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Tragedy and Inspiration:
The Epistemic Injustice of Stereotypical Media Representations of Disability

Abstract: Media representations of disabled people are rare, and those that do exist are grounded in stereotypes, often falling into one of two standard narratives: tragic victim or inspirational Supercrip. The influence of such media representations on both outsider perception of disability and disabled individuals' self-conceptions means the unbalanced portrayals of disability are surely harmful. But is this sufficient to show that the media has a duty to do better? I argue that it does, but that this cannot be grounded in the impact on disabled individuals' well-being. Rather, we must show how current representations of disability constitute, or contribute to, their unjust treatment – and specifically, here, to epistemic forms of injustice. Media producers are, I argue, responsible for failing to give appropriate credibility to disabled individuals' testimony and for not working to rectify their wilful hermeneutic ignorance by listening to disabled individual's own understandings of their lives and circumstances. Further, by maintaining stereotypes of disabled individuals as lacking the competence or sincerity to be credible, and of disability as nothing but a tragedy, they further contribute to disabled individual's epistemic exclusion in wider society. Ultimately, my goal is not to propose a new model of disability representation, but to show that the widely-articulated demand for disabled people to be visible in the public sphere as "'regular' people performing 'regular' tasks" (Kama 2004: 462) is a demand of *justice*. As such, it is not one the media can choose to ignore

1. Introduction

Media representations of disabled people remain rare (Farnall and Lyons 2012). Further, those representations that do exist are deeply grounded in stereotypes, often falling into one of a few standard narratives – inspirational supercrip, tragic victim, drain on the welfare state, and so on. Both outsider perception of disability and disabled individuals' self-conceptions are deeply influenced by media representations. It is, therefore, relatively uncontroversial that the current state of affairs is harmful. For the many whose experience of disability comes solely via the media, these representations perpetuate a negative and unrealistic view of disabled life. Further, it can contribute to negative self-conceptions and low self-esteem amongst disabled individuals, weakening their "performance and aspirations" (McGrail *et al*. 2020), and even leading them to deny their disabled identity (Zhang and Haller 2013).

Thus, it would surely be better if disability were more visible, and portrayed in a more balanced and nuanced way. But do those responsible for producing these representations have a duty to thus improve the current state of affairs? Do advertisers, aiming to sell their clients' products, or film and television producers, hoping to create the next big hit, or even news editors, concerned in part with their viewing figures, have a duty to protect and promote the well-being of disabled people? There is much analysis of current representations and the harms they cause, but little consideration of how this might translate into obligations to do better.

One strategy could be to argue that current media representations are not merely failing to promote well-being, but cause concrete harm. And, whilst requiring media producers to actively *promote* well-being seems overdemanding, it is more plausible that they have a duty not to harm. However, there are problems with this approach. First, it may be difficult to demonstrate. After all, these narratives are utilised and have traction because they trade on existing ableist biases, norms, and expectations. The media contributes to upholding and perpetuating these, but pinpointing the connection between this and particular harms, will be difficult. Second, the notorious 'supercrip' stereotype, whilst widely criticised in the disability studies literature is welcomed by many disabled individuals, constituting "a beacon of hope, a model for admiration and emulation" (Kama 2004: 462). Given this positive impact it is not clear this narrative is always harmful (in the sense of causing net well-being reduction), though it may certainly be objectionable. Third, the injunction to 'do no harm' might be fulfilled by simply ignoring disability altogether, further erasing disabled lives and stories.[1] Finally, this approach fails to acknowledge the significance of opportunity costs. The media could make society *better*. It could change minds, provide role models, normalise difference, and inform people that disabled lives are neither tragic, nor simple stories of inspirational personal courage and perseverance. Merely expecting media representations not to make things worse seems a low bar for our aspirations.

For these reasons, I propose an alternative basis for the media's duty to do better: representations of disability are not merely harmful but *unjust*. They do not merely lessen disabled individuals' well-being, but constitute, or contribute to, their unjust treatment. Thus, even when representations *improve* disabled people's well-being – as may be true of some Supercrip narratives – we have reason to object to them due to the injustice they perpetrate. Perhaps we cannot expect the "amoral" commercial sphere, "driven…by the single logic of the bottom line" (Garland-Thomson 2002) to set about improving lives, however admirable this would be. But commercial imperatives do not free agents from the demands of justice. And, as we will see, meeting these demands will require new disability narratives.

