

Phenomenal knowledge, imagination, and hermeneutical injustice

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the role of phenomenal knowledge in understanding the experiences of the victims of hermeneutical injustice. In particular, I argue that understanding that is enriched by phenomenal knowledge is a powerful tool to mitigate hermeneutical injustice. I proceed as follows: Firstly, I investigate the requirements for a *full* understanding of the experiences at the center of hermeneutical injustice and I argue that phenomenal knowledge is key to full understanding. Secondly, I distinguish between *direct phenomenal knowledge* and *imaginative phenomenal knowledge*. Thirdly, I investigate whether one can gain imaginative phenomenal knowledge of the experiences of members of social groups other than one's own. I consider reasons for pessimism in this regard and show that they are not conclusive. Then, I provide a model of how outgroup members can acquire imaginative knowledge of the experiences of the victims of hermeneutical injustice. Finally, I connect the varieties of phenomenal knowledge with different grades of understanding an experience and I outline how understanding that involves imaginative phenomenal knowledge helps to overcome various forms of hermeneutical injustice.

Introduction

Most people remember having had an experience which they did not fully understand. It might have been the very first time that they had such an experience, they might have been too young to understand the experience, or they might have lacked the relevant background knowledge to make sense of it. Not understanding an experience can be very upsetting, and clearly constitutes a cognitive disadvantage. There are various reasons why one might not be able to make sense of one's own experience—some easy to resolve, others much more difficult. As Fricker (2007) points out in her influential work on epistemic injustice, sometimes difficulty understanding an experience can constitute an injustice. In such cases, there is a particularly worrisome and persistent reason for not being able to understand an experience: a systematic marginalization that causes a *hermeneutical injustice*.

Hermeneutical injustice is “the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization.” (Fricker 2007, 158). The key cause for hermeneutical injustice is found in the systematic marginalization of certain social groups that leads to a gap in the collective interpretative resources. As a result, members of the marginalized group suffer from an unjust deficit of intelligibility of their experiences (Fricker & Jenkins 2017, 1). In her analysis of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker concentrates on the paucity of collective conceptual resources to capture and communicate the target phenomenon.¹ Take, for example, the phenomenon of *sexual harassment* before that concept had been developed. Due to this lacuna, the victims of sexual harassment could not fully understand their experiences and make them intelligible to others. I agree with Fricker that the development of novel public concepts is a necessary step towards dissolving hermeneutical injustice.² However, I do not think it is sufficient for fully resolving hermeneutical injustice.

In the literature, we find insightful analyses of further phenomena that plausibly count as instances of hermeneutical injustice, but that cannot be reduced to a lack of a public concept of the target phenomenon. Pohlhaus (2012), for example, discusses the phenomenon of “willful hermeneutical ignorance” that occurs when the public target concept has been introduced but the powerful avoid describing events in those terms, offering counterinterpretations that fail to accurately depict the phenomenon. Similarly, Medina (2013) analyzes the hermeneutical injustice that occurs when the powerful refuse to apply the target concepts. Moreover, Dotson (2014) discusses epistemic exclusion that is caused by inadequate, dominant, epistemic resources that hinder the uptake of the more adequate hermeneutical resources developed by the marginalized. These insightful analyses suggest that hermeneutical injustice can take various forms besides the lacunae of apt public concepts.

In this paper, I am concerned with the role that phenomenal knowledge plays in mitigating hermeneutical injustice. I proceed as follows: In section 1, I explore the requirements for a *full* understanding of the experiences at the center of hermeneutical injustice, and I elaborate on the role of phenomenal knowledge in such understanding. In section 2, I turn to the analysis of the different forms of phenomenal knowledge. In particular, I distinguish between *direct phenomenal knowledge* and *imaginative phenomenal knowledge*. Moreover, I analyze different kinds of experiences that are at the center of hermeneutical injustice. In section 3, I focus on

¹ In more recent work, Fricker (2016) and Fricker and Jenkins (2017) discuss actively oppressive, motivated ignorance of concepts and they highlight the core notion of hermeneutical marginalization to account for such instances of hermeneutical injustice.

² In Fürst (2024), I offer a model of closing the conceptual gap in cases of hermeneutical injustice.

imaginative phenomenal knowledge of experiences. In particular, I investigate whether one can gain imaginative phenomenal knowledge of the experiences of members of social groups other than one's own and I argue for optimism in this regard. In section 4, I connect the varieties of phenomenal knowledge with different grades of understanding, outlining how understanding based on imaginative phenomenal knowledge helps to mitigate forms of hermeneutical injustice other than those caused by conceptual lacunae.

Before proceeding, some preliminary remarks on terminology will be helpful. In this paper, I analyze ways of understanding and phenomenally knowing *experiences*. When I discuss *experiences* without further specification, I take them to include perceptual, emotional, and cognitive states that exhibit a phenomenal character. By including cognitive states, I adopt the *cognitive phenomenology thesis* which has it that conscious thoughts also have a phenomenal character (Chudnoff 2015, Horgan & Graham 2012, Pitt 2004, Fürst 2023).³ By *phenomenal character* of an experience, I refer to the specific what-it-is-likeness to have a particular experience (Nagel 1974), to its particular feel.

Experiences can have a simple structure (e.g., the experience of a red after-image) or they can be more complex. (For an analysis of atomic and complex states, see Werner 2024.) What is common to simple and complex experiences is that there is something it is like for the subject to have them. The focus of this paper is on complex experiences. Complex experiences can be of a relatively short duration such as, for example, the experience of seeing a beloved one, but they can also extend over a longer time such as the experience of hiking in the desert or watching a play or even over years such as the experience of being a parent. In the following, I use the notions of a *complex experience* or an *overall experience* interchangeably, referring to all sorts of multimodal experiences that can consist of perceptual, emotional, and cognitive elements.⁴ Furthermore, I use “phenomenal knowledge” to refer to knowledge about what an *experience* is like. The objects of phenomenal knowledge can be fleshed out in many ways, for example, as properties of external objects, of internal states, of subjects, etc. However, since the focus of this paper is on experiences in the case of hermeneutical injustice, for simplicity I assume that phenomenal knowledge is knowledge of *experiences*.

