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Social Imaginary and Epistemic Discrimination: From Global Justice to Epistemic Injustice

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The situation of injustice can be defined when someone is denied the value or thing that is otherwise ‘due’ to them or ought to be theirs. They are denied such a value because of their historico-structural location at the margins. Historically, people who have been pushed on the margins of the society, which calls itself mainstream, experience, this type of marginalisation as a normalised social practice. Situation of injustice manifests in many forms such as in the form of social and economic injustices. However, socio-economic injustice is normalised and standardised with the help of epistemic injustice that plays an instrumental role in such standardisation.

In recent decades, there has been an increased interest in the issue of epistemic injustice, which has generated a new renowned philosophical reasoning and attracting intense scholarly attention. This new development has generated new theoretical tool kit to illuminate the situations of ‘epistemic injustice’ and ‘epistemic violence’. This new conceptual tool kit has enabled to identify the situations and settings of epistemic injustice.

Global Justice to Epistemic Injustice

One of the settings of epistemic injustice that gaining scholarly attention is the domain of international development cooperation (Koch 2020). Koch argued that, international development cooperation is the field ‘which purports to be concerned with “doing good” and to work towards global justice, but, in practice it counteracts its own ambitions’ (478). She has picked her arguments from Dübgen (2012), Malavisi (2010, 2015) and further advanced it. Koch furthered it with the help of interview material that she generated in Tanzania and South Africa as the policy experts in these countries are subjected to epistemic injustice in the form of discriminatory epistemic practices in development cooperation context. The scholar aligned epistemic injustice with critical development theory, post-colonial scholarship and Southern theory. All these theories were developed to seek human emancipation as their overt political position. A social theory is critical insofar as it seeks human emancipation that is to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer 1982, 244). Critical theories would find out the causative circumstances and historical contexts in which human being have been enslaved. By doing so it would also prescribe rational normative basis on which human freedom can be increased and domination can be decreased.

Koch substantiates her argument with the help of two other scholars to illuminate epistemic injustice in practice of development cooperation context as epistemic injustice occurs at different levels. First, Malavisi maps the process of occurrence of such injustice for instance, ‘when development professionals visit poorer countries for a few days and believe they “understand” the situation of the other, and therefore base their decisions on this experience’ (Malavisi 2015, 118).

Koch claims to have provided a more in-depth analysis and ‘empirical proof’ to the gap, which Malavisi has left unfulfilled. Malavisi highlights the argument that there is a visible harm done in a situation of credibility excess and continuous discriminatory epistemic

imaginary that influences and shapes the development cooperation in their world or recipient countries, which can be characterised as the situation of epistemic injustice. Miranda Fricker offered the rubric term of ‘epistemic injustice’ for normalised experiences, ‘namely those in which someone is ingenuously downgraded and/or disadvantaged in respect of their status as an epistemic subject’ (Fricker 2017, 53). She conceptualised two forms of epistemic injustice, which occur at the individual as well as at the structural level, namely testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice.

In case of testimonial injustice, ‘someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007, 20). This injustice takes place when an epistemic agent receives an unfair deficit of credibility due to identity prejudice on the hearer’s part. At the structural level, Hermeneutical injustice, which describes as a structural form of injustice, occurs when certain groups are epistemically marginalised. Thus, they are unfairly prevented from fully participating in social processes, which is primarily a meaning-making process (Fricker 2016, 163). Second argument Koch advances is of Dotson’s, in his argument, it is not that an individual faces disadvantage as an individual but he or she face this situation because ‘socio-epistemic structures’ (Dotson 2012). This socio-epistemic structure render members of certain marginalized groups collectively disadvantaged and unintelligible or less intelligible than others. The effects of such kinds range from communicative misunderstanding to ‘epistemic oppression’ (Dotson 2014) and, in the very extreme, ‘hermeneutical death’ (Medina 2017). However, it is to be noted that, testimonial injustice has roots in the hermeneutical injustice, at the same time both of them mutually interact and influence each other.

Social Imaginary and Credibility Deficit

While highlighting on aid-related advisory processes Koch’s paper makes a claim on how epistemic authority therein are tied to identity-based prejudice. Fricker’s central case of testimonial injustice is one in which a speaker suffers from credibility deficit, not credibility excess. It highlight that the systematic credibility and systemic credibility deficit of policy experts are structurally related, policy experts from aid-receiving countries suffer from systematic credibility deficit which is closely interrelated to credibility excess of so-called ‘international’ experts. In this process the author makes the point that the prevalence of both ‘testimonial and hermeneutical injustice prevents experts from the Global South from taking the lead in interpreting their own societies’ realities’. Credibility excess does here no epistemic injustice because it does not undermine, insult, or otherwise withhold a proper respect for the speaker, however in a cumulative credibility excess over a period produces detrimental effects for the person who has been attributed of credibility deficit.