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[1] The likelihood of this response is bolstered by evidence of reduced disability-representation following the backlash towards controversial adverts featuring disabled persons, such as the infamous Nuveen Investment advertisement featuring Christopher Reeve 'walking' (see Haller and Ralph 2006).

I begin by outlining two dominant disability narratives: disability as a tragedy, and the disabled person as pitiable; and disability as something to be overcome, and the disabled person as inspiring (§2). Next, I consider how these narratives might constitute or contribute to epistemic injustices. I outline varieties of epistemic injustice in §3, before considering how disability narratives perpetrate them in §4. Finally, I conclude by considering what justice demands with regards to media representations: simply put, a wider array of representations, in which disability is not reduced to stereotype. The conclusion will come as no surprise to those in the disability rights movement who have long demanded such changes. My goal, then, is not to propose a new model of disability representation, but to show that the widely-articulated demand for disabled people to be visible in the public sphere as "'regular' people performing 'regular' tasks" (Kama 2004: 462) is a demand of *justice*. As such, it is not one the media can choose to ignore.

2. Disability Narratives

Many models categorising media framings of disability have been proposed, often with considerable overlap between them (Clogston 1994; Haller 2000a; Haller *et al.* 2016; Zhang and Haller 2013). For example, a representation might encapsulate both the business model – disabilities come with a monetary cost – and the medical model – disability is an illness or deficit in need of a cure (and this is why it is so costly). Or, disability might be framed both by the social pathology model – disabled people are disadvantaged and need socioeconomic support – and by the civil rights model – they are a community seeking equal rights (exactly due to their social exclusion). More strongly, some models entail a commitment to others. For example, Supercrip narratives, of 'extraordinary' individuals 'heroically' overcoming their circumstances, imply acceptance of the medical model (disability is a deficit that needs to be individually overcome).[2] Further, my interest is in disability narratives that produce stereotypes (Schalk 2016: 76), and some models are not of this form. For example, the consumer model – people with disabilities are a new consumer base (Haller 2000a) – does not constitute a clear narrative nor generate a particular stereotype. As such I will focus on just two narratives: the pitiable disabled (PD), and the Supercrip (SC).

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[2] Narratives should be distinguished from accounts modelling the nature and cause of disability. Classically, a dichotomy is presented between the medical model – disability is straightforwardly caused by individual impairment – and the social model – denying this causal relationship, and insisting disability solely results from unjust social structures. Neither model is satisfactory alone, so a hybrid is needed to account for the contribution of society *and* impairment to disabled individuals' disadvantage (Begon 2021). I leave this debate aside, but it is worth noting that both narratives discussed fail to acknowledge social causes of disability, utilising an implausibly individualised medical model.

It is easiest to see why the PD narrative – of the "sad, unlucky disabled person, in need of pity and charity" (Shapiro 1994: 124) – is objectionable. It perpetuates a view of disabled people as inferior to the able-bodied, and dependent on them for 'charitable' assistance. It reinforces disabled individuals' exclusion from wider society by portraying them not as contributing members but as outsiders: a pitiable group the able-bodied fear joining. It strengthens the idea that disability, not social structures, are the problem, and that any help bestowed is voluntary beneficence, not rectifying injustice. It undermines disabled individuals' confidence in their capacities and independence, and makes formulating a positive self-conception difficult: if disability is a tragedy and those who experience it are dependent victims, it is hard to view disability as a positive and empowering experience, and disabled identity as worth being proud of. As Kama (2004: 458) puts it: "Objects of pity are not normal human beings, but doomed creatures who, without pity, cannot survive. Their humanity is thus severely damaged."

