Emancipatory Activist Movements Can Build Collective Intellectual Self-Trust—But Not Always in Ways We Would Like

Inkeri Koskinen, Tampere University, inkeri.koskinen@tuni.fi

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Nadja El Kassar (2020) argues that intellectual self-trust, both individual and especially collective, is a central tool for countering epistemic injustice. It can help individuals and collectives to defend themselves against the effects of epistemic injustice, and especially collective intellectual self-trust can enable resistance against epistemic injustice. The argument is compelling, and when I was given this chance to reply, I decided to adopt the notion of collective intellectual self-trust, and use it in order to clarify a question I kept asking myself when reading the article: How do people subjected to long-standing epistemic injustice build collective intellectual self-trust?

Being Subjected to Epistemic Injustice

What I particularly appreciate in El Kassar's article is that her argument brings to the forefront the people subjected to epistemic injustice. The virtue-epistemological starting points of the philosophical discussion about epistemic injustice have drawn a lot of attention to the actions of the potential perpetrators of epistemic injustices. Many of the remedies suggested in the recent philosophical literature—including the ones suggested by Fricker (2007)—seek answers to the question "how can we avoid committing epistemic injustice". This I find somewhat problematic, because I doubt that the efficient countering of epistemic injustices can be carried out by the perpetrators or potential perpetrators alone. This has also been made quite clear in feminist, critical and decolonial thought before the vocabulary of epistemic injustice was available (see Kidd, Medina and Pohlhaus 2017). Of course we can all try to avoid epistemic injustice, and we can, for instance, make institutional changes when epistemic injustices are embedded in institutional practices. But I fear that such remedies are insufficient.

As El Kassar makes clear, the literature on epistemic injustice largely agrees that when people are subjected to epistemic injustice, their epistemic agency is harmed. Remedying epistemic injustice should then strengthen their epistemic agency. Therefore, remedies in which they are not engaged as active epistemic agents are not likely to be as effective as ones in which they are the central agents, and even the initiators of the change—after all, how better could one's agency be strengthened than through autonomous action? And if the processes where epistemic injustices have actually been effectively countered are anything to go by, it seems that if the people who are subjected to epistemic injustice are not active agents in the change—if they do not resist epistemic injustice (Medina 2013)—the injustice will likely go unnoticed by the majority of the population, and the need for changes on the side of the potential perpetrators may never even be recognised.

El Kassar's article draws attention to the prerequisites of such resistance. She argues that effective resistance against epistemic injustice requires not only individual, but also collective intellectual self-trust. This makes sense. When members of a group trust each other's intellectual capacities, they all receive the kind of support and trust that not only maintains individual intellectual self-trust, but can increase it. And if the group succeeds in some act of resistance, the success is likely to further increase the group's collective intellectual self-trust: it strengthens the trust the group members have in the intellectual capacities of the other

members and of the group itself. In other words, increasing individual and collective intellectual self-trust seems, in such cases, to be an integral part of countering epistemic injustice.

But as El Kassar notes, there are clear obstacles to such virtuous circles—ones that can prevent them from ever starting off.

Collective Intellectual Self-Trust

Firstly, collective intellectual self-trust is possible only in communities whose members identify with the community, and epistemic injustice can hinder such identification. As El Kassar points out, only groups that are relatively strongly collective (Tuomela 2013)—ones whose members are aware of having shared concerns—can have the kind of collective intellectual self-trust she talks about. But individuals subjected to epistemic injustice are not necessarily in a position in which they would or could become members of a strongly collective group. For an example, a disabled person who is not treated as a reliable epistemic agent, who lacks conceptual resources that would be necessary for expressing their experiences to others, and who relies on others for care, may be unable to even contact other people in similar circumstances.

Secondly, even strongly collective groups can have low collective intellectual self-trust. Persistent epistemic injustice is, as El Kassar notes, likely to lead to low intellectual self-trust. This does not apply only to individuals, but also to groups and communities. People are often categorised as belonging to some social group—individuals are gendered, racialised, etc., by others, and this creates and sustains group identities (Moya 2000; Alcoff 2006). The individuals thus categorised have no say in the matter: they cannot avoid being categorised as members of some group, and they know that other members are in a similar situation and face similar attitudes. Social groups like this can be strongly collective. But if there are widely held prejudices against the intellectual capacities of the members of such a group, this will quite likely erode the group's collective intellectual self-trust.

This leads to two interrelated questions: How does one actively build the collective intellectual self-trust of a group or community? And is it possible to somehow make group members more aware of the shared concerns they have, thus turning weakly collective groups into more strongly collective ones—or is it possible to create strongly collective groups around some shared experience? These questions are quite crucial if collective intellectual self-trust is to be a basis for effective remedies against epistemic injustice. In section 5 ("Collective Intellectual Self-Trust", 202-205) El Kassar mentions examples of groups in which something like this clearly has happened, and asks how do such developments start. I would, however, pose the question in a slightly different way: How do group members actively initiate and sustain such developments?

But even this question needs to be refined. As El Kassar emphasises, intellectual self-trust does by no means guarantee the epistemic value of its outcomes. The fact that a community has high collective intellectual self-trust does not mean that we should believe the claims its

members endorse. So the crucial question is how do group members counter epistemic injustice by strengthening or building collective groups, and by strengthening their collective intellectual self-trust—and how do they do this in a way that is likely to produce epistemically valuable outcomes.

I will now turn two examples I have encountered in my own work; in the first the strengthening of group identities and simultaneous increases in collective intellectual self-trust lead to epistemically valuable outcomes; in the second they do not.