³ On the weak cognitive phenomenology view, the phenomenology of a conscious thought is a concomitant phenomenon; e.g., inner imagery associated with a thought. On the strong view, a *sui generis* kind of phenomenology is uniquely tied to entertaining a particular thought. Although in Fürst (2023) I defend a strong cognitive phenomenology view, for present purposes, it suffices to assume the weak view.

⁴ Plausibly, to qualify as an overall experience its elements have to be tied together in some way. This unity can take many forms such as *objectual unification* (i.e., various experiences that are all of one object), spatial unity, temporal unity, *subsumptive unity* which, according to Bayne and Chalmers (2003), yields a distinctive phenomenology, *co-conscious* unity (Dainton 2005), etc.

1. Understanding the experiences at the core of hermeneutical injustice

Let me start with some brief remarks about how the phenomenon of understanding can generally be analyzed. Some philosophers are concerned with ontological analyses of understanding, others with the relationship between knowledge and understanding, and others with the epistemic value of understanding. On the standard view, to understand a phenomenon is to grasp its causes, relations, and explanations. Elgin (2017), for example, emphasizes that understanding crucially involves grasping a body of information and how the elements are connected. Plausibly, grasping these components enables one to make a variety of inferences (Hills 2016). Accordingly, some theorists think that understanding exhibits a cognitive skill (Pritchard 2010) or an ability to have cognitive control that involves being able to manipulate the relata of the relation in question (Hills 2016, 663). Notably, some theorists hold that understanding is harder to acquire than knowledge (Pritchard 2010) and that understanding has a distinctive value (Kvanvig 2003). This distinctive value is often analyzed as understanding being an achievement (Greco 2010; Pritchard 2010, Riggs 2003), the result of an ability carried out successfully. This latter view fits well with the claim that dissolving a complex phenomenon such as hermeneutical injustice requires understanding, which is a more demanding epistemic state.

In this paper, I am concerned with understanding *experiences*. Experiences are special objects of understanding in that their phenomenal character is often seen as an *essential* aspect of the experience (Balog 2012, Nida-Rümelin 2007, Fürst 2014). If so, grasping the phenomenal character of, e.g., a red-experience provides us with a richer understanding than merely knowing that it is a red-experience or that it is caused by such-and-such stimuli. On a widely shared assumption, understanding comes in degrees (Kvanvig 2003, Elgin 2009, Riggs 2003). This claim is particularly plausible for understanding experiences. You can understand an experience fully or partially. Partial understanding might result either from no (or poor) grasp of the phenomenal character, or from no (or poor) grasp of the causes, relations, and connections of the experiences. Accordingly, full understanding of an experience requires grasping its causes and relations, comprehending connections, *and* grasping the experience's phenomenal character. In the case of hermeneutical injustice, it becomes especially clear why merely grasping a functional characterization of the experience does not suffice for full understanding.

Fricker's (2007) analysis of why the victims of hermeneutical injustice could not make their experience intelligible focuses on the lacuna of the public target concept. Take the example of the victims of sexual harassment before the concept had been introduced. Plausibly, the victims knew what the experience was like when having it, but they could not make fully sense of it

since they lacked a concept that captured aspects of the experience other than its phenomenal character. Only the newly established concept of *sexual harassment* highlighted the power-relations, social situatedness of the victims, gender oppression etc. which are key for the target phenomenon. From this, one might rush to the conclusion that grasping the relevant public concept and, hence, understanding an experience *as an experience of sexual harassment* suffices for fully understanding this experience. However, this would be too quick. I suggest that grasping the novel public concept⁵ is not all there is to fully understand the target experience. In particular, what is neglected in the literature on hermeneutical injustice thus far is that phenomenal knowledge is *also* key for fully understanding an experience.

To see the importance of phenomenal knowledge, we have to distinguish between the causes of an experience and those features that make the experience the experience that it is. If one relied solely on knowledge about the causes of the experience (e.g., the behavior of the aggressor) without grasping its phenomenal character, one might misunderstand the phenomenon and misinterpret it as harmless flirting. This misunderstanding is prevented by the grasp of the phenomenal character of the victim's experience which highlights, e.g., the feelings of being threatened, intimidated, and unease—aspects that contribute to the normative character of the phenomenon. Thus, to appreciate the wrongness of the phenomenon, grasping the phenomenal character of the experience is key.⁶ Accordingly, full understanding of the target experience requires possessing phenomenal knowledge *as well as* grasping its causes and connections.

Full understanding, however, is not the main focus of my project. Rather, my aim is to investigate which kind of understanding helps to mitigate hermeneutical injustice. To elucidate this, the issue needs more refinement. Thus, in the next section, I will investigate different kinds of phenomenal knowledge that result in different grades of experiential understanding.

2. Varieties of phenomenal knowledge

Let me start by clarifying what it means to say that a subject possesses phenomenal *knowledge*. Two options are near at hand. First, one might say that, just as with knowledge in general, *phenomenal* knowledge is absolute and non-gradable. There are only two options: either one

⁵ Not all target concepts are concepts of *experiences*. Some concepts clearly are concepts of experiences (e.g., postpartum depression), others refer to complex phenomena that involve actions and experiential aspects. One might think, for example, that 'sexual harassment' or 'stalking' refers to actions but gets its normative content from the experience of the victims.

⁶ Alternatively, one might highlight the importance of phenomenal knowledge by holding that the concept of *sexual harassment* is a concept that is phenomenally mediated. That means, instead of individuating sexual harassment via its causes, the phenomenon is mediated via the experiences of the victims. Thanks to Luke Roelofs for pointing this out to me.

possesses or one lacks phenomenal knowledge of an experience. The claim that knowledge is absolute fits well with the thesis that phenomenal knowledge requires having had the target experience.⁷

Alternatively, one may be inclined to hold that phenomenal knowledge is special insofar as it is *gradable*. Cath (2018), for example, argues that phenomenal knowledge comes in three standards: Gold Standard knowledge of experiences (KoE) (which is phenomenal knowledge that is based on having (had) the target experience oneself), Silver Standard KoE (which is phenomenal knowledge that is based on experiences sufficiently similar to the target experience), and Bronze Standard KoE (which is phenomenal knowledge based on theoretical descriptions and testimony). On this view, the epistemic source bears on the grade or standard of knowledge. This view more accurately captures the following intuitions that are hard to reconcile with the non-gradable view of phenomenal knowledge:

- (a) the intuition that phenomenal knowledge requires attentively undergoing the target experience;
- (b) the intuition that in a restricted sense one can gain phenomenal knowledge of an experience without undergoing the target experience.