Explaining what is wrong with SC narratives is harder, though many discussions assume its problems go without saying. Given it is welcomed by many disabled individuals, who consider its subjects role models (Kama 2004), such easy dismissal is too quick. Indeed, in some cases, the narratives are intended to be empowering and positive, moving away from the tragic and focussing on stories of success. However, we also cannot conclude that because producers of these narratives (sometimes) mean well, and disabled consumers (sometimes) welcome them, that they are *not* objectionable. Broadly, a SC narrative describes "the plucky, courageous person, celebrated for overcoming a disability and performing seemingly superhuman feats, whether holding a job or scaling a mountain" (Shapiro 1994: 124). There is an important – but often implicit – distinction to be made, well-illustrated by Shapiro's examples. On the one hand, there are those Kama (2004) terms "regular" Supercrip (RSC) narratives, which focus on routine achievements such as getting married, having a job, or playing a sport, and treat them as extraordinary accomplishments. On the other, there are "glorified" Supercrip (GSC) narratives, focussing on "people who achieve feats that even non-disabled persons rarely attempt", such as climbing a mountain or sailing the ocean (Kama 2004: 454).[3]

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[3] Schalk (2016: 81) adds a third – the superpowered SC – that I will not consider here.

There are five core features both narratives share.[4] First, the use of superlative language. This may seem apt in the latter cases, but even descriptions of remarkable achievements can be overblown. The indiscriminate use of the “super” label in disabled sport, or the expression “the Olympics are where heroes are made, Paralympics is where heroes come”, are clear examples of this (Silva and Howe 2012: 181). Second, a close analysis of the disabled body, reducing the subject of the narrative to their disability and not seeing them as a complete human-being. Third, this analysis usually involves being judged against able-bodied norms. Consequently, disability is portrayed as a deficit, which must be ‘overcome’ to measure up to these norms. The achievements are so incredible because disability is such a barrier. Fourth, it is assumed overcoming these ‘limitations’ is an individual process, requiring extraordinary willpower and determination. The ‘problem’ is the ‘defective’ body or mind, and the responsibility for surmounting it is placed squarely with the individual. Finally, and relatedly, contextual factors, which both enable some disabled persons to succeed and prevent others from doing so, are ignored. By focussing exclusively on personal responsibility, disability is depoliticised. This obscures the existence and impact of social injustices, and the privilege of the successful, who “have not just extraordinary qualities, but extraordinary circumstances” (Wendell 1989: 116).

I identify five consequences of SC narratives and the stereotypes they reproduce, before considering how they constitute injustices. First, they set low standards for disabled lives. RSC narratives, praising banal achievements, both demonstrate and reinforce society’s low expectations, according to which simply having a job or a relationship is extraordinary. The hyperbolic language used in GSC narratives emphasises the unexpectedness of disabled success. Second, and relatedly, they ‘other’ disabled individuals, presenting them as beings who do not function and achieve in the manner of the able-bodied. On the face of it, RSC narratives may seem to have the opposite effect, and certainly the visibility of everyday successes can be important. However, our focus is narratives, not the subjects of them, and the SC framing of these lives does not normalise: if achieving what ‘normal’ people do is noteworthy, this emphasises that disabled people do not, ordinarily, lead ordinary lives. Further, benchmarks of achievement are indexed to the able-bodied. Thus, there is no celebration of difference and diversity of functioning, merely a lauding of those few who are deemed to have conformed, and implicit denigration of those who have not.

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[4] Drawn from Silva and Howe (2012) and Schalk (2016).

Third, SC narratives may set unrealistic expectations for disabled individuals, giving "the non-disabled the false impression that anyone can 'overcome' a disability" (Wendell 1989: 116). This results both from being judged by able-bodied norms – only certain forms of success count – and the focus on personal endeavour – implying anyone can succeed if they try hard enough. This, in turn, implies that lack of success is due to individual failings, and not the rules of the game or the playing-field. Thus, fourth, these narratives contribute to the lack of understanding of the need for social changes and legal protections. Indeed, the prevalence of stereotyped portrayals of disability led lobbyists for the American with Disabilities Act to bypass the media, believing "journalists would impede, not further, the public's understanding of disability rights issues" (Shapiro 1994: 123). They may have been right, but the consequence of a lack of disabled voices on this issue was (and is) that "society has little understanding of those protections or of why disabled people need them" (Shapiro 1994: 126). SC narratives contribute to this not only by focussing on individual accomplishments, but also by crowding-out alternatives. Stories of personal success come at the expense of stories about fights against discrimination, the need for accommodation, or the application of legal protections. As Haller (2000b) puts it: "The most destructive aspect of the news media's use of Supercrips is that the Supercrip image kicks real issues off the table". Opportunity costs are thus a fifth consequence of the prominence of SC narratives.

