

Fleshing Out the Structural Aspects of Hermeneutical Injustice
James McCollum, Saint Louis University

Sandra Marshall (2012) puts pressure on several aspects of my account of hermeneutical injustice in the social sciences. Her comments are useful and give me an opportunity to broaden the scope of my research. Her most significant concern, from my point of view, is whether the social sciences and the bureaucratic epistemes that they underwrite actually constitute hermeneutical injustice.

Hermeneutical injustice is, in Fricker's words, "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization." (Fricker 2007, 154) This injustice, because it is conceptual in nature, affects the way we interpret our world and render our experiences intelligible to others. Marshall rightly highlights the intelligibility condition of hermeneutical injustice, for it is not merely a refusal to hear a complaint but a failure, a structural failure, to understand a certain form of harm.

I sought to show in the paper that this concept could be applied to institutions, specifically institutions that used concepts from the social sciences to understand problems in international development. Since sometimes the concepts of the social sciences are inadequate to illuminate the nature of development problems, there is an intelligibility gap created between the various development agencies and the people for whom they work.

Marshall argues that when development agencies are insensitive to problems of transportation to medical clinics, there may be no hermeneutical injustice. Indeed, she says, "This looks like a kind of stupidity, or carelessness but what is needed for this to be a case of hermeneutical injustice is for there to be a 'failure of communicative intelligibility'." Marshall puts her finger on the *sine qua non* of hermeneutical injustice, the lack of intelligibility engendered by various forms of marginalization.

Marshall points out that some problems may be perfectly obvious to those on the ground, so the intelligibility condition of hermeneutical injustice seems to be lacking. Taking it further, the problems even may be perfectly obvious to the bureaucrats and administrators, even if their institutions don't have the necessary rules or resources to effectively solve them. I have no quibble with this diagnosis, but I think this puts the structural aspect of hermeneutical injustice in full relief.

As Elizabeth Anderson says, "Hermeneutical injustice is structural, because hearers are not at fault for not being able to understand what the victims are saying." (2012) The hearer in the institutional case is not a lone administrator or a single victim of bureaucratic stupidity, the hearer is the institution. The regulative frameworks in which institutions operate are structures with their own forms, checklists, and operating procedures, irreducible to the agents, employees, and other stakeholders that inhabit them.

Institutions have a life of their own, but it is not as if the various stakeholders are always or even most of the time aware of the pitfalls of these institutions. The lines are more fluid than that. Administrators sometimes uncritically accept the frameworks of the agencies and sometimes citizens see their own claims in light of a schedule of rights provided to them by an institution or even a constitution. In these cases, intelligibility will be doubly-hindered by narrow institutional frameworks.

Whatever the empirical relationship between how these stakeholders see themselves and how the institutions represent them, intelligibility is not merely an interpersonal affair. It is mediated and filtered by a complex institutional apparatus. Ought one to call this a failure of intelligibility? This is not the place to argue about a notion of intelligibility that can be applied to institutions and persons alike. Suffice it to say that some facets of the situation remain off the institutional radar, precisely because of the organizational structure and concepts that are in place.

Marshall and I agree that these failures of intelligibility are contingent insofar as they relate to the organizational structures in play. These structures can be amended and participants can be further empowered to change them. At another level, the concepts deployed by various agencies are also the products of the social sciences. The use of a neo-classical economics is my primary example, but Marshall is concerned about a broader skepticism that my account may facilitate.

Marshall asks:

The question is how far this constitutive form of hermeneutical injustice runs in the social sciences...the idea of hermeneutical injustice to the social sciences if taken up would surely require a more detailed look at the conceptual structure of more than just neo- classical economics before we can be sure that there really is any useful place for the social sciences in policy making. (23)

This extreme view is unwarranted. We may need better social science, but policy without the perspectives afforded by the social sciences would be just as hermeneutically stunted as policy in a narrowly neoliberal economic model. More participatory forms of the social sciences exist that can help to avoid the idealizations and generalizations that create narrow policy metrics in which people and their interests are misrepresented and their problems misconceived. Moreover, local perspectives do not always afford an optimal vantage point to view macro-level problems.

I do concede that the social sciences are guided by ideals that do not always mesh with the view from the ground. Generalization and idealization may always create rather low-resolution views of the complexity of social problems. However, I do not doubt that such idealizations and generalizations are useful, even necessary features of the social scientific viewpoint. While generalizations are useful, any particular generalization is contestable.

Generalizations are contestable for two reasons. First, progress within the social sciences may result in the reformulation and further characterization of the social data. Second, when institutions rely on these generalizations, they create social categories that form the basis of institutional relationships and expectations. The normative pull of these epistemic categories create the structures that can be characterized as hermeneutically just or unjust precisely because of the dual moral/epistemic significance of these categories.

At the forefront of analyzing these dual relationships is the French “*école des conventions*” approach to economics. Robert Salais, an important figure in this approach, argues that differences in the concepts of employment and unemployment are sometimes insufficient to gauge the impact of joblessness:

The rules by which the list of registered jobseekers is managed are such that any beneficiary of an active measure is removed from the list. If, as is often the case, the measure fails to integrate its beneficiaries into employment, they are, when they reregister, considered to be new jobseekers. The indicator “% longterm unemployment” is mechanically improved while the actual longterm unemployment situation remains the same. These are examples that are in no way marginal, but are true of many countries and have a significant impact on statistical outcomes. (Salais 2005, 248)

Concepts like unemployment are artifacts of both institutions and the social sciences that ground them. Sometimes people who are underemployed are unable to report their problems or apply for assistance precisely because they are not accounted for by these indices. Their problems are unintelligible to the institutions for reasons that are built into the organizational structures themselves.

The power dynamics and intra-institutional relationships are complex, but social scientists like Salais are responsible for illuminating them and giving us avenues for further advancement. Thus, the social sciences, like bureaucracies, are a double-edged sword. They give us powerful epistemic instruments to measure and predict the effects of human interaction. Nonetheless, they can be progenitors of epistemic injustice because they too have cognitive blind spots.

Contact details: jim.mccollum@gmail.com

References

- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2012. Epistemic justice as a virtue of social institutions. *Social Epistemology* 26 (2): 163-173.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. 1st edition. Oxford University Press, USA.

McCollum, James. 2012. Fleshing out the structural aspects of hermeneutical injustice. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 1 (9) 33-36. <http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-qC>

Marshall, Sandra. 2012. A problem for the social sciences: A comment on James McCollum on hermeneutical injustice. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 1 (7): 21-23.

Salais, Robert. 2006. On the correct (and incorrect) use of indicators in public action. *Comparative Labor Law and Policy Journal* 27 (2): 237-256.