Both intuitions seem plausible, and a view that accommodates both of them is desirable. Thus, following Cath, I assume that phenomenal knowledge comes in degrees. In particular, I will elaborate on two kinds of phenomenal knowledge, differentiated by their source: *direct phenomenal knowledge* (hereinafter: DPK) and *imaginative phenomenal knowledge* (hereinafter: IPK).

(a) Direct phenomenal knowledge (DPK)

On a widely held view, one cannot know what an experience is like solely by description; rather, one has to undergo the experience oneself to know what a particular type of experience is like (Jackson 1982, Lewis 1998). There are various ways of fleshing out the phenomenal knowledge that is gained by attentively undergoing an experience. On one account, such knowledge is spelled out in terms of *acquaintance*. Acquaintance is understood as a direct and non-conceptual awareness of the experience that is *given* to the subject (Russell 1911). Alternatively, one might flesh out phenomenal knowledge as the possession (Chalmers 2003) or the grasp (Nida-Rümelin 2007) of a phenomenal concept of the target experience. Further explanations can be found in the literature (Alter & Walter 2007). For present purposes, I set this debate aside,

⁷ However, it does not preclude the view that phenomenal knowledge can also be acquired via other sources. The key point of this view is that, regardless of the specific way it is acquired, knowledge is absolute.

sticking instead to the minimal assumption that there are special acquisition conditions—namely to attentively undergo the target experience—for acquiring phenomenal knowledge. Moreover, I restrict this claim to *a particular kind* of phenomenal knowledge, namely to DPK.

Plausibly, DPK is the kind of knowledge that is necessary for full understanding of an experience.⁸ If so, full understanding is open only to those who both have the experience and the (phenomenal and public) concepts necessary to grasp the experience. Are these requirements too strong? I do not think so. Recall that our goal is to find out what kind of phenomenal knowledge and understanding proves helpful in the quest to establish hermeneutical justice. For reaching this aim, we can settle for less than full understanding. As I will show, partial understanding suffices, as long as it involves phenomenal knowledge of the target experience. Thus, a more nuanced construal of how we can phenomenally know an experience is desirable. Accordingly, let me draw the attention to a second kind of phenomenal knowledge.

(b) Imaginative phenomenal knowledge (IPK)

Imaginative phenomenal knowledge is phenomenal knowledge gained by employing our imaginative capacities. Imagining *experiences* is not merely *supposing* a state of affairs (Weinberg & Meskin 2006), but a specific way of immersing oneself. Deploying our imaginative capacities in this respect requires using experiences we have had as a starting point and then modifying, adding, subtracting or combining them with other experiential or cognitive elements. Kind (2020, 137) labels this process *imaginative scaffolding*, conceived as a skill. We can scaffold out from our previous experiences to experiences that we did not or cannot have. Successful scaffolding requires that the material we use in this process is *sufficiently similar* to the target experience. Analyzing the conditions for an experience to meet the required degree of verisimilitude to the target experience is a difficult task. There are borderline cases that are hard to judge. For present purposes, it suffices to assume that there are cases that clearly qualify or clearly do not qualify as sufficiently similar to the target experience.

Take the experience of tasting a Yuzu for one who has tasted a variety of fruits. One might combine previous experiences of tasting a lime and a grapefruit, with tasting something tart and

⁸ Notably, grasping the public concept might influence the target experience. For example, in the light of the public concept of *sexual harassment* that highlights the gender-related oppression, the way one experiences sexual harassment might change. Before, the overall experience might contain feelings of guilt and shame, whereas after the acquisition of the concept the experience might contain anger and outrage. (However, grasping the public concept does not imply such change; e.g., feelings of shame might persist, even though the survivors now see gender oppression as part of the phenomenon.)

slightly bitter, to arrive at IPK of what tasting a Yuzu is like. Imaginative scaffolding will succeed in this case, since the subject's experiential resources are sufficiently similar to the target experience.

In contrast, gaining IPK of an experience in a particular sense modality for a subject who lacks this sense modality — e.g., imagining as a blind person the experience of seeing a hummingbird — is much more difficult. Nagel puts this limitation as follows: “The problem is not confined to exotic cases, however, for it exists between one person and another. The subjective character of the experience of a person deaf and blind from birth is not accessible to me, for example, nor presumably is mine to him” (Nagel 1974, 440; For similar considerations, see Paul 2014). Let me clarify that hard cases are not restricted to differences in the functioning of our sense organs. Possessing the right imaginative resources to scaffold to the experiences of skydiving or of giving birth, for example, might be very difficult as well. The upshot is: without experiential resources sufficiently similar to the target experience, gaining IPK is not possible.

Trivially, to imagine an experience is different phenomenally from having an experience. Some philosophers think that imagination consists in distinctive imaginative *states* (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002), others think that it is best characterized as a distinctive imaginative *process* (Wiltsher 2023). However, the question that is relevant here is: Can the deliverance of employing our imaginative capacities give rise to DPK? Plausibly, the answer is no. No qualitative identity can be achieved, but qualitative similarity can. This speaks in favor of tying the two different types of phenomenal knowledge to different grades or standards of phenomenal knowledge. Accordingly, following Cath (2018), I hold that these two types of phenomenal knowledge amount to different standards of phenomenal knowledge. *Direct phenomenal knowledge* qualifies as Gold Standard KoE, and *imaginative phenomenal knowledge* qualifies as Silver Standard KoE. With this distinction in hand, let me turn to analyzing the objects of phenomenal knowledge.

2.1 Objects of phenomenal knowledge

To provide a thorough analysis of phenomenal knowledge in cases of hermeneutical injustice, we have to distinguish various kinds of experiences as objects of phenomenal knowledge. I begin with drawing a distinction between the following:

(a) Non-perspectival experiences:

What a particular experience *X is like*.⁹

(b) *Individual perspectival experiences:*

What a particular experience *X is like for a specific subject*.