The testimonial injustice is attributed to in Fricker’s argument ‘speaker qualifies as a special case; the regular case of testimonial injustice, for Fricker, ‘remains such as a matter of credibility deficit and not credibility excess’ (Fricker 2007, 21). However, building credibility here does not depend only on individual subjectivity, rather one has to look at holistically at the larger historical-social relations and contexts in which either credibility deficit or credibility excess are built. In such an analysis one, also need to pay attention to social

imaginary, ‘a repository of collectively shared images and scripts’ that it operational in a given context, here in the context of international development cooperation. Medina gives social imaginary a prominent place and highlights this notion as it plays double role in instituting epistemic injustice. One side it can render certain things highly visible and another side it can make others implausible and nearly invisible, thus contributing to hermeneutical injustice. In the same vein, it also induces testimonial injustice by establishing unjust patterns of credibility excesses and deficits (Medina 2011, 27). Social imaginary has the capacity to rank someone in epistemic terms with high credibility while other deficit credibility, in this process it facilitates, sustains, naturalises and legitimises hierarchical epistemic relations.

While investigating empirically and translating epistemic injustice in the context of Development Cooperation, Koch highlights this field as an ‘inter and transnational area of political-economic business through which states provide assistance to other states, mainly in the form of financial resources and knowledge-related activities, such as capacity building and expert advice’ (480). However, the dependency that is created in this kind of international cooperation process is not mutual dependency but dependency of third world countries on the western/northern world that sustains and legitimises the economic, cultural and of course the epistemic domination over eastern/southern world. The scholar presents the development aid as a field without any contradictions in terms of economic dependency. In Escobar’s words development has been the primary mechanism through which the Third World has been imagined and imagined itself, thus marginalizing or precluding other ways of seeing and doing (Escobar 1995).

In international aid, cooperation between local or national and global or international is one of the key features that has been emphasised. Nevertheless, in the recent decades ‘partnership’ in international aid prevailing in policy circles and earmarked the formal role of responsibilities of various actors both global and local. However, the relationship continues to be hierarchical. In terms of sharing of knowledge, various international institutions have emphasised on giving importance to local knowledge and mutually learning and sharing of knowledge rather transferring it unilaterally from global to local. In other words, partnership discourse emphasised on agency of southern partners without addressing the power asymmetries in international political economy.

Koch attempts to empirically examine Fricker’s two essential elements i.e. testimonial injustice with the help of expert’s interviews that she carried out in South Africa and Tanzania, namely, a speaker unfairly receives a deficit of credibility, and this happens due to identity-prejudice operating in the hearer’s judgment. It was amply clear through the expert’s interview that many of the interviewee’s explained that they were subjected to credibility-deficit practices, which resulted in epistemic injustice cumulatively. Through interview, Koch establishes that the local experts experience acute credibility deflation in interaction with international experts that are affiliated to donor organisations. The space that the local expert’s occupy in sharing local knowledge has little or no weightage in designing the development planning.

It is clear that there is a kind of division of labour between local/national experts and foreign/international experts. The terms of interaction between these two is of hierarchical subordinating local expertise to the international expert's knowledge. In the particular case that Koch mentions of the development strategies that was developed by ministerial and academic experts from Tanzania were rejected by donors, the known reason for the rejection was not that the development strategy was inferior but simply the local experts developed it. In their view, the rejection was not because of its content, but due to the fact that 'locals' had drafted them. The development strategies developed by local experts are not only rejected but there are instances where donor advisors make derogatory assessments/comments against the strategy reports prepared by the local experts. Climax of this derogatory attitude reaches in the assumptions that 'local actors unable to perform without external support. It indicates this attitude is linked with the origin of the epistemic agent involved i.e. the local expert's. While origin of the agent, associated social imaginary play an important role, the professional experience, and situated epistemic privilege of the local agents doesn't count as consequence of discriminatory social imaginary for only being local, thus epistemically lesser. It indicates that experts from 'the aid receiving countries are subjected to discriminatory credibility judgment based on their identity and that this seems to happen not incidentally but systematically' (483). Koch adds: 'The accounts presented above indicate that experts from within the aid-receiving countries are subject to discriminatory credibility judgment. The credibility deficit 'local' experts suffer is inherently linked with the credibility excess 'international' experts receive in aid circles, they are considered more knowledgeable and more competent to deal with the challenges at stake' (483).

Epistemic Injustice and Epistemicide

The process of epistemic injustice here is interactive, comparative and contrastive as claimed by Medina (2011, 18). In this context of development cooperation in South African and Tanzanian the overwhelming perception of local experts was that they were not judged based on their knowledge, expertise and merit but simply because they are local experts, thus their advice was hardly taken into consideration. Here social identity of the local experts was given prominence over their competence and expertise. Even though, certain extent the field of international cooperation under the new paradigm of partnership between local and international cooperation has been democratised. However, the local experts are reduced to epistemic informants and at the least informants with certain capability to speak.

