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Concept Proliferation as an Educational Good: Epistemic Injustice, Conceptual Revolutions, and Human Flourishing

A. C. Nikolaidis
The Ohio State University

Abstract: This article presents a pedagogical approach for disrupting epistemic injustice. The author demonstrates that different forms of epistemic injustice—testimonial, hermeneutical, and contributory—are the result of limited or distorted conceptual resources and argues that concept proliferation can be a promising educational means for overcoming such limitations and distortions. Concept proliferation involves a combination of increasing exposure to diverse, especially marginalized, concepts and providing students with necessary critical tools for questioning harmful and erroneous concepts. Concept proliferation is beneficial for both individual students and society at large. It liberates students from the confines of harmful concepts that limit their self-understanding, but also provides them with necessary skills to challenge hegemonic concepts that distort collective (social) understanding and contribute to epistemic and systemic injustice.

Keywords: Epistemic injustice, willful ignorance, concepts, conceptual analysis, conceptual history

> Concepts orient us to the world, and it is a rare individual who can resist this inherited orientation. Once established in the social mind-set, its influence is difficult to escape, since it is not a matter of seeing the phenomenon with the concept discretely attached but rather of seeing things *through* the concept itself.
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> — Charles Mills[1]

> Consider the experience of Carmita Wood…She couldn't find an adequate concept to understand her own experience, let alone describe it. This sort of lacuna in someone's conceptual resources can mean that however hard someone tries, they can't make their experiences understood, even to themselves. What was needed, in this case, was a

[1] Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 27.

> conceptual revolution, filling the lacuna with an entirely new concept—sexual harassment.
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> — Rae Langton[2]

In response to the positivist revival in educational research following the publication of the 2002 National Research Council report, Patti Lather argued for "Paradigm proliferation as a good thing to think with."[3] Proliferation, for Lather, responds to the current wave in educational research that situates researchers and research subjects within orderly categories that obscure epistemological and ontological complexities. Proliferation entails "saying yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceeds."[4] Similarly I argue for concept proliferation in education as a means to disrupt epistemic injustice. Concept proliferation embraces the messiness that diverse conceptual resources create in a pluralistic society, interrupts dominant and hegemonic conceptual resources, and exceeds limited and restraining concepts that contribute to epistemic injustice.

Since the publication of Miranda Fricker's groundbreaking book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*,[5] many scholars have addressed the problem of epistemic injustice, including scholars in philosophy of education.[6] Many have built on Fricker's account,[7]

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[2] Rae Langton, "Review of *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*," *Hypatia* 25, no. 2 (2010): 460.
[3] Patti Lather, "Paradigm Proliferation as a Good Thing to Think With: Teaching Research in Education as a Wild Profusion," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19, no. 1 (2006): 35.
[4] Ibid., 48.
[5] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[6] Examples in philosophy of education include: Barbara Applebaum, "Needing Not to Know: Ignorance, Innocence, Denials, and Discourse," *Philosophy of Education* (2015): 448–456; Barbara Applebaum, "White Ignorance, Epistemic Injustice and the Challenges of Teaching for Critical Social Consciousness," in *Educating for Critical Consciousness*, ed. George Yancy, pp. 28–44 (New York: Routledge, 2019); Karin Murris, "The Epistemic Challenge of Hearing Child's Voice," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32 (2013): 245–259; Ashley Taylor, "The Logic of Deferral: Educational Aims and Intellectual Disability," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37 (2018): 265–285; Ashley Taylor, "Knowledge Citizens? Intellectual Disability and the Production of Social Meanings Within Educational Research," *Harvard Educational Review* 88, no. 1 (2018): 1–25; Winston C. Thompson, "Reconstructing a 'Dilemma' of Racial Identity Education," *Ethics and Education* 13, no. 1 (2018): 55–72.
[7] See for instance Elizabeth Anderson, "Epistemic Justice as Virtue of Social Institutions," *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 163–173 and Ben Kotzee, "Educational Justice, Epistemic Justice, and Leveling Down," *Educational Theory* 63, no. 4 (2013): 331–349.

pointed to its limitations,[8] and demonstrated the need for a more expansive understanding of epistemic injustice.[9] Kristie Dotson, in grappling with issues of epistemic oppression has claimed that "a catchall theory of epistemic injustice is an unrealistic expectation."[10] What we need is "open conceptual structures" which acknowledge "that there is always more to say and remain sensitive to the inevitability of damaging oversight."[11] In this paper I will proceed in the spirit suggested by Dotson, careful to remain open to implications raised by scholars of epistemic injustice. My account does not address educational insights, underpinnings, or consequences of epistemic injustice, nor is it related to the application of epistemic justice in schools. Rather, I present a pedagogical approach with the potential to disrupt epistemic injustice.