(For me, for my spouse, etc.)

In many cases, people think that when undergoing a particular experience—for example, tasting a Yuzu, having a toothache, smelling a skunk, being bullied—they share the (essential) properties of this type of experience with others. This speaks in favor of the view that the object of phenomenal knowledge often is what I label a *non-perspectival experience* that, in principle, can be had by many individuals. The key question is: can one gain IPK of non-perspectival experiences by *imagining* what they are like? Take again the experience of tasting a Yuzu. Plausibly, we can gain IPK of this particular non-perspectival experience as long as our imaginative resources are sufficiently similar to the target experience.

Next, consider individual perspectival experiences—what it is like *for a specific subject* to taste a Yuzu—as the object of phenomenal knowledge. This way of fleshing out an experience as the object of phenomenal knowledge takes into account that many factors—besides its causes (for example, the stimuli of your taste buds coming from eating the fruit)—can influence the phenomenal character of an experience. Other actual and previous experiences, emotions, associations, evaluative thoughts, etc. contribute to an individual perspectival experience.

When it comes to individual perspectival experiences, it is not so clear that we can gain IPK, since usually we do not share similar past experiences, emotions, preferences, etc. of other persons. Accordingly, to combine and modify our own previous experiences in the right way to arrive at IPK turns out as an extremely demanding task. Here I do not defend the general *impossibility* of IPK of individual perspectival experiences.¹⁰ I grant that, if someone knows the experiencer very well and has a rich stock of imaginative resources, there might be some cases in which IPK of individual perspectival experiences is possible. However, we can still draw the conclusion that IPK is extremely hard to acquire if the target experiences are essentially constituted by a perspective very different from our own. If our analysis so far is correct, then

⁹ Or, alternatively, what a particular experience *X is like for a subject* (but not for a *particular* subject). See Cath's distinction between "a generic 'one' reading ('S knows what it is like for one to Φ ') and a reading that is anaphoric on the main subject ('S knows what it is like for S to Φ ') (2022, 17).

¹⁰ One way to argue against IPK of individual perspectival experiences is to say that we cannot take the perspective of another person for *conceptual* reasons: complete identification with another person is a conceptual impossibility (Goldie 2011, 302).

we can gain IPK of *non-perspectival experiences* of others. However, it is much harder, if not impossible, to gain IPK of *individual perspectival experiences* of others.

In the case of hermeneutical injustice, the victims are searching for novel concepts to capture a type of experience that they share. This search, as well as the formations of support-groups, shows that the experiences at the core of hermeneutical injustice are *not* conceived of as individual perspectival experiences that only one person can have. Rather, to grasp the target experiences in the case of hermeneutical injustice we have to abstract from individual differences and focus on those phenomenal aspects that are shared. Does this mean that *all* experiences in the case of hermeneutical injustice are non-perspectival experiences? I do not think so. I rather suggest that the distinction between non-perspectival experiences and individual perspectival experiences is not exhaustive. In particular, when it comes to the experiences in hermeneutical injustice, we have to consider a third kind of experience:

c) *Group perspectival experiences:*

What a particular experience Y is like *for members of a particular (social) group*.

Let me elaborate on what I mean by the notion of “group perspectival experiences”, which is central to my analysis of experiences in the case of hermeneutical injustice.

When referring to *group perspectival experiences*, I am not concerned with the experiences of what it is like *to be a member of a particular group* (e.g., what it is like to be a woman, Black, or disabled).¹¹ Rather, the notion of *group perspectival experiences* is used to cover *various types* of experiences that have the following aspect in common: their phenomenal character is influenced by a perspective that members of the group share. Let me clarify that I use the notion of *sharing* in the simple sense of subjects *having the same perspective*, due to living in a society in which certain social-imaginative conceptions are prevalent. That means, members of the group can share a perspective, which becomes an essential part of the overall experience, without interacting with each other. (Interpretations of the notion of sharing that involve a kind of interaction such as, for example, reciprocal other-awareness and integration (León, Szanto & Zahavi 2019) or the token identity and fusional view of sharing (Schmid 2014) are not my focus here.)

¹¹ On my view, such generalized experiences exist, they often arise from social positionality and ongoing lived experience, but can also be brought about by formative events (such as being sexually assaulted that brings about the experience of being a sexual assault survivor).

The shared perspective is the result of situations, events, and actions with which the subjects are confronted repeatedly due to their social identity. (Note that this perspective is not identical to a *standpoint* (which is actively achieved)). Plausibly, this group perspective results from social situatedness, but needs to be distinguished from it.¹² Social situatedness attunes the subject to particular aspects of the world (and might occlude other aspects) and thereby influences *which* experience is brought about in a particular situation. The group perspectival character is the intrinsic phenomenal feature of specific experiences that *phenomenally* reflects the influence of the situatedness. It is best fleshed out as the phenomenology of having an experience *qua one's own social identity*. That means that not every experience of a person who belongs to some group—like the group of people who go running on Wednesday—, exhibits a group perspectival character. The group perspectival character rather is the phenomenal part of particular types experiences that one has *qua one's social identity*; that is, in virtue of the shared social-imaginative conceptions (Fricker 2007, 4) of one's group. Examples of group perspectival experiences are the experience of the *male gaze* (that involves the phenomenology of being looked at in particular way by men *qua being a woman*) or the experience of *racial profiling*.

Most experiences at the core of hermeneutical injustice are *complex* experiences. I suggest that these experiences have some core features—for example, feeling humiliated, objectified, threatened, etc. in the case of the male gaze—and also some other, contingent, features (associations, emotional reactions such as fear or anger, etc.) that might vary from individual to individual. In individuating the experience, we can allow some variation in the contingent features as long as the (majority of the) core features are held fixed. Elaborating on the core features of a particular, complex experience is a hard task and would carry us too far off course. For present purposes, it suffices to point out that in the case the group perspectival character is one such *core feature* of group perspectival experiences. That means, group perspectival experiences cannot be abstracted to non-perspectival experiences without an essential aspect of the experience getting lost.

