On Whose Authority? Issues of Epistemic Authority and Injustice in the Social Justice Classroom

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I recently assisted in a diversity course for education majors. The students enrolled were primarily middle class, white, and female. During one session, we watched a video, *A Girl Like Me*, created by a woman of color about how white standards of beauty impact black women.[1] A large portion of the video included a reenactment of Dr. Kenneth Clark's famous doll experiment, which demonstrated that young, black kids judge white-skinned dolls to be "nice" and black-skinned dolls to be "bad." In the reenactment, when the black children are asked which doll looked like them, the majority of the children point to the black-skinned doll they label as "bad." As soon as the video finished, Mary, a white, female student asserted that the woman of color was leading the children to specific answers. Recalling this moment, I know many members of the class were taken aback by her assertion. Quickly, the instructor stated that the filmmaker's doll experiment re-conducted Clark's research utilized in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which prompted the court to rule in favor of school desegregation. Immediately Mary began retreating from her original argument and gave the video authority. While the instructor provided additional evidence to support the credibility of the video, the few marginalized peers in the class also testified to the accuracy of the information.

I have found myself thinking about this class interaction frequently. Why did Mary initially not give epistemic authority to the video created by the black woman? What made Mary question so abruptly the trustworthiness of the video's creator? Did the social location of the creator affect Mary's assessment of the trustworthiness of the creator's claims? Was Mary's questioning of the testimony presented problematic or a necessary step in the proper evaluation of testimonial evidence? All of these questions led me to consider the possible epistemic movements that occur in the social justice classroom and how a failure to assess students' reasons for or against conferring epistemic authority to marginalized authors or students could lead to immense epistemic injustices.

Reflecting on this experience, I examine and provide arguments that support the possibility that Mary's initial inability to afford the video's creator epistemic authority may be due to engrained prejudice and/or systemic white ignorance regarding the credibility of the creator. Even though the instructor included many materials by marginalized people and acknowledged the epistemic privilege of such authors regarding the class topic, Mary's difficulty affording the video's creator epistemic authority may imply that privileging marginalized authors' work is not sufficient. Bat-Ami Bar On makes a similar point when she contends that the issue of epistemic authority — whose voices are given credibility — must be disconnected from the issue of epistemic privilege.[2] In this respect, it seems that epistemic authority, which is often "conferred in a social context" based on "other people's

judgment of [one's] sincerity, reliability, trustworthiness, and 'objectivity,'" is perhaps of greater significance for the social justice classroom.[3] The implications of such an inquiry may help clarify the process by which individuals and the classroom community more generally confer epistemic authority when evaluating testimonial evidence such as articles, videos, and personal experiences. I argue, then, that exposing and examining processes of evaluating testimonial evidence is crucial to preventing the reproduction of epistemic injustices in the social justice classroom.

This essay examines how the process of evaluating testimonial evidence and epistemic authority may produce epistemic injustices due to engrained prejudices or systemic ignorances toward the testifiers. I begin with John Hardwig's analysis of testimonial assessment, which is premised on the necessity of trust.[4] Second, I explain how appraisals of testifiers' trustworthiness potentially create epistemic injustices toward testifiers in the social justice classroom. For this essay, I specifically focus on how inaccurate evaluations of testifiers' trustworthiness may lead white students to epistemically harm marginalized testifiers.[5] Thirdly, I assert that testimonial assessment, at least within the social justice classroom, requires recognizing the cognitive role emotions play in the evaluation of testifiers' trustworthiness and how giving attention to such emotions can create a more just process of ascribing epistemic authority. The goal of this essay is both to highlight possible epistemic injustices that occur in testimonial evaluation and to consider more just ways of attributing epistemic authority.