This hierarchy of knowledge sharing and positioning experts vertically is a direct ascendancy of colonial domination that was unleashed during colonial subjugation of Northern over Southern knowledge because former with the help of science as a form of knowledge was ascribed universality, generalisability and empirically valid form where as the Southern knowledge was folklorist context-driven and local, thus supplementary. In this scheme of hierarchy, science was considered as the 'best' kind of knowledge, superior to various other forms of unreliable and unverifiable non-scientific knowledge (Vaditya 2018). It was primarily used to understand and subjugate both natural and human worlds.

The epistemic subordination of non-western world in the present context the experts from the North in the division of work are delegated tasks such a project design and conceptualisation, where local and national experts are employed just to assist in data collection work. There is also large extent acceptance of such division by the local experts. It indicates that even the local experts have internalised this kind of knowledge division based on their level of perceived credibility factors. It shows the hegemonic hold of western/northern form of knowledge that was institutionalised during colonial period. That hegemony continues in the form of the imaginary epistemic superiority of global North perpetuated by the donor bureaucracies in the South. The local experts from south should be given liberty to interpret their own societal realities from their own structural standpoint. However, in advisory interaction concurrently credibility deflation and epistemic marginalisation go hand in hand.

The western epistemic domination has not been a silent neutral historical process but has caused considerable irreparable damage to the indigenous way of knowing reality which was termed as ‘epistemicide’. The logic of epistemic domination stems from the colonialism and its expansion of with the logic of ‘epistemicide’. Epistemicide is the process of extermination of knowledge other by the logic of expansion of science through the historical process of colonial expansion. According to de Sousa Santos, colonialism was destructive of the knowledge and cultures of native populations, of their memories and ancestral links and their manner of relating to others and to nature. Their legal and political forms—everything—is destroyed and subordinated to the colonial occupation (Santos 2016, 18).

The colonialism offered enormous epistemic power to the West over the centuries. In the process, it has also permeated in the reality of several non-western dominant epistemologies. For example country like India, where equally dominant (upper) caste epistemologies of have integrated with the dominant western epistemologies. Thus, the dominant caste society maintains and sustains it epistemic domination, where it considers socially marginalised groups as passive recipients of, in the form of ‘received theories.’ Within non-western Indian society, there is interplay of west European epistemology and Caste epistemologies. In that sense, ‘acquisition of knowledge is more an act of power rather than as an act of truth seeking’. It is interesting to note that this ‘taken for granted’ epistemic practice among the dominant which committing epistemic injustice has been projected and camouflaged as natural and just. This act was even considered sometimes as necessary, progressive and an act of ‘kindnesses (bodhi s.r and bipin jojo 2019).

The article highlights the development cooperation through an epistemic justice lens and aligns it with critical development theory, post-colonial scholarship and Southern theory. In case of critical development theory, which ‘offer a radical critique of the dominant paradigm and to use all its imaginative powers to develop a new paradigm offering renewed emancipatory horizons’. The paradox is that, the epistemic injustice, practiced and institutionalized in the development aid field, which claims to be working towards the global justice. As the author claimed that, this article was an outcome of a project that sought to scrutinize advisory processes with a focus on the policy fields of health, environment and education and the uptake of expertise in South Africa and Tanzania.

The scholar shifts from theoretical perspective and focuses on empirical evidence of how the experts from the global South in development cooperation experience latent deflation of credibility and structural marginalization as acts of discriminatory epistemic injustice. The study even highlights the division of labour that takes place between local/national and international experts. The former is assigned the duty of 'field work' of consultancy and the later intellectual tasks such as project design and conceptualization. Thus, in development cooperation subordinates 'local' knowledge to the expertise of a transnational expert epistemic community whose members have established a hegemonic hold. This article makes a strong point for ending epistemic subordination of global south to the global north.

Conclusion

The article highlights the one of the contexts of epistemic injustices but fall shorts of pointing out counter movements at large that challenges the epistemic dominance of the west in Africa particularly in Tanzania and South Africa. Thus, it captures the contextual dimension of epistemic injustice but not the historical one. Knowledge as source of power and domination has to be acknowledged through accepting the reality of there is not a single reality hence single epistemology rather multiple realities and multiple epistemologies. It has to be grounded fundamentally on a *historical approach* that accepts producing knowledges rather than knowledge. Thus, the process of decolonising from both external and internal colonialism can liberate subjugated knowledge of oppressed groups throughout the world. The motto of the liberating knowledge and people should be as claimed by bodhi and jojo (2019) the transformation from objects of theory' to 'subjects with epistemology'.

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