It should be emphasised that the subject of criticism here is not individuals. Indeed, the all-too-frequent ascription of the SC label to all high-achieving disabled individuals should be avoided (*contra* Berger 2008; Haller and Ralph 2006). What should concern us is not whether these *individuals* are appropriate models for emulation, or whether successful athletes constitute "inauthentic representatives of the disability experience" (Berger 2008: 672). Rather, what matters is how these lives are framed by SC narratives: describing, with superlative language, extraordinary individuals overcoming their tragic disability, neither aided nor impeded by their socio-political context. Such narratives not only denigrate those who fail to live up to these standards, but also those who do.

3. Epistemic Injustices

Part of the problem with providing a limited repertoire of disabled stereotypes, side-lining disabled voices, and failing to communicate the range of disabled experience, is the knowledge that is not shared. For example, knowledge of "how to live with limitation, uncertainty, pain, nausea, and other symptoms when doctors cannot make them go away" (Wendell 1989: 115) and, more broadly, of being an embodied and vulnerable creature. This leaves everyone in a more impoverished epistemic position than if the media gave disabled individuals the space to share their experiences and tell their stories as they wish. The consequences for disabled individuals, though, are not merely bad but unjust. They are wronged, and those involved in perpetuating this wrong have an obligation not to do so.

I outline two categories of epistemic injustices – wrongs done to someone in their capacity as a knower (Fricker 2007) – before considering how these apply to the dissemination of PD and SC narratives. First, testimonial injustice, which occurs “when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word” (Fricker 2007: 1). We constantly make spontaneous credibility judgements, and these often rely on heuristics utilising stereotypes. This may be appropriate and unobjectionable: if stereotypes are merely widely-held associations between social groups and attributes (Fricker 2007: 30), they need neither be unreliable nor have a negative valence. For example, associating doctors with the attribute of trustworthiness in medical contexts. However, when stereotypes are grounded in prejudice, they are likely to be misleading. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker’s credibility is not merely deflated due to a hearer’s one-off error, but when negative prejudice tracks identity features, such as race, class, gender, or disability, meaning their credibility is deflated systematically, across time and context. Forming disparaging associations between social groups and attributes such as over-emotionality, lack of intelligence, paranoia, or dishonesty, undermines judgements of speakers’ *sincerity* and *competence*, hence deflated ascriptions of their credibility, potentially bringing the speaker below the threshold for hearer acceptance (Fricker 2007: 32; Dotson 2012: 27). Fricker’s core example is Tom Robinson’s trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the jurors’ prejudicial stereotypes “that *all* Negroes lie, that *all* Negroes are basically immoral beings” (Lee in Fricker 2007: 25). This causes a serious deflation of Robinson’s credibility, ultimately leading to their returning a guilty verdict.

Fricker focuses solely on credibility deficits, assuming credibility excesses are rarely disadvantageous, and so unlikely to be unjust. However, as Medina (2011) has pointed out, this fails to take account of the comparative and contrastive nature of credibility judgements. Credibility is not a scarce good, but there is still a sense in which giving too much to some can mean others end up with less than they deserve. By ascribing inflated credibility to an individual with certain characteristics (appearing white, male, middle-aged, and straight, say), we not only contribute to the privileged epistemic treatment of those like the recipient, but also “the underprivileged epistemic treatment of…members of the contrast class” (Medina 2011: 20), who lack these features and whose credibility is thus deflated. Further, misplaced trust in, and so the "disproportionate authority" of, certain speakers, can lead others to feel intimidated to "dissent or raise objections" (Medina 2011: 17-18). Indeed, excess credence may even harm the speaker in a sustained exchange, leading them to become "arrogant and dogmatic" (Medina 2011: 17). Testimonial injustice can arise, then, *whenever* identity-prejudicial stereotypes result in underserved credibility attributions that "distorts the hearer's perception of the speaker" (Fricker 2007: 36).

The second category Fricker (2007: 158) identifies is hermeneutic injustice, which she defines as "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization". Such marginalisation occurs when individuals have an asymmetric ability to affect society's hermeneutical resources – the shared meanings and collective understandings that enable us to interpret, attribute significance to, and render intelligible to others, significant areas of our experience. For Fricker (2007: 159), this inequality only "erupts in injustice…when some actual attempt at intelligibility is handicapped by it". In other words, when someone is disadvantaged by the inability to make an important experience understood, and, crucially, when the lack of appropriate hermeneutical resources results from marginalisation, not mere bad luck.