Testimonial Assessment and Trust

Much of what we claim to know in our daily life is based on the testimony of others. By hearing the weather person predict snow in the afternoon on Monday, I generally know it is going to snow on Monday. My college education has largely revolved around learning from the testimony of other theorists and professors. The classroom context, then, is a perfect example for grasping the epistemology of testimony — how we come to know information without direct, first-hand evidence. Hardwig's principle of testimony states: "If *A* knows that *B* knows *p*, then *A* knows *p*."[6] In a class on schooling and diversity, a student knows the professor knows institutional racism exists and, in turn, the student knows that institutional racism exists. Hardwig's principle of testimony is simple enough, but it also presents a myriad of other issues. Should students blindly accept the testimony of their professors? Does the principle of testimony encourage students to be credulous? Since a primary educational ideal is critical thinking, I doubt many educators would find it desirable to encourage gullibility.[7] Extreme skepticism, the flipside of gullibility, is not necessarily an attractive trait either. Such a conundrum requires that students develop a set of tools for examining the reliability of testifiers.

In the college classroom, however, students often come from various disciplines and may not have the background knowledge to understand a testifier's particular reasons for knowing something. If one is not able to comprehend the testifier's reasons, how does one evaluate the reliability of the testifier? According to Hardwig, one evaluates the reliability of a testifier based on the testifier's moral character (that is, truthfulness) and epistemic character (competence). Hardwig

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elaborates by asserting that "*A* must TRUST *B*, or *A* will not believe that *B*'s testimony gives her good reasons to believe *p*. And *B* must be TRUSTWORTHY or *B*'s testimony will not in fact give *A* good reasons to believe *p*."[8] A student, then, must trust the professor and the professor must be trustworthy in order for the student to have good reasons to believe the professor about the class topic. Trusting a testifier, though, often requires experience with the testifier, such as familiarity with the testifier's work. It is often necessary to trust the testimony one receives from a testifier without knowing the testifier. If one does not know the testifier, Hardwig explains that evaluating the trustworthiness of the testifier and, in turn, trusting the testifier often necessitates corroborating the testifier's testimony.[9]

Comparing my opening example to Hardwig's analysis of testimonial assessment and trust, it may seem that Mary was simply performing a good assessment of the testimony presented. Mary watched the video and, because she was unfamiliar with the black woman's work, asked for more information from her professor about the creator's reliability. After Mary received corroborating evidence from her professor and peers, she began to trust the testimony of the video's creator. While I think it is sensible to assert that Mary's asking for corroborating testimony was not intended to be harmful, I wonder if there is more to her testimonial assessment. Therefore, I contend that Hardwig's conception of testimonial assessment and trust is too simplistic because it does not acknowledge how assessing a testifier's reliability may be influenced by the testifier's social location. Assessing the trustworthiness and trusting a testifier in a world where multiple prejudices regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality exist, means it is possible, whether consciously or unconsciously, that one could epistemically harm a testifier of marginalized status by not affording her the authority and/or trust she deserves. Did Mary, then, so abruptly question the credibility of the video's creator because the latter was a black woman? Considering that the professor, who is knowledgeable about the class topic, selected the video, it seems more plausible that Mary's initial assessment of distrust might be prompted by engrained prejudices regarding the black woman's credibility.

Assessing Trustworthiness and Epistemic Injustice

Is trusting a testifier as straightforward as having evidence of the testifier's reliability? Just because I have evidence that a testifier is competent in her field, does it necessarily follow that I trust her? Even though Mary had evidence that the video's creator was re-conducting a very influential experiment, the student may still not trust the creator because of her epistemic socialization —"a social training of the interpretive and affective attitudes in play when we are told things by other people."[10] In other words, trust is affective and, in turn, influenced by one's learned patterns of trust.[11] Karen Jones explains that trust has an affective component: the act of trusting is informed by our previous patterns of trust.[12] When one is prompted to trust, one often depends on examples of those one has previously trusted and often seeks out similar evidence for evaluating trustworthiness. If Mary had not been exposed to many authors of color, her reservation to trust the video's creator could have more to do with the unconscious belief that the creator was not trustworthy

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because of her social location. As Catherine Elgin explains, "Because a feeling of trust can be experienced at an instant, we are apt to overlook how richly textured its conditions are, how much we had to learn and internalize in order to be in a position for the deliverance to be a deliverance of that emotion."[13] When we fail to recognize how our feelings of trust toward a testifier are motivated by internalized belief, though, we can make the mistake of epistemically harming a testifier unduly — that is, not affording the testifier the epistemic authority he or she deserves.