Group perspectival experiences can be located somewhere in the middle between non-perspectival experiences and individual perspectival experiences. First, consider *who* can have such experiences. In principle, most individuals can have a particular non-perspectival experience, only members of a certain group can have a group perspectival experience, and just

¹² This notion of a *group perspective* differs from epistemically more demanding notions of *perspectives* that can be taken up deliberately and function as cognitive tools (Camp 2019, Sliwa forthcoming). A group perspective does not require the possession of particular concepts (e.g., the concept of the *male gaze*) or background knowledge.

one single subject can have an individual perspectival experience. Second, consider the connection of the experience to a particular *perspective*. As the label indicates, non-perspectival experiences are not tied any particular perspective, group perspectival experiences are tied to a perspective, but to one that can be shared, and individual perspectival experiences are tied to a perspective that only one individual has. Since group perspectival experiences lie in the middle between non-perspectival experiences, of which we can gain IPK, and individual perspectival experiences, of which IPK is extremely hard to achieve, the next question is: is IPK of group perspectival experiences possible for out-group members?

3. Imaginative phenomenal knowledge (IPK) of group perspectival experiences

One might doubt that outgroup-members can gain IPK of group perspectival experiences. In the following, I investigate reasons for such pessimism and show that they are not conclusive. Then, I provide a model of how one might acquire IPK of group perspectival experiences of social groups other than one's own.

3.1 Pessimism

Some theorists (Goldie 2011, Paul 2014) might find the intuition appealing that one cannot know what it is like to have an experience qua being, for example, a woman or Black, if one does not belong to the relevant group. Kind (2021, 239) labels, but denies, the following epistemic inaccessibility thesis: "Any experiential perspective vastly different from the one a person occupies is epistemically inaccessible to that person." What considerations might support the epistemic inaccessibility thesis with regard to group perspectival experiences?

Pessimism might be based on considerations that stem from standpoint epistemology (Harding 1991, Collins 2002, Wylie 2003). According to standpoint epistemology, marginalized groups are in a better position to gain knowledge of the mechanisms of oppression due to their specific standpoint. There is controversy about whether being part of a marginalized group is necessary and/or sufficient for developing a particular standpoint. Many theorists (e.g., Harding 1991; Pohlhaus 2002; Collins 2002) hold that a standpoint is a critical consciousness that is actively achieved. Accordingly, being marginalized is not sufficient for developing a standpoint. But is it necessary? Some theorists argue that, e.g., a feminist standpoint *necessarily* requires being a woman (Collins 2002; Hartsock 1983; Manne 2017), while others deny this (Tilton 2022; Pohlhaus 2012).¹³ If being marginalized is necessary for occupying an oppressed

¹³ Here I remain neutral about this necessity claim. The reason is that an analysis of standpoint epistemology, though a highly relevant task, is beyond my scope. My focus is narrower; namely on the possibility of *phenomenal knowledge* of the experiences of marginalized groups.

standpoint, then this results in an epistemic disadvantage for the powerful. The view that being in a privileged social position occludes knowledge of the oppression of others is widely shared (Alcoff 2007). If one agrees with this view, one might think that the epistemic limitation of the powerful extends also to *phenomenal knowledge* of the *experience of being disprivileged*. Here I will not argue for or against the view that a dominantly situated standpoint limits the possibility of knowing what the *general* experience of being disprivileged is like.¹⁴ Rather I am interested in whether these considerations support pessimism about IPK of *group perspectival experiences*. This is not the case. Let me explain.

Even if the powerful cannot know what the general experience of being disprivileged is like, this does not entail that they cannot gain IPK of *other, more particular*, experiences (such as the experience of the male gaze) of marginalized groups. After all, such complex experiences have many core aspects and the group perspectival character is only one of them. Pessimists might reply that the group perspectival character is an *essential* part after all and achieving IPK of the perspectival character is as hard to achieve as IPK of the general experience of being disprivileged. What speaks in favor of this claim? At this point, considerations about different ways of imagining an experience from a particular *perspective* come in play.

Pessimists might point at the following example to illustrate the difficulty to achieve the relevant IPK: Consider a man who replies to a woman suffering from the male gaze: “If I were looked at as an object of sexual desire, I would be flattered!”. This man makes a very poor attempt at imagining suffering the male gaze from his *own*, egocentric, perspective or, as Goldie puts it, “in-his-shoes perspective-shifting”, viz.:

[...] consciously and intentionally shifting your perspective in order to imagine what thoughts, feelings, decisions, and so on you would arrive at if you were in the other’s circumstances. (2011, 302)

In doing this, he fails to acquire the relevant IPK.¹⁵ As Stueber (2016, 373f.) points out, important differences between the target person and the imagining person bring about this failure. The particular group perspective plausibly counts as such an important difference. Accordingly, in the case of group perspectival experiences, the shortcomings of imagining from an egocentric perspective are particularly salient. Given the difficulty of imagining a group perspectival experience by projecting the experiences one would have to another person, pessimists might conclude that we rather have to *take the very perspective of the victims*.

¹⁴ For an insightful analysis of grasping this kind of experience in a general sense, see Wiltsher 2021.

¹⁵ Arpaly (2020) analyzes a related problem, namely the problem of “runaway simulations”. In this case, the assumption that the other person has the very experience the imager would have turns into a stubborn belief that resists counterevidence.

Finally, they might point out, this task is extremely hard to accomplish and, hence, the relevant IPK cannot be achieved. I agree that egocentric perspective taking is the wrong way to achieve IPK of group perspectival experiences. However, the requirement of *taking the very perspective of the victims* for gaining IPK is too strong. Let me be more specific about the notion of perspective taking involved and draw the attention to a a third option.

Taking on another's perspective is often seen as essential to empathizing.¹⁶ There is a sophisticated debate about what empathy in general requires and how it relates to imagination (Stueber 2016, Schmetkamp and Vendrell Ferran 2020) that I have to bypass here. What is important for our present purposes is that pessimists, presumably, have demanding conceptions of empathy in mind, such as *reenactive empathy* (a form of simulation explored, e.g., by Stueber 2016, Goldmann 2006), *empathetic perspective-shifting*, i.e. “shifting your perspective in order to imagine being the other person, and thereby sharing [...] his or her thoughts, feelings, decisions, and other aspects of their psychology (Goldie 2011, 302)), or *imaginative identification*, i.e. “putting yourself in the position of another person and feeling what their experiences are like from their point of view” (Wiltsher 2021, 324). I remain non-committal about the possibilities of these demanding forms of empathy in general, but I share the pessimist's intuition that it is particularly hard for the powerful to take the perspective of the marginalized in this demanding sense. Importantly, this is not a problem for reaching our goal, since the ambitious “imaginative identification” or complete shift of perspective are too strong of requirements for gaining IPK of group perspectival experiences. The reason is that IPK comes with lower standards than DPK and only requires that one has *sufficiently similar* experiential resources that need not result in an exact match of the target experience.

