligence when relying on or citing others’ work, checking for plagiarism and so on. But not only are women and people of colour less likely to be recognized and credited as knowers: they are also less likely to be believed (Dotson, 2011) when they assert their authorship of knowledge claims or draw attention to acts of ‘appropriation’. This also allows these forms of devaluation to continue, with an occasional *mea culpa* or footnote *à la* Merton.

This at last brings us to the other kind of epistemic injustice: hermeneutical. By offering a systematization and a typology of these practices, this article aims to contribute to ‘conceptual engineering’ (e.g. Haslanger, 2012) in ways that would make these practices easier to name and identify. But it goes beyond that. Emphasizing the relational and performative nature of forms of positioning highlights the need to rethink our own practices, and how they relate to the complex intersections between recognition, promotion and inequality in the context of increasing precarity and competition in knowledge production.

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Notes

1. Like other forms of inequality and injustice, some of these practices have for years been criticized in concepts, such as ‘mansplaining’, ‘White ignorance’, ‘more-of-a-comment-than-a-question’ and ‘patronizing’ to describe experiences of being silenced or positioned as epistemically less capable. Similarly to some other concepts that have ‘migrated’ from activist to general discourse, these practices are routinely dismissed as denoting a particular social group’s experience (of victimhood, devaluation, oppression), rather than a general(izable) social trend (see Manne’s analysis of ‘misogyny’, 2018). This form of dismissal (in this paper, ‘bounding’) serves to reinforce the boundary between diagnostic terms that can be considered ‘proper’ objects of sociological analysis (e.g. ‘positioning’) and those that are considered ‘lay’ (such as ‘mansplaining’).
2. While ‘positioning’ can refer to inanimate objects – for instance, we can talk of ‘positioning’ a rock as a boundary stone between two fields – the process itself inevitably requires some degree of community agreement. Searle (2010) framed positioning as the key constitutive process of human reality: in other words, there are no ‘objects’ in the social world that are not positioned.
3. As is evident in the latter two examples, these concepts in disciplinary parlance are, in fact, attributed to specific thinkers or schools of thought. In some cases, the association between a thinker and a concept is so strong that practitioners would need to specify use of the concept diverging from this association (e.g. ‘Kleinian unconscious’ or ‘habitus as developed by post-Bourdieuian scholars’).
4. Thank you to Mark Carrigan who drew my attention to this.

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Résumé

Cet article introduit le concept de positionnement épistémique pour théoriser la relation entre les jugements épistémiques fondés sur l'identité et la reproduction des inégalités sociales, y compris celles de genre et d'origine ethnique ou de race, dans le milieu universitaire. Les actes de positionnement épistémique impliquent l'évaluation de revendications de savoirs sur la base de l'identité déclarée ou déduite du locuteur. Ces jugements servent à limiter la portée de la revendication de savoirs, de sorte qu'il est plus probable que les locuteurs se voient refuser la reconnaissance ou le crédit. Les quatre types de positionnement épistémique – l'établissement d'un lien (le fait de réduire une revendication de savoirs à des éléments de l'identité personnelle), l'établissement d'un domaine (le fait de réduire une revendication de savoirs à une discipline ou un champ associé à l'identité personnelle), la non-attribution (l'utilisation de la revendication sans reconnaître l'auteur) et l'appropriation (la présentation de la revendication comme étant la sienne) – se renforcent mutuellement. Étant donné l'importance croissante de la visibilité et de la reconnaissance dans un contexte de concurrence et d'insécurité croissantes dans l'emploi universitaire, ces pratiques jouent un rôle dans la capacité des groupes sous-représentés à rester dans la profession universitaire.

Mots-clés

Effet Matthieu, injustice épistémique, justice citationnelle, « leaky pipeline », positionnement épistémique, reconnaissance

Resumen

Este artículo introduce el concepto de posicionamiento epistémico para teorizar la relación entre los juicios epistémicos basados en la identidad y la reproducción de las desigualdades sociales, incluidas las de género y etnia / raza, en el mundo académico. Los actos de posicionamiento epistémico implican la evaluación de enunciados de conocimiento basada en la identidad declarada o inferida del hablante. Estos juicios sirven para limitar el alcance del enunciado de conocimiento, por lo que es más probable que se niegue el reconocimiento o el crédito a los hablantes. Los cuatro tipos de posicionamiento epistémico son: delimitación (reducir un enunciado de conocimiento a elementos de identidad personal), dominio (reducir un enunciado de conocimiento a una disciplina o campo asociado con la identidad), no atribución (usar el enunciado sin reconocer al autor) y apropiación (presentar el enunciado como propia). Y se refuerzan mutuamente. Dada la creciente importancia de la visibilidad y el reconocimiento en el contexto de la creciente competencia e inseguridad en el empleo académico, estas prácticas juegan un papel en la capacidad de los grupos subrepresentados para permanecer en la profesión académica.

Palabras clave

Efecto Mateo, injusticia epistémica, justicia citacional, posicionamiento epistémico, reconocimiento, 'tubería con fugas'