Fricker's (2007: 6) definition of hermeneutic resources is broad – "shared tools of social interpretation" – but her core examples focus on developing and disseminating appropriate concepts or knowledge. For example, Carmita Wood was subject to what we would now identify as sexual harassment – a senior male colleague brushed against her breasts, jiggled his crotch in her direction, and subjected her to unwanted kisses – but lacked the concept to explain this to others. As such, her request to transfer departments, and then her claim for unemployment benefits, were refused, because she could not articulate why her working environment was intolerable. Without the concept of sexual harassment there is a uniform inability to explain what is wrong with the situation, but asymmetric disadvantage: both harasser and harassed experience the hermeneutic lacuna, but only one is disadvantaged by it – indeed, the other is likely advantaged. Wood's inability to explain her experiences is rectified by the emergence and uptake of the concept of sexual harassment.

However, merely having the right concepts and knowledge may be insufficient. As Crerar (2016: 205) has argued, the social costs associated with communicating "taboo topics can disable or at least obstruct the use of concepts that would otherwise help individuals render an experience fully intelligible to themselves and to others". Thus, in addition to an adequate conceptual framework and appropriate knowledge, we also need an environment in which they can be properly utilised. Crerar suggests that we add (at least) access to an expressively-free environment to the toolbox of essential hermeneutic resources, such that our concepts can be put to good hermeneutical effect. However, such examples suggest a more fundamental point: hermeneutic injustice often arises not because appropriate epistemic resources are unavailable, but because, in at least some contexts, they are not, or cannot be, used. This suggests, too, that more fundamental revisions to Fricker's account are needed. I consider what these are in the context of disability narratives.

4. Disability Narratives and the Epistemically Unjust Media

Fricker often refers to 'collective hermeneutical resources', which can misleadingly imply a homogeneity to expressive communities. The first point of divergence, then, is acknowledging the different resources available to different groups. The dominant epistemic resources may be well-established and widely-shared, but this should not obscure "alternative epistemologies, countermythologies, and hidden transcripts" utilised by marginalised communities (Dotson 2012: 31). Thus, hermeneutic lacuna need not be universally shared. Even if some lack the epistemic resources to make sense of certain experiences, this need not mean these experiences are "unintelligible for everybody equally and in every communicative dynamic" (Medina 2012: 210).

This is particularly relevant in the context of disability, where concepts – such as disability pride or Deaf culture – have been developed that are entirely at odds with the dominant medicalised understanding of disability. These resources allow those with access to them to render intelligible experiences – for example, rejecting a 'cure' – that would otherwise be unintelligible – if disability is simply "sub-optimal functioning" (Bickenbach 2013: 826) how could anyone *not* want to be rid of it? However, membership in the disabled community is not automatic, but often needs to be sought. Indeed, the process of finding this community is, itself, inhibited by dominant understandings of disability as an "individual tragedy or private burden", not "something that gives you access to — or something you experience with — a community" (Barnes 2015: 184). Thus, for some disabled people, as for many non-disabled, the media constitutes their primary source of epistemic resources regarding disabled life, especially when newly disabled. The paucity of representational variety and realism may prevent them rendering their experiences intelligible to themselves if unable to access existing alternative hermeneutic resources of the disabled community, and will anyway prevent them from explaining their experiences to those outside it. (The resulting disadvantage will be considered below.)

Next, Fricker (2007: 148) assumes “the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on…whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly”. This disparity arises both because the marginalised are excluded from the process of developing and disseminating epistemic resources, and because whilst it is in the interests of the marginalised to acquire and use the epistemic resources of the dominant, the reverse is not true. However, there are exceptions to this dynamic, when it is not in the powerful’s interest to understand their own experiences. Ignorance of unjust structures of privilege, for example, can make them more intransigent, thus maintaining the socioeconomic benefits that arise from them (Medina 2012; Mills 1997; Polhaus 2017).

