



<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Testimonial Smothering's Non-Epistemic Motives: A Reply to Goetze and Lee

Eric Bayruns García, California State University, San Bernardino,
Eric.BayrunsGarcia@csusb.edu

García, Eric Bayruns. 2022. "Testimonial Smothering's Non-Epistemic Motives: A Reply to Goetze and Lee." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (1): 18-20.
<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-6rH>.

In her article, J. Y. Lee (2021a) presented anticipatory epistemic injustice. A subject suffers anticipatory epistemic injustice if she suppresses her testimony because she anticipates that she will face negative consequences due to her membership in a non-dominant identity group (Lee 2021). She claims that anticipatory epistemic injustice is distinct from testimonial smothering (Dotson 2011). According to Lee, these phenomena are distinct because they differ in terms of their causal stories. By Lee's lights, testimonial smothering involves a speaker smothering or truncating her testimony because her hearer is testimonially incompetent vis-à-vis the content that the speaker would communicate. Anticipatory epistemic injustice need not involve a speaker who actually is testimonially incompetent. In a case of this phenomenon, a speaker need only anticipate incompetence.

The Dialectic

In commentary (Bayruns García 2021) on Lee's article, I argue that testimonial smothering and anticipatory epistemic injustice are indistinct because according to Kristie Dotson testimonial smothering only requires that a speaker have good reason to believe that her audience may be testimonially incompetent regarding the content she would relay. As a result, the difference to which Lee points to ground her claim that these phenomena are distinct does not obtain.

My aim in pointing out that these phenomena are indistinct is to motivate the view that 'distinctness' should not serve as a primary criterion for inclusion into the epistemic injustice literature. Rather, the primary criterion should be whether a phenomenon's addition to the literature will promote the development of prescriptions and remedies of epistemic injustice and as a consequence identity-based systemic injustices such as racial injustice.

In replies to my commentary, Goetze (2021) and Lee (2021b) argue that even if my point about testimonial smothering is correct, my claim that these phenomena are indistinct is false. By their lights, my claim is false because anticipatory epistemic injustice can obtain if a subject suppresses her testimony due to negative consequences that are *non-epistemic* such as ethical or political consequences. The basic idea here is that my claim that these phenomena are indistinct fails because a broader set of causes can lead to anticipatory epistemic injustice in comparison to the causes that can result in testimonial smothering. For Goetze and Lee, this is the case because the relation between these phenomena are a relation of genus to species. In other words, testimonial smothering is a sub-class of a more general class, namely anticipatory epistemic injustice.

Ethical, Social and Political Harms and Testimonial Smothering

In my initial commentary on Lee's article, I focused on testimonial incompetence as a potential difference between anticipatory epistemic injustice and testimonial smothering because it featured prominently in Lee's explanation of why these phenomena are distinct. In response to my commentary, Goetze and Lee claim that anticipatory epistemic injustice is a broader phenomenon than testimonial smothering and as a consequence it is distinct from testimonial smothering in the sense that anticipatory epistemic injustice can obtain without testimonial smothering obtaining. But I submit that anticipatory epistemic injustice is not

distinct on the grounds that they present because testimonial smothering can result from a speaker's anticipation that her testimony will result in "social, political, and/or material harm" (Dotson 2011, 244).

Dotson identifies "three circumstances that routinely exist in instances of testimonial smothering" (244). That the "content of the testimony must be unsafe and risky" is one of these circumstances (244). The lack of safety that a speaker faces, or the risk that a speaker runs, can be epistemic, social or material. Accordingly, if a speaker smothers her testimony because she aims to avoid some bad ethical or material consequence, then a case of testimonial smothering obtains.

Goetze presents a case in which a sexual assault survivor suppresses testimony of her sexual assault because she would rather not risk subjecting her assailant, a man of color, to the justice system in Canada. She would rather not subject him to this because men of color almost invariably receive unjust treatment in this system of justice. Goetze presents this case to show that anticipatory epistemic injustice and testimonial injustice are distinct. For Goetze, that an ethical or political consequence motivates this speaker demonstrates anticipatory epistemic injustice's distinctness from testimonial smothering.

I submit that this case is not only properly understood as a case of anticipatory epistemic injustice, but that it is also properly understood as a case of testimonial smothering. Speakers that testimonially smother, for Dotson, can be motivated by "social, political, and/or material harm" (244). Dotson points to the microaggressions that Black women face as an example of the psychological and ethical harm that can motivate a speaker to smother her testimony (250).

Dotson describes a case of testimonial smothering where Cassandra Byers Harvin, a Black woman, opts to truncate her testimony because her audience, a White woman, responds with a micro-aggression (Dotson 2011, 247; Harvin 1996). Harvin also notes that she avoided conversations about race in the US in general and conversations about the O.J. Simpson trial in particular because her colleagues would display "hurt feelings...and defensiveness" (Dotson 2011, 247; Harvin 1996, 16). Harvin here appeals to non-epistemic reasons that motivate testimonial smothering. That is, Harvin smothers her testimony because of her desire to avoid eliciting certain feelings and responses in her would-be White audiences. If Harvin's motive here is non-epistemic, then the reason that Goetze and Lee adduce in support of their claim, that anticipatory epistemic injustice and testimonial smothering are distinct, does not in point of fact support this claim.

References

- Dotson, Kristie. 2011. "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia* 26 (2): 236–257.
- García, Eric Bayruns. 2021. "On Anticipatory-Epistemic Injustice and the Distinctness of Epistemic-Injustice Phenomena." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 7 (10): 48–57.

- Goetze, Trystan S. 2021. "Anticipation, Smothering, and Education: A Reply to Lee and Bayruns García on Anticipatory Epistemic Injustice." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (9): 36–43.
- Harvin, Cassandra Byers. 1996. "Conversations I Can't Have." *On the Issues: The Progressive Woman's Quarterly* 5 (2): 15–16.
- Lee, J. Y. 2021a. "Anticipatory Epistemic Injustice." *Social Epistemology* 35 (6): 564-576
- Lee, Ji-Yong. 2021b. "On Anticipatory Epistemic Injustice: Replies to Eric Bayruns García and Trystan S. Goetze." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (10): 39-42.