Emancipatory Activist Research

Kristina Rolin and I have argued that scientific/intellectual movements are sometimes capable of remedying structural epistemic injustices (Koskinen and Rolin 2019). Such movements are overtly political and contested collective movements with a programme for scientific or intellectual change or advance (Frickel and Gross 2005). As an example of a successful scientific/intellectual movement we focused on indigenous activist research. By mobilising agents across disciplinary boundaries as well as across the boundaries of science, by emphasising the importance of participatory practices, and by steering research in many fields towards questions indigenous communities find important, indigenous activist research has, we argue, been able to effectively counter many structural epistemic injustices embedded in both scientific and social institutions and practices. Also many other forms of emancipatory activist research have been able to efficiently tackle deep-rooted epistemic injustice. A good example is the way in which the notion of accessibility has been developed and used in disability activism and disability research to counter hermeneutical injustice (Berghs et al. 2020).

Community building and what can here be called the strengthening of collective intellectual self-trust are crucial parts of such (often partial and incomplete) success stories. In postcolonial theory they are discussed under rubrics such as self-determination, identity building, and conceptual and epistemic decolonisation (Fanon 1961; Smith 1999; Mitova 2020). By acting both in academia and in other areas of society, activist researchers can, when successful, alter prejudiced ideas of what it means to belong to a certain social group. New knowledge about an indigenous community, knowledge that has been produced by studying questions and issues members of the community find important, can (often slowly) change widely held conceptions of the community. Changes in such conceptions, and experiences of the successful addressing of issues relevant for the community—carried out by community members, and in ways the community members find epistemically familiar and compelling—is likely to build the community's collective intellectual self-trust. One way to describe this is to draw on Ian Hacking's (1995) notion of the looping effect of human kinds: new knowledge about a category, or about what it means to belong to that category, can change the self-understanding and behaviour of the people who are classified as belonging to that category. In order to strengthen collective identities harmed by oppression, activist researchers are intentionally creating emancipatory looping effects.

Such processes can yield epistemically valuable outcomes not only for the community itself, but also for others: taking the viewpoints of socially marginal groups into account in research can help us to avoid biases and notice understudied issues (Wylie 2003; Rolin 2009). To sum up, emancipatory activist research can, when successful, counter epistemic injustices by bolstering the collective intellectual self-trust of socially marginal groups, and the process can lead to epistemically valuable outcomes. It can also strengthen collective groups; the impact disability activism and activist research has in many countries had on the communities in question might once again provide good examples. However, such success stories require people whom Medina (2013) would call epistemic heroes: individuals who have the courage to initiate epistemic transformations. Without them, activist emancipatory movements are unlikely to arise.

Moreover, the building of collective intellectual self-trust does not guarantee epistemically valuable outcomes. An excellent example of this are groups that C. Thi Nguyen (2020) calls echo chambers: epistemic communities where community members are trusted and their epistemic credentials amplified, while non-members are epistemically discredited and distrusted. I observed some groups like this quite closely a few years ago, as I was writing a popular book on pseudoscience and demarcation. I wanted to use, as examples, pseudoscientific theories of the history of Finland: our forefathers actually ruled Europe, we descend from the lost tribes of Israel or from the inhabitants of Atlantis, our noble history has been maliciously covered up by the scheming elites, and so on. Most countries have their own versions of these stories, and they are repetitive enough to be easily recognisable. I have no way to assess whether the people whose discussions I followed on various online platforms had actually been subjected to epistemic injustices of some sort.

In the few debates I followed, no epistemic injustice took place: outsiders presented sound criticism, which the insiders promptly dismissed. But the theorists certainly believed themselves to be wrongly discredited. And for some of them these online discussions were clearly very important; possibly even the only place where they got positive, encouraging feedback on their intellectual capacities—the kind of feedback that builds intellectual self-trust. And with the validation came also an explanation for the disparagement they received elsewhere: the maliciousness of some group which is intentionally covering up the truth. For these people, the discussions were emancipatory. Such processes can be major catalysts in the formation and strengthening of communities. Surprisingly strong collective groups had emerged in some of the platforms I followed. The most active members dedicated a lot of time and effort to their shared cause, and the longer the participants had been members, the more views they shared. Outside views were dismissed as either misguided or downright malicious. Such groups have their own heroic activists, ones whose initial work has led to the emergence of these strongly collective groups with high collective intellectual self-trust. But the outcomes are epistemically deplorable.

Practical Applications

It is easy to imagine how an individual subjected to persistent epistemic injustices can be or become a member of a strengthening group or community with rising collective intellectual

self-trust. But unfortunately it is as easy to imagine it to be a group of the second type sketched above as it is to imagine it being one of the first type. A significant difference between the two is related not to self-trust, but trust in others. As El Kassar notes and many have pointed out, people subjected to epistemic injustice often have good reasons for not trusting other people. But while activist movements within academia are critical of the prevailing approaches to their central issues, they nevertheless have some trust towards the scientific community: critical interaction, though sometimes strained, is still cultivated. In echo chambers the only attitude towards outsiders that is cultivated is distrust.

My aim here has been to examine the possible practical applications of the idea that collective intellectual self-trust can enable resistance against epistemic injustice. If intellectual self-trust is, as El Kassar argues, a central tool for countering epistemic injustice, then how, in practice, is it used and developed? Does the usefulness of the notion lie mainly in its applicability to the retrospective analysis of successful cases of resistance? Or can it also be used in the development of efficient remedies against epistemic injustice? Either way, I appreciate the way in which El Kassar's article draws attention to the actions of the people subjected to epistemic injustice.

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