The emphasis on concepts and conceptual revolutions highlighted by the opening extracts betrays the fact that my solution is best suited for hermeneutical injustices in particular. Yet, as I will argue, correcting hermeneutical injustices is a fundamental precondition for correcting other kinds of epistemic injustice such as testimonial and contributory injustice. Concept proliferation promises to be a viable structural solution for a variety of epistemic injustices, as it is through the influence of concepts that we come to perceive the world, and, therefore, that our epistemic habits, virtues, and vices are acquired and perpetuated. Its basic premises involve: (1) exposing students to multiple diverse concepts so as to amplify marginalized conceptual resources and challenge the hegemony of dominant ones and (2) engaging students in meaningful conceptual analysis and conceptual history with the aim of exposing and rejecting erroneous or obfuscatory

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[8] See for instance Langton, "Review of *Epistemic Injustice*," 459–464 and Rebecca Mason, "Two Kinds of Unknowing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 294–307.
[9] Most notably José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of 'Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance,'" *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (2012): 715–735.
[10] Kristie Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression," *Frontiers* 33, no. 1 (2012): 41.
[11] Ibid., 41–42.

concepts. This paper will proceed as follows: I will (1) briefly provide an account of epistemic injustice to frame the problem and the solution I propose; (2) explain why I believe we must focus on concepts; (3) delineate the scope of concept proliferation in relation to epistemic injustice; (4) discuss the notion of a conceptual revolution as the desirable effect of concept proliferation; (5) and, finally, for the purpose of rendering concept proliferation a tangible educational aim, trace the contours of an education that emphasizes concept proliferation.

Framing the Problem: Epistemic Injustice

The term epistemic injustice, according to Fricker, refers to injustices committed against people in their capacity as knowers that hinder their ability to give or receive knowledge. Epistemic injustices usually have structural implications in that they are committed against marginalized groups that are excluded from dominant discourses. Fricker presents two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical.[12] Dotson introduces a third distinct type: contributory injustice.[13] In this section I will briefly describe each of these three types of epistemic injustice and argue for the primacy of hermeneutical injustice. Before I do so, it is important to state that these three types need not be exclusive, and, as Dotson argues, cannot and should not be exclusive. However, for the purposes of this paper I will limit myself to these three.

A *testimonial injustice* occurs when a speaker suffers from a "credibility deficit" as a result of "identity prejudice" against the speaker, by a listener.[14] That is to say, the speaker's credibility is evaluated on grounds that are irrelevant to their epistemic status and that relate to their identity. This credibility deficit may result in unsubstantiated disregard of a speaker's

[12] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.
[13] Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale," 31.
[14] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 28.

testimony harming the speaker in their capacity as a giver of knowledge. Moreover, the listener misses out on a piece of information or knowledge that is important for them to know, knowledge that may pertain to the speaker, listener, or society more generally.[15] In its most severe formulation, testimonial injustice occurs at a systemic level, meaning that it leads to further, more tangible, injustices.[16] Examples of testimonial injustice could be as minimal as not considering a person with a foreign accent to be a credible source of information, notwithstanding their expertise in a given subject, and as grave as a white jury finding a person of color guilty of a crime for which a white person with a similar defense line would have been acquitted. Depending on its severity, testimonial injustice may have detrimental effects for someone's life prospects.

A *hermeneutical injustice* occurs when one has "some significant area of one's social experience obscured."[17] People suffering from hermeneutical injustices are confronted with "ill-fitted meanings" that render the situations they experience obscure.[18] This injustice is a result of "hermeneutical marginalization," viz., it occurs against groups of people who are excluded from "hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area(s) of social experience."[19] This renders them powerless to fully understand the situations that they find themselves in, even though it is in their interest to do so. Moreover, the lack of hermeneutical resources might even impact their sense of "selfhood" by influencing the way their social identity is constituted, particularly when said constitution of their identity is harmful for them.[20] A severe case of hermeneutical injustice might include a gay person who believes they suffer from a mental

[15] Ibid., 17.
[16] Ibid., 27.
[17] Ibid., 158.
[18] Ibid., 148.
[19] Ibid., 153.
[20] Ibid., 168.

illness because of predominant homophobic interpretations of homosexuality in their community. In such cases, the psychological burden of a hermeneutical injustice can be heavy, interfere with someone's well-being, and impede one's ability to flourish.