In our everyday lives we are often called upon to assess a testifier's trustworthiness immediately, such as my believing the Starbucks cashier who tells me that my coffee is $1.50. While the dailiness of evaluating testimony makes such habits of assessment almost second nature, the possible epistemic injustices that can occur in the social justice classroom, by inaccurately assessing the trustworthiness of a testifier, in many ways defeat a primary course goal — to broaden students' understanding of injustices in the world and, in turn, to make students more aware of their possible complicity in the replication of such injustices. To clarify, the type of epistemic injustices I am concerned with are those that occur when testifiers are not given the epistemic authority they deserve, which results in an authority deficiency or authority surplus.[14]

What are the dangers of a testifier being given less epistemic authority than she deserves in the social justice classroom? If, for instance, the class is examining how white standards inversely affect people of color, such as on the day the video was shown in my class example, an inaccurate assessment of the testifier's trustworthiness by a white student can encourage white students to dismiss or distance themselves from complicity in replicating such white standards. An inaccurate assessment of the testifier's trustworthiness and epistemic authority based on her social location can prompt the white student to resort to a form of "victim blaming." Kim Case and Annette Hemmings explain, "Victim blaming is a standard catch phrase in attacks on theories that hold people of color responsible for the poverty, lack of education, crimes, and other social problems they experience."[15] Victim blaming, then, enables a white student to harm a marginalized testifier epistemically by not granting her sufficient epistemic authority, and disassociates the student from understanding how she may be complicit in the replication of such discriminating practices.

What are the dangers of a testifier being given more epistemic authority than she deserves in the social justice classroom? If, for example, the topic for the day was anti-racist pedagogies, which included a mixture of readings from both white and black authors, and an authority surplus is assigned to the white authors by a white student viewing their work as more trustworthy, the viewpoints of the black authors could be entirely dismissed. Additionally, a white student could grant an epistemic surplus to the white authors because it enables the student once again to disassociate herself from racism. That is, she may grant more epistemic authority to the white authors' readings about anti-racist pedagogies because those readings enable her to identify with the "good white" label.[16] If the white student unjustly affords the black authors less epistemic authority than the white authors, it could result in her feeling

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justified to dismiss the arguments by the black authors entirely because it enables her to disconnect herself from complicity.

Continuous reiteration of inaccurate testimonial assessment from dominantly located students regarding marginalized testifiers not only enables white students to develop attitudes of disassociation from issues like racism, but can create a self-perpetuating cycle of epistemic injustice.[17] As Jones argues, one relies on previous patterns of trust to assess whether a testifier is worthy of trust. A white student's habit of affording less epistemic authority to marginalized testifiers can, if not corrected, perpetuate inaccurate testimonial assessments. Nancy Duakas explains, "we make discriminating judgments regarding the different epistemic value of different (actual or potential) testifiers in particular situations, regarding particular domains." If, for instance, a white student always affords white authors' testimony more credibility than black authors' testimony about racism, such patterns of testimonial assessment and granting of epistemic authority could result in the white student unintentionally always privileging the testimony of white authors about racism. In this sense, the consequences of a white student's routine of customarily assigning less epistemic authority to black authors begins to "perpetuate the inequalities that fulfill, and therefore seem to justify, the discriminatory expectations that, in turn, perpetuate unjust epistemic exclusion."[18] Assessments of trustworthiness in the social justice classrooms, when unacknowledged, can potentially replicate the unjust power relations between dominant/subordinate populations. The examples I have given regarding epistemic authority deficiency and surplus demonstrate how a hearer's assessment of a testifier's trustworthiness can be the result of the hearer's inability to acknowledge or correct for internalized prejudices. In both instances the white student fails "to adjust for the way in which [her] *own* social identity affects the testimonial exchange."[19] If the white student's assessments of testimony are not critically examined in the social justice classroom, the white student is unable to recognize how her habit of assigning less credibility to black authors on questions of racism may enable her to disassociate herself from racism, thus making her culpable of perpetuating epistemic injustice on the basis of a testifier's social location. I argue, then, that it is necessary to develop ways of assessing testimony in the social justice classroom that call attention to possible inaccurate assessments of trustworthiness and encourage more just ways of attributing epistemic authority.