In the context of disability, we lack the necessary epistemic resources to render intelligible the experiences of both the disabled and able-bodied. First, both PD and SC narratives present disability as tragic, and the disabled as either pitiable victims or inspiringly heroic. Both reinforce low expectations for disabled lives, which are not anticipated to contain even mundane successes. They provide no resources to render intelligible experiencing a lack of fit between one’s mode of functioning and the design of social structures and institutions. Identifying the barriers disabled individuals face as wholly internal, renders unintelligible experiences such as being unable to enter the workforce due to exclusionary norms and lack of accommodations. The disadvantage can only be understood as arising from ‘dysfunctional’ bodies or minds, which must be overcome with exceptional perseverance and willpower. When it is not, the appropriate response is pity for those who have failed, not re-examining the norms and infrastructure that thwarted their success. Those without experience of this lack of fit have little interest in making it intelligible. This is reinforced by the othering effects of disability narratives, which perpetuate the sense that disabled life is utterly unlike the ‘norm’ – a tragic existence, in which even quotidian achievements are remarkable – and one the able-bodied need never experience, so need never understand.

Yet this does not merely obscure *disabled* experiences from collective understanding, but also the able-bodied’s. Just as ‘white ignorance’ can leave privileged white subjects unable “to recognize and make sense of their racial identities, experiences, and positionality in a racialized world” (Medina 2012: 202), so too does the able-bodied’s ignorance leave them unable to recognise their embodied identities, experiences, and positionality in an ableist world. Such cases entail both primary harms of epistemic injustice – wronging someone specifically in their capacity as a knower – and secondary harms – practical and epistemic disadvantageous consequences. Whilst the powerful suffer some primary harms – the inability to explain important parts of their lives – the marginalised suffer this too, in addition to further primary harms – the prejudicial exclusion from the spread of knowledge – and secondary harms. The practical secondary harms here might include lack of accommodation and thus lack of opportunities that would otherwise be open, such as accessing employment, forming relationships, or pursuing leisure activities. Or the stress and social isolation of being unable to make oneself understood, for example, when one's "bodily experience is radically different from medical descriptions of her/his condition" and one is thus "labelled mentally ill or dishonest" (Wendell 1989: 120). The epistemic secondary harms comprise the consequences of the persistent inability to render central experiences intelligible, such as losing faith in one's ability to make sense of the world or doubting one's own competence.

A third gap in Fricker's account is the lack of agent-responsibility for hermeneutic injustice: the thwarted attempt at intelligibility arises due to a structural problem, which "involves no culprit" (Fricker 2007: 159). However, even insofar as the problem is structural this does not preclude attributions of responsibility, and I argue dominantly situated knowers do bear responsibility for their ignorance. For Fricker (2007: 152), a hermeneutic disadvantage is unjust, not merely bad luck, when resulting from background conditions that cause the social powerlessness of the affected group, thus their inability to participate equally in developing and disseminating hermeneutic resources. Interestingly, Fricker's (2007: 157) example of bad luck concerns someone with "a medical condition affecting their social behaviour at a historical moment at which their condition is still misunderstood and largely undiagnosed". It is deeply implausible that this case would *not* involve hermeneutic marginalisation identical to the sex and race-based exclusions used as contrast cases, given disabled individuals' long history of social powerlessness.[5]

Further, as noted above, though marginalisation may result in the inability to articulate and know their own experiences, in other cases marginalised communities develop appropriate epistemic resources, which "fail to gain appropriate uptake" (Dotson 2012: 32). Both phenomena do not simply happen, but are co-perpetrated by the powerful, who "remain

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[5] Contra Fricker (2007) and Medina (2012: 214). For discussion see Dotson (2012: 39-41); Tremain (2017: 177-178)

entrenched in dynamics that block new forms of understanding and foster communicative dysfunctions” (Medina 2012: 217). Resisting the status quo can be difficult: these experiences are not salient to the dominantly situated, and are rendered still more alien by the inapplicability of existing hermeneutic resources. Nonetheless, dismissing alternate epistemic resources and nascent attempts to develop them is not an inevitable consequence of occupying a position of social power. The powerful lack not the ability, but the will, to understand obscured experiences. Thus, epistemic exclusion results from “a willful refusal to acknowledge and to acquire the necessary tools for knowing whole parts of the world” (Polhaus 2012: 729).