Accordingly, IPK lies somewhere in-between self-oriented perspective taking and imaginative identification: What IPK requires is more demanding than egocentric perspective taking (or “pseudo-empathy” (Coplan 2011, 40)), since this attitude gets the essential, group perspectival part (and perhaps also other parts) wrong. However, IPK is less demanding than taking the others perspective in the ambitious sense,¹⁷ since it suffices to grasp the essential parts via *sufficiently similar* experiences, rather than by sharing the very target experience. Thus, to adjudicate this issue, we have to get clear about the possibilities of imagining the group perspectival character by relying on sufficiently similar experiences.

¹⁶ For various forms of perspective-taking see Coplan 2011. Some characterizations focus on the capacity to make another person's *reasons* one's own and understand their decisions and actions. These aspects are not our concern here.

¹⁷ For an argument that these two ways of perspective shifting are more similar than suggested by Goldie, see Langkau 2021.

3.2. Achieving IPK of group perspectival experiences

The group perspectival character is an essential part of group perspectival experiences. Accordingly, to gain IPK of the target experience, phenomenally grasping this aspect is key. There are various ways of fleshing out the group perspectival character.

Let me begin with distinguishing the group perspectival character in the *general sense*—as having a social experience qua being a member *of a social group* or, more restricted, *of a marginalized group*—from the *specific* group perspectival character, e.g., that of *women* in the case of the *male gaze*. Based on this refinement, I outline one model of how IPK of group perspectival experiences can be achieved. (I do not conceive this model as the only one; other models might prove helpful too.)

First, if the aim is to gain IPK of the group perspectival character *in a general sense*, one might use experiences that are tied to *one's own social identity* as imaginative resources. Every one of us belong to a variety of social groups and have some experiences that are essentially tied to our social identity. Accordingly, to succeed in this aim seems easy.

Second, if one aims at IPK of the group perspectival character that is tied to experiences qua being *marginalized*, the intersectional diversity of social groups (Crenshaw 1989; Carasthathis 2014) offers a source for gaining this IPK: one might be privileged in one context (being middle class, white) and marginalized in another context (as a women). Hence, one could use one's own experiences that were tied to marginalization to arrive at IPK of the general aspect of having an experience qua being marginalized.¹⁸

Third, one might aim at IPK of *a specific group perspectival character*. This is a difficult task and its success again depends on one's imaginative repertoire. Some of the specific group perspectival aspects share important features whereas other differ significantly. For example, a women might take her experience of not being believed qua being a woman as an imaginative resource for figuring out what the specific group perspectival aspect of not being believed qua being an asylum seeker is like.¹⁹ Due to the fact that her experience shares many of the properties with those of the asylum seekers' experience, she might grasp this specific phenomenology well and achieve IPK of the group perspectival target experience.

¹⁸ Wiltsher analyzes ways of understanding the general experience of *being (dis)privileged*. On his view, “to have experiential mastery of (dis)privilege is to have control of the relationship between the character of relevant experiences and its explanatory grounding in (dis)privilege.” (2021, 334) This is an illuminating view about understanding such general experience. However, my focus is on a less demanding task: on gaining IPK of *particular* experiences that are tied to one's social identity. Imagining what these experiences are like does not imply that one grasps the explanations outlined by Wiltsher.

¹⁹ For an insightful analysis of hermeneutical injustice in the case of asylum seekers, see Boncompagni 2021.

Next, consider a Black man who uses his experience of the White gaze (Yancy 2016)—i.e., *being looked at in a particular way qua being Black*—to imagine what it would be like to suffer the male gaze, i.e., *being looked at in a particular way qua being a woman*. His imaginative material will share some properties of this group perspectival experience (e.g., one’s physical appearance and body being in the focus of others), but significantly differ in others (e.g., being perceived as potentially dangerous in the case of the Black man and as an object of desire in the case of the woman). Thus, imaginative abstraction of the diverging aspects is needed. The result will be only a *partial* grasp of the specific group perspectival experience, but one that still gets many of the core features right.

In other cases, it might be very hard to gain IPK of the specific group perspectival character. Take a White, powerful, able-bodied, straight, cis man who, getting older, has some but yet not many experiences of ageism as the only imaginative resource to try gaining IPK of women’s experience of the male gaze. Given his limited resources, the *specific* group perspective cannot be imagined. Moreover, the man’s own situatedness might hinder him to grasp the—to him uncomfortable—aspect of marginalization and gender oppression. Hence, some core features of the overall experience are left out.

Importantly, even in such hard cases, no excuse for a complete ignorance of what the target experience is like is given, since at least the *general* group perspectival character of having an experience qua one’s own social identity (in this case: by relying on his own social experiences qua being old) could be imagined and combined with DPK of other core features such as unease and threat. Moreover, a skilled imaginer (Kind 2020) might try to imagine the influence of the general group perspectival character on those other parts and partially succeed in this. Since the resulting IPK will still leave out many of the core features of the experience of suffering the male gaze, I label it *gappy* IPK. Gappy IPK qualifies as phenomenal knowledge of a lower standard than IPK, but it still is richer than a purely descriptive knowledge of experiences that leaves all the phenomenal aspects out.