Utilizing Cognitive Emotions and Encouraging Just Testimonial Assessment

As I reflect on my opening example, if Mary's initial inability to trust the testimony of the video's creator is motivated by underlying, most likely unconscious, beliefs about the creator's credibility, we must consider whether such distrust has an emotional element. If trust is in fact affective, it seems that a recognition and evaluation of student's emotionally motivated reasons for granting a testifier trust may enhance testimonial assessment. If Mary were to reflect on the feelings of distrust she initially had regarding the credibility of the video's creator, the teacher could create an opening for her to discover that her feelings of distrust are not rational. Specifically, a critical evaluation of her emotions of distrust may reveal prejudicial attitudes and/or systemic ignorances regarding the epistemic

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authority of the video's creator or of the person giving testimony in the film because of the creator's social location.

How would an evaluation of our emotionally motivated reasons assist in more accurate testimonial assessments? Elgin and Elizabeth Anderson both assert that emotions have the ability, when recognized and assessed, to provide information that could otherwise be overlooked. Emotions are not unprompted reactions, but rather are responses motivated by events or people, for example.[20] If we acknowledge the presence of emotions, "we can correlate emotional reactions with the events that trigger them … and use those reactions as sources of information about the environment."[21] For example, if Mary recognized that her distrust of the video's creator may have been emotionally motivated, she could analyze whether her reasons for distrusting the video were actually influenced by engrained prejudicial beliefs and/or systemic ignorances. Assessing her emotions of distrust might enable her to correct her testimonial assessment of the video's creator. By assessing her emotionally motivated reasons for initially distrusting the video, she could become more aware of her habits of evaluating testimony and, in turn, highlight how such habits may have made her complicit in producing epistemic injustices toward testifiers of marginalized status in the past. Reflecting on the past calls for one to focus on the future in order to understand how one's feelings guide one's "obligations and opportunities, and [one's] sense of [self] as a moral agent with on-going relations to other moral agents."[22] Thus, Mary's evaluation of her emotions of distrust might enable her to recognize that accurately assessing marginalized testifiers' epistemic authority requires moral motivation. Because Mary is a dominantly located student, it is important for her to recognize how her patterns of testimonial assessment can, even if unconsciously, perpetuate epistemic injustices toward marginalized people. When one is in a dominant position it is important to exercise, to a degree, epistemic humility — to be aware of how one's dominant social status influences one's automatic evaluations of others' testimony.[23]

By claiming that our testimonial assessments must be morally motivated, I am not, like Hardwig or Daukas, asserting that people who occupy dominant social positions should, by default, trust testifiers of marginalized status. Such an approach, I contend, leaves us open to gullibility and credulity. I agree with Miranda Fricker that the issue with over-optimism regarding the trustworthiness of a testifier "represents the hearer as having his critical faculties in snooze mode unless and until he is alerted to some cue for doubt that flicks a switch to reawaken his critical consciousness."[24] Any default mode, even if morally motivated, makes a hearer not only less apt to identify possible cues about the testifier's trustworthiness, but also less aware of his emotional reasons for trusting/distrusting a testifier. It seems, then, that the default position of trust does not help a hearer perform a more just testimonial assessment. If a goal of the social justice classroom is to assist students in becoming aware of how they may be complicit in systems of oppression, taking a default position of trust toward testifiers seems to diminish the hearers' reflections on how their testimonial assessments can be impacted by engrained prejudices. A dominantly located hearer taking a default position of trust toward marginalized

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testifiers may appear to correct for power imbalances, but such a position may only be a bandage that further conceals prejudicial attitudes that have arisen in the past or could arise in future evaluations.