Dominantly situated knowers are responsible for their ‘wilful hermeneutical ignorance’, and for their ongoing failure to fulfil their duties to overcome it by facilitating the hermeneutical agency of all communicators. This at least requires ‘catching up’ and learning to use the epistemic resources they lack in cooperation with marginally situated knowers (Polhaus 2012: 733). Medina (2017: 48) has also defended positive duties to facilitate the hermeneutic agency of the marginalised by challenging “established interpretative frameworks”. This may involve “disobeying oppressive communicative norms and expectations, and…deploying communicative moves that facilitate paths of resistance for eccentric voices, expressive styles, and interpretative perspectives” (Medina 2017: 50).

The relevance to the media’s duties is clear. Disseminating PD and SC narratives not only violates the negative duty not to maintain wilful ignorance of alternative hermeneutic resources and ways of understanding the world, but also the positive duty to facilitate their production. Whilst individuals with little capacity to create change have correspondingly restricted obligations, “institutions and people in a position of power bear special hermeneutical burdens” (Medina 2012: 215), and the media bears considerable power. This helps clarify what is so objectionable about the media’s myopic focus on SC and PD narratives: it wilfully perpetuates ignorance of different narratives about disability – as a source of pride, solidarity, community, and new opportunities and experiences – and fails to enable the development of yet more ways of knowing this part of the world.

Finally, it might seem testimonial and hermeneutic injustice are wholly distinct, or only rarely and coincidentally linked. This is not the case. Deficits of credibility and intelligibility are intimately connected (Medina 2011; 2012). On the one hand, hermeneutic gaps arise though failures in “testimonial dynamics” (Medina 2012: 206). The hermeneutically marginalised who might fill these gaps are unable to contribute to the production and dissemination of epistemic resources because their attempts to highlight and articulate hidden experiences are dismissed because *they* are dismissed as non-credible. Being labelled 'mentally ill or dishonest' when describing one's experiences, for example, may indicate identity prejudice regarding one's competence as an interlocuter. This unjustified credibility deficit then limits one's capacity to contribute hermeneutic resources.

On the other hand, speakers' testimony may be dismissed as non-credible because its *content* is unintelligible. Hermeneutical gaps can render "certain voices less intelligible (and hence less credible) than others" (Medina 2012: 206). Robinson's difficultly in being believed during his trial, for example, was not simply due to the deficient credibility attributed to him as a black interlocuter, but also due to what he was saying. Hermeneutic gaps made the idea of a black man feeling pity for a white woman, or a white woman making sexual advances toward a black man unintelligible – problems experienced by his white attorney too (Polhaus 2012: 724-727; Medina 2011: 22-28). Similarly, hermeneutic gaps can render disabled individuals' claims that they are proud of being disabled, do not want a cure, and prefer their life with a disability unintelligible, because disability can only be understood as a tragic lack of essential opportunities. This compounds the unjustified credibility deficits disabled individuals are already subject to, increasing the likelihood that they will be dismissed – as dishonest or mentally ill, perhaps. Then, in a vicious circle, because disabled individuals who might offer alternative narratives are not considered credible, alternative conceptualisations of disability remain unintelligible. Thus, testimonial and hermeneutic injustice tend to coexist, each exacerbating the other. Indeed, Medina (2011: 27) insists that hermeneutic justice is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for testimonial justice: "Hearers cannot listen to a speaker fairly if there is a hermeneutical gap that prevents them from understanding and interpreting that speaker".

Thus, perpetuating stereotypes of disabled people as either victims or heroes not only generates identity prejudice that directly contributes to disabled individuals' deflated credibility (perhaps especially of those on the pitiable end of this spectrum), but also means that *anyone* who propounds an alternative view of disability will be considered unintelligible, and so non-credible. Although different, PD and SC narratives share core assumptions: success should be judged by able-bodied norms; disability is an individual, not a social, problem, 'overcome' through personal endeavour. The narratives differ in their focus – on those who have miraculously succeeded, or those who have failed to – but both utilise the same hermeneutic resources to understand disability, and maintain a wilful ignorance of counternarratives.

Media producers are thus responsible both for failing to give appropriate credibility to disabled individuals' testimony and working to rectify their wilful hermeneutic ignorance, *and* for maintaining stereotypes of disabled individuals as lacking the competence or sincerity to be credible, and of disability as nothing but a tragedy. By doing so they perpetuate primary epistemic harms – wronging disabled individuals as participants in the spread of knowledge (Fricker 2007: 44) – as well as secondary harms – both the practical disadvantages that follow from being disbelieved or unintelligible, and the damage to confidence in one's epistemic abilities that arise when one's testimony is dismissed or central experiences cannot be made intelligible to oneself or others.