I have been concerned thus far with the reasons for pessimism about gaining IPK of group perspectival experiences and showed that none of them entails that IPK, conceived of as lower standard phenomenal knowledge, is impossible. I then outlined how one might achieve IPK by imagining the group perspectival character either in general or more specific ways. Intersectionality, which is often seen as a challenge for adequately capturing a particular type of experience (Dror 2023), turns out to be an important source for grasping the group perspectival experiences of others by phenomenally grasping at least the general character of

having an experience qua being marginalized. Thus, depending on one's own experiences and situatedness, IPK of the specific or the general group perspectival character can be achieved. Even if one can only gain IPK of having an experience *qua one's social identity*, this limited type of IPK can still function as a bridge between the other core aspects of the experience of which one has phenomenal knowledge. In this way, one achieves only gappy IPK of specific group perspectival experiences. However, gappy IPK is still richer than purely descriptive phenomenal knowledge and, as we will see in the final section, more helpful for combatting hermeneutical injustice.

Let me close this section with a further consideration in favor of optimism. Some theorists (Jones 2004; Yancy 2016) argue that the marginalized are often forced to grasp the experiences of the powerful and succeed in this attempt. In contrast, it is often not in the interest of the powerful to grasp and understand the experiences of the marginalized, since this would make the injustice of their privilege clear. The work on willful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus 2012, Medina 2013, Mason 2011) and on white ignorance (Mills 2007) shows that the privileged are not doomed to ignorance. Rather, they actively cultivate or maintain this ignorance. It is important to acknowledge that much of the work on willful ignorance focuses on ignorance of certain uncomfortable facts of the social world rather than on ignorance of the phenomenal character of the experiences of the marginalized. However, extending the concept to cover instances of willfully ignoring those experiences makes sense. If this is true, then it is more plausible to explain the lack of IPK as the result of willful ignorance, the power structures in the society, implicit biases, etc., rather than by a general impossibility of gaining IPK of the experiences of marginalized groups.

3.3. Optimism about IPK

The analysis in the previous section provides us with reasons for optimism about IPK of the experiences at the center of hermeneutical injustice. As we have seen, some of these experiences are non-perspectival experiences, while others are group perspectival experiences. Depending on the target experience, the possibilities and ways of gaining IPK differ.

One might think, for example, that the experience of *sexual harassment* (or, e.g., *stalking*) is best analyzed as a complex *non-perspectival experience*, since members of various kinds of social groups can be victims of sexual harassment or stalking (although the probability of becoming a victim of these phenomena varies between different social groups). If so, IPK about these experiences can be achieved as long as our experiential repertoire encompasses enough experiences similar to the essential parts of the target experience (Kind 2020, 2021). For

example, one might have had experiences of intimidation, threat, and unease and can use these experiences when exercising one's imaginative capacities to arrive at IPK of the experience of sexual harassment. (For an insightful analysis of this possibility, see Werner 2024). To find out which experiences meet the similarity requirement listening to the testimony of the victims, reading literature or watching movies that depict the experiences of social groups one does not belong to, etc. is crucial.

Other experiences at the core of hermeneutical injustice are *group perspectival* experiences. For example, the experience of being the object of the *male gaze* or *racial profiling* is best analyzed as a complex experience that essentially involves a group perspectival character.²⁰ Depending on the imaginative resources at hand, IPK, or at least gappy IPK, of the target experience can be achieved. Thus, it turned out that there is no insurmountable obstacle to gaining IPK of group perspectival experiences.

The result of the analysis is the following: with regard to phenomenal knowledge of experiences in general, one might have two conflicting intuitions:

- (a) we can know what an experience X is like only if we have had this experience;
- (b) in a restricted sense we can know what X is like by imagination.

These allegedly conflicting intuitions are accounted for by holding that phenomenal knowledge comes in degrees. In particular, phenomenal knowledge that is acquired via different sources, —via occurrent experiences and via imagination—, amounts to different standards of knowledge.

Next, with regard to phenomenal knowledge of the experiences at the core of *hermeneutical injustice* two intuitions are also pressing; namely that if we do not belong to the relevant group,

- (a) we can gain IPK of the target experiences;
- (b) we cannot gain IPK of the target experiences.

In the face of these conflicting intuitions, an account that does justice to both intuitions is desirable. These conflicting intuitions are accounted for by distinguishing non-perspectival experiences from group perspectival experiences. In the case of non-perspectival experiences, IPK can be achieved which accounts for the optimism expressed in (a). In the case of group perspectival experiences, the situation is more complex. Depending on one's imaginative

²⁰ Theorists might disagree which experiences essentially involve a group perspectival character and which do not. However, the point I want to make is that, depending on one's imaginative repertoire and whether the object of phenomenal knowledge is a non-perspectival experience or a group perspectival experience, IPK is easier or harder to achieve.

resources, one might only gain gappy IPK of the target experience. The latter amounts to lower standard as IPK which accounts for the intuitive force behind (b).

4. How IPK helps to establish hermeneutical justice

In this final section, I outline how IPK proves helpful in our endeavor to establish hermeneutical justice.

While on Fricker's view, hermeneutical injustice is systemic and does not require the actions of any particular agent, some philosophers point at forms of hermeneutical injustice that are actively brought about by an agent. Pohlhaus, for example, analyzes "willful hermeneutical ignorance" as the "dismissal and the knower's continued engagement in the world while refusing to learn to use epistemic resources developed from marginalized situatedness" (Pohlhaus 2012, 722).²¹ Similarly, Medina discusses epistemic vices that produce "active ignorance [...] that involves being hermeneutically numbed to certain meanings and voices" (Medina 2013, 107). The result are resistant hearers who contribute to hermeneutical injustice even in the presence of a public concept. As Kinney and Bright (2023, 36) point out, "[this] ignorance of the socially dominant has real social consequences—their ignorance often interferes with or prevents efforts to alleviate injustice."

One way of dismissing the novel concepts is to offer counterinterpretations of the target phenomenon, for example, of sexual harassment as harmless flirting.²² Since such counterinterpretations focus on how the phenomenon is conceived by the powerful and ignore the victim's experience, they do not adequately reflect the target phenomenon but distort it by stripping it of its evaluative character. The result is a misrepresentation that obscures the nature and normative significance of the phenomenon. Phenomenal knowledge of the target experiences draws the attention to the victims and reveals the inadequacy of such counterinterpretations by highlighting the experiential and evaluative aspects of the target phenomenon. In the light of IPK, the merits of the novel public concept become clear. Thus, IPK is useful in combatting dismissal of the public concept and counterinterpretations of the phenomenon.