If taking a default position of trust, as I have asserted, leaves a hearer open to gullibility and credulity, what position should a dominantly located hearer take when evaluating marginalized testifiers? Fricker explains that a hearer has an epistemic responsibility to develop a "well-trained testimonial sensibility" — a sensitivity to identify how and when our social location can influence our testimonial evaluations.[25] As asserted earlier, an analysis of one's emotions of trust may be one way to help develop a testimonial sensibility that can identify how prejudicial beliefs may impact our reasons for or against trusting a testifier. However, what epistemic virtue motivates one to analyze one's emotional responses of trust/distrust every time one evaluates a marginalized testifier?

While it seems that there is no surefire way to solve possible prejudices that may arise in testimonial assessments, Fricker asserts that a virtue of "reflexive critical openness" — an alertness to the impact of the testifier's social location and to one's own social location in granting epistemic authority — may assist in producing more just testimonial assessments. By cultivating a reflexive critical awareness of one's potential prejudice or ignorance in inaccurately affording testifiers epistemic authority, one takes the first step toward amending authority deficiencies/surpluses. Fricker claims that reflexive critical openness works to correct for prejudice by making the hearer more alert to "sensing cognitive dissonance between her perception, beliefs, and emotional responses, or … self-conscious reflection."[26] For example, by Mary cultivating a virtue of reflexive critical openness, she could be more apt to go into a critical-reflective mode which might better equip her to assess how much her prejudice/ignorance might have influenced her assessment of the black woman's credibility. If Mary sees, through critical reflection, that her distrust of the black woman is due to prejudice regarding the black woman's social location, she might be prompted to counteract her authority judgment by increasing the amount of authority she originally grants the black woman. Fricker claims there is no fixed formula for predicting how much a hearer should increase her credulity of a testifier when prejudice is the reason for granting insufficient epistemic authority. The ideal of such credibility reparation is, however, to "neutralize any negative impact of prejudice in one's credibility judgments by compensating to reach the degree of credibility that would have been given were it not for the prejudice."[27] While I generally agree that a virtue of reflexive critical openness is a positive virtue to cultivate in students, especially in the social justice classroom, I wonder whether such a virtue is sufficient for creating a more just process of testimonial assessment.

As I examine possible ways to encourage more just testimonial assessments, it seems that, in general, the solutions focus solely on the individual who may hold prejudice regarding the credibility of a testifier. Epistemology often contains an "individualistic bias" that focuses on "epistemic self-reliance and self-sufficiency" in order to avoid "epistemic vulnerability."[28] Is knowing an individual endeavor? If we acknowledge that much of what we come to know is from the testimony of others,

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it seems implausible to claim that knowing is an individual process. Thus, it seems to follow logically that the most just testimonial assessments will not be individual appraisals of a testifiers' credibility, but rather community evaluations. Communal assessments of testimony, potentially, provide more moments for individuals within the community to practice reflexive-critical openness because people within the community may have multiple interpretations of testifiers' trustworthiness. The diversity of perspectives present in a community regarding a testifier's credibility can possibly bring forth conversations for or against a testifier's trustworthiness, which could likely alert individuals within the community to reflect more deeply on feelings of trust/distrust.