One illustrative secondary harm is how difficult it is for disability to be a positive *personally* transformative experience – one that radically changes your preferences, priorities, and even self-conception (Paul 2015: 8).[6] As Barnes (2015) has argued, social factors impact both the degree to which an experience is personally transformative and whether it is transformative in a positive or negative way. Individuals can, of course, come to view their disability positively – as a central to their identity, as a source pride, solidarity and community, and atypical functioning as something to be welcomed, not rejected. Yet it is very difficult for disability to be transformative in this way, and this is because "the thought that disability could actually be a positive aspect of someone's self-conception…is an idea that's incredibly foreign to most people" (Barnes 2015: 184). The reason it is foreign, and positive transformative experiences are thus atypical, is that dominant norms and stereotypes – reinforced by PD and SC narratives – do not make these ways of thinking about disability readily available. This undermines disabled individuals' opportunities for a positive self-identity, and "constitutes a harm" (Barnes 2015: 181).

Yet harms are the wrong focus. These are epistemic *injustices* because they wrongly expose individuals to the risk of harms. What matters is that individuals are thus wronged, not whether the harms necessarily manifest. For example, we ought to be able to contribute to collective hermeneutic resources on an equal footing, and are wronged when prevented from doing so – even if we will not exercise this right, so it will not directly affect our quality of life.

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[6] Distinguished from *epistemically* transformative experiences, which provide new 'what it's like' information, only accessible via experience.

Similarly, it should be easy for disability to be a positive transformative experience, and an individual is wronged if it is not, even if, given personal features, it would nonetheless remain negative for them. Disseminating PD and SC narratives perpetuate negative identity prejudice that reduces disabled interlocuters credibility, maintains the dominance of hermeneutic resources that make many of their experiences unintelligible, and prevents them from contributing more suitable epistemic resources. This certainly harms many disabled people, but the injustice cannot be reduced to these harms.[7]

5. Conclusion

Media is a large part of the problem, but is also well-placed to be part of the solution. This solution is *not* to give disabled individuals new epistemic resources – often they exist, and, when they do not, disabled individuals should be involved in generating them – or credibility – which alone is insufficient when content is unintelligible. Rather, the solution is for dominantly situated knowers to "learn to use epistemic resources they lack by forging truly cooperative interdependent relations with marginally situated knowers" (Polhaus 2012: 733). Since "the media provide most of the 'reality' that people know outside their own personal experience" (McGrail *et al.* 2020), by representing disability in ways that are "inadequate, inaccurate, mostly negative" (Haller and Becker 2014) the media not only fails to enable, but positively inhibits, this learning process. The current approach, in which "disabled persons are located on both poles" of an axis of humanity running from super to pitiable, "but never at its 'normal' center" (Kama 2004: 462), does not merely harm disabled individuals – though it does – but is also unjust.

This bolsters the old, and sadly familiar, demand that disability be represented from disabled perspectives, and that narratives around disability present it as just another form of diversity, as just one aspect of people's lives, and disabled lives as normal and mundane. Of course, the inclusion of such narratives should not kick the extraordinary off the table. However, the framing of these narratives must change: no longer using superlative language indiscriminately, reducing people to their impairment, judging them against able-bodied

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[7] These narratives may also contribute to distributive injustices. For example, focussing on personal responsibility obscures the need to design and modify infrastructure and institutions to accommodate disability, perpetuating disabled individuals' socio-political exclusion. Or, if individuals are entitled to genuine opportunities, requiring both external conditions *and* the right internal, psychological predisposition (Nussbaum 2000: 84), then narratives buttressing the view that disabled individuals rarely achieve anything worthwhile can be expected to undermine this.

norms, and focusing on personal responsibility at the expense of social injustices. Other forms of success must be recognised, and other stories must be told – of disabled people proud of their lives, of disabled people campaigning for social reforms, or disabled solidarity – and disabled people should appear in the background of others' stories – recognising and acknowledging their existence, not erasing them from our image of society. In this way, we can undermine harmful stereotypes, and begin to move towards a more epistemically just society.

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