²¹ Further discussions of ignorance that is actively maintained can be found, for example, in Mills 1994, Sullivan and Tuana 2006, and Dotson 2012.

²² Falbo (2022) discusses a related problem, namely the dynamic interconnections between hermeneutical resources. For example, the concept of a *golden boy* can lead to a failure to apply the concept *rapist* to the perpetrator. In such cases, the distorting concepts are not used to directly replace the novel concept but rather "function to crowd-out, defeat, or pre-empt the application of a more accurate hermeneutical resource" (2022, 343).

A clarification is needed here. Some members of the powerful actively resist gaining knowledge of the target phenomenon, while others passively ignore the phenomenon by simply not making the effort to step outside their default ways of viewing the world, and yet others aspire to ameliorate the injustice and try to understand. The proposed model might not help for changing the mind of the first group (which is the main focus in the literature on willful ignorance). Rather, my model primarily aims at the third group who is engaged in the struggle to overcome hermeneutical injustice. For those aiming at the “virtue of hermeneutical justice” (Fricker 2007, 169), IPK of the experiences of the victims is key. Even in harder cases, when only gappy IPK can be achieved, the deliberate imaginative effort brings with it a reflective awareness that might result in a higher “hermeneutical sensibility” (Medina 2013, 99). Moreover, recognizing the difficulty to gain IPK with respect to certain experiences of the marginalized can lead to new insights regarding how one’s own experiences, that are often taken as normal by the privileged, are tied to one’s situatedness (Wiltsher 2021, 341). Thus, the effort to gain IPK can result in critical reflections on one’s privilege which is a further step towards overcoming the injustice.

As I argued, those who try to grasp the target experiences can gain IPK. In the light of the relevant IPK, they become aware of the merits of novel public concepts and can communicate this to the second, passive, group. This second group does not attend to the victim’s experiences (but does not willfully block any insights about the target experiences either) and can be guided by the third group towards acknowledging aspects they did not notice before. As Pohlhaus points out: “In cases where such a refusal is enacted, dominant epistemic agents are calling for a guarantor for the need for new epistemic resources, but they disqualify marginalized knowers, the very persons whose experienced world reveals the inadequacy of current epistemic resources.” (2012, 729) Those members of the powerful who take active interest in understanding the experiences of the marginalized and who acquire IPK can serve as such guarantor for the need of the novel hermeneutical resources. The more members of the powerful acknowledge these resources and expose the inadequacy of counterinterpretations, the harder it will be for the first, actively resistant, group to exercise their power.

Let me close by connecting the analysis of IKP with the initial consideration of the ways of *understanding* the experiences in hermeneutical injustice.

First, *full* understanding plausibly involves DPK of the experience and the background knowledge provided by the novel public concept. Since only the victims can gain full understanding of the target phenomena, the importance of listening to them (Oluo 2018)

becomes clear.²³ Our efforts to gain IPK via imaginative scaffolding is best guided by testimony and its success crucially depends on listening with “hermeneutical sensibility” (Medina 2013, 99).

Second, in the light of the analysis provided, I distinguish further degrees of understanding that are tied to the kind of phenomenal knowledge involved, namely:

Rich understanding of the target experiences:

Understanding an experience that involves a grasp of the public concept *and* IPK.

Good enough understanding of the target experiences:

Understanding an experience that involves a grasp of the public concept and *gappy* IPK.

Good enough understanding is lower standard than rich understanding, but it still qualifies as higher degree than purely theoretical understanding of experiences. The reason is that phenomenal knowledge enriches our understanding of experiences in a particular way, by revealing their nature and normative character. Thus, to mitigate various forms of hermeneutical injustice, we should aim at *rich* or *good enough* understanding of the experiences of the victims. Such understanding not only allows comprehension of causes and connections, but also an appreciation of the experiential and normative character of the target experience. The powerful who possess such understanding will see the importance of the novel public concepts and the wrongness of willful hermeneutical ignorance. Plausibly, rich and good enough understanding enhances compassion with the victims and motivates action. Recognizing the value of novel public concepts, the powerful who aim at combatting the injustice will make sure that these concepts are effectively operationalized and accurately applied on the relevant occasions. Moreover, if its on the powerful to decide about the implementation of novel institutional practices and manuals, those decisions will benefit strongly from phenomenally enriched understanding of the experiences of marginalized groups.

Conclusion

Generating novel public concepts is not sufficient for resolving hermeneutical injustice. We must also pursue ameliorative action against forms of hermeneutical injustice that persist even once novel concepts are introduced. One key step towards achieving this goal is to gain

²³ However, we also have to bear in mind that, as Berenstain (2016) argues, pressing the marginalized to explain to the powerful their experiences can take the form of “epistemic exploitation”.

understanding of the experiences of the victims of hermeneutical injustice; in particular, understanding that involves phenomenal knowledge. The aim of this paper was to analyze ways of gaining the relevant phenomenal knowledge and to show how phenomenal knowledge of the target experiences helps to combat hermeneutical injustice.

First, I distinguished between different types of phenomenal knowledge—DPK, IPK and gappy IPK—that amount to different grades of phenomenal knowledge. Since DPK is only open to the victims, the importance of listening to them and giving them a voice becomes clear. Second, I argued for optimism regarding IPK of the experiences at the core of hermeneutical injustice. Depending on whether the target experience is a non-perspectival experience or a group perspectival experience, outgroup members can gain IPK, or at least gappy IPK. Third, I outlined how (gappy) IPK proves helpful in combatting willful hermeneutical ignorance. Finally, I integrated the varieties of phenomenal knowledge into an analysis of degrees of understanding experiences and argued that *rich* understanding and *good enough* understanding (that involve IPK and gappy IPK, respectively) play a key role in mitigating the injustice.

I have explored a strategy for mitigating hermeneutical injustice that depends on the capacities of individuals. This fits well with Fricker's proposal that we should aim at developing hermeneutical virtues. The best way to resolve hermeneutical injustice from a political point of view might be very different, for example, to facilitate structural changes due to novel social policies and institutional arrangements (Langton 2010). But identifying a cognitive skill—namely, to gain IPK and, as a consequence, rich or good enough understanding of the experiences of the victims—that helps in our quest to establish hermeneutical justice is one important step that we can take.

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