If, as I have claimed, the most just testimonial evaluations will occur within an epistemic community, the social justice classroom could be an excellent place to start discussing possible prejudices or systemic ignorances that may influence assessments of testifiers' epistemic authority. In order to make the process of testimonial assessment more explicit in the social justice classroom, however, educators need to construct the classroom as a "community of negotiation" — a place where "persons are willing to negotiate their positions within … interpretive communities."[29] In many ways, the social justice classroom is already a community of negotiation where individuals from different disciplines and social locations come together to become more aware of social injustices. Thinking back to my opening example, when Mary questioned the epistemic authority of the video's creator both the professor and marginalized students in class testified to the credibility of the creator's testimony. In many ways, the multiple testimonies Mary received regarding the reliability of the creator's testimony emulate a communal-testimonial assessment. What I claim is missing from this communal-testimonial assessment is Mary's reflection on why she initially distrusted the creator's testimony. The lack of such reflection, I argue, is a learning moment lost. While Mary may have reflected on that moment later on, other students in the course, who may have held similar feelings of initial distrust regarding the video, may never take the opportunity to critically reflect on their assessments. I do not think that this missed learning moment was the fault of the professor. Rather, testimonial assessment and the granting or denying of epistemic authority function slyly. The demands of testimonial assessment and the granting or denying of epistemic authority point to a challenging process. Therefore, I think it may be a worthy goal for the social justice classroom to call attention to the process of testimonial assessment and the potential epistemic injustices that may be produced due to inaccurate evaluations of testifiers' epistemic authority.

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1. Kiri Davis, *A Girl Like Me* (New York: Media That Matters, 2005).

2. Bat-Ami Bar On, "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 83–100.

3. Marianne Janack, "Standpoint Epistemology Without the 'Standpoint'? An Examination of Epistemic Privilege and Epistemic Authority," *Hypatia* 12, no. 2 (1997): 133.

4. John Hardwig, "The Role of Trust in Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 88, no. 12 (1991): 693–708.

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5. While one could argue that inaccurate assessments of testifiers' trustworthiness by marginalized students can produce epistemic injustices toward dominant students, I will not address that issue. Additionally, I understand that I am constructing a dichotomy between white/black or dominant/subordinate students. While I believe such categorical distinctions are socially created and arbitrary, I have constructed this dichotomy to highlight the very "real" implications these identities have on social dynamics.

6. Hardwig, "Role of Trust in Knowledge," 698.

7. William Hare, "Credibility and Credulity: Monitoring Teachers for Trustworthiness," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. 2 (2007): 207–219; Elizabeth Fricker, "Against Gullibility," in *Knowing from Words*, eds. B.K. Matilal and A. Chakrabarti (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1994): 125–161.

8. Hardwig, "Role of Trust in Knowledge," 700.

9. Ibid., 701.

10. Miranda Fricker, "Epistemic Injustice and the Role of Virtue in the Politics of Knowledge," *Metaphilosophy* 34, nos. 1/2 (2003): 161.

11. Catherine Elgin, "Emotion and Understanding," in *Epistemology and Emotions*, eds. Georg Brun, Ulvi Douolu, Dominique Kuenzle (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 33–49; Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Karen Jones, "Trust as an Affective Attitude," *Ethics* 107, no. 1 (1996): 4–25.

12. Jones, "Trust as an Affective Attitude," 17.

13. Elgin, "Emotion and Understanding," 43.

14. Fricker, "Epistemic Injustice."

15. Kim A. Case and Annette Hemmings, "Distancing Strategies: White Women Preservice Teachers and Antiracist Curriculum," *Urban Education* 40, no. 6 (2005): 620.

16. Ibid., 616.

17. Nancy Duakas, "Epistemic Trust and Social Location," *Episteme* 3, nos. 1/2 (2006): 116.

18. Ibid, 115–116.

19. Fricker, "Epistemic Injustice," 169.

20. Elizabeth Anderson, "Uses of Value Judgments in Science: A General Argument, with Lessons from a Case Study of Feminist Research on Divorce," *Hypatia* 19, no. 1 (2004): 1–24.

21. Elgin, "Emotion and Understanding," 35.

22. Ibid., 41.

23. Duakas, "Epistemic Trust and Social Location," 121–122.

24. Fricker, "Epistemic Injustice," 66.

25. Ibid., 169.

26. Ibid., 91.

27. Ibid., 91–92.

28. Hardwig, "Role of Trust in Knowledge," 701.

29. Sylvia Burrow, "The Political Structure of Emotion: From Dismissal to Dialogue," *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (2005): 38.

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