Finally, a *contributory injustice* occurs when an "agent's situated ignorance" creates conditions for using and maintaining "structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm to the epistemic agency of a knower."[21] Contributory injustice recognizes that different groups of people are dependent on different hermeneutical resources to make sense of the world, yet dominant hermeneutical resources are biased and conceal the value of marginalized hermeneutical resources.[22] Notwithstanding this bias, epistemic agents can appeal to a set of hermeneutical resources other than their own to make sense of experiences that they are unable to fully grasp using their own resources. Unwillingness to "recognize or acquire requisite alternative hermeneutical resources," notwithstanding the inherent bias of dominant resources, is the cause of contributory injustice.[23] The type of ignorance that Dotson describes is what Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. calls *willful hermeneutical ignorance*: dominantly situated knowers refusing "to learn to use epistemic resources developed from marginalized situatedness."[24] The historic denial of opportunities for women and people of color to pursue an education and careers other than the ones prescribed to them by white men is a salient case of contributory injustice. Though oppressed people have been knowledgeable of and vocal about their ability to pursue such endeavors, as well as about the injustice of denying them such opportunities, white men

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[21] Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale," 31.
[22] Although contributory injustice is grounded on the fact that dominant hermeneutical resources are biased, they need not be the only ones that are biased. Marginalized hermeneutical resources can also be biased, though, as will be discussed later in greater detail, they tend to be more accurate than dominant hermeneutical resources are.
[23] Ibid., 32.
[24] Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice," 722. Pohlhaus' notion of "willful hermeneutical ignorance" is in many ways similar to Charles Mills' notion of "white ignorance" and José Medina's notion of "active ignorance." All three follow Mills' delineation of "an epistemology of ignorance." Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.

chose to abide by their biased hermeneutical resources which justified the denial of such opportunities on erroneous beliefs about supposed white male superiority and nonwhite/non-male unfitness.

As mentioned above, concept proliferation seems best suited to address hermeneutical injustices. Since more concepts—and alternative concepts—facilitate a variety of different, and potentially better, interpretations of one's experiences, they may help one better understand their situation and overcome any hermeneutical injustices they suffer from. However, I argue that concept proliferation has the potential to address all three types of epistemic injustice, the reason being that hermeneutical injustice is the fundamental basis for each variety. Inability to heed the credible testimonies of some groups of people due to implicit or explicit biases (testimonial injustice) and unwillingness to adopt marginalized hermeneutical resources notwithstanding their often-greater interpretive capacity (contributory injustice), are both a result of erroneous interpretations of reality. People who commit testimonial and contributory injustice are unable to see the value of certain groups' testimonies and hermeneutical resources, because their own dominant hermeneutical resources are biased against said groups and their epistemic capacities. For example, mainstream American society, which is permeated by white, male, middle-class values, is often unable to understand that marginalized voices are better positioned to understand certain aspects of reality. Moreover, people who inhabit mainstream American society implicitly or explicitly disregard marginalized individuals' testimonies because they are biased against the racial, ethnic, gender, class, etc., group with which said individuals are identified. It is, thus, a misinterpretation of reality by dominant groups which makes them commit or be complicit in all

three types of epistemic injustice and such misinterpretation is the result of hermeneutical injustice.[25]

Given that hermeneutical injustice underlies all three forms of epistemic injustice, concept proliferation is well equipped to address epistemic injustice as a whole. I will return to epistemic injustice and the ability of concept proliferation to disrupt it below, but first I will discuss why concepts are central to this inquiry.

Concepts as Windows to the World

As suggested in the opening quote by Charles Mills, concepts are significant in that we come to see the world *through* them. When object A has been conceptualized *as* X, the concept cannot be easily jettisoned in favor of a newer or better one. We come to understand A in light of its X-ness, interpret future A-related experiences through the conceptual framework delineated by X, and act toward A in accordance with said interpretations. Mills explains how our socialization as human beings entails the acquisition of particular conceptual resources and, hence, a particular way of viewing the world. "Perception is also in part conception," Mills avers, "the viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid."[26] When we encounter new situations or new information we appeal to the conceptual resources we have acquired through our socialization, in an effort to process or make sense of them. We appeal to memory—the testimonies, perceptions, and conceptions of others. More importantly, the very language we use is socialized and grounded in a particular understanding of reality. This understanding can be more or less 'accurate', but in either case is influenced by a preexisting "conceptual array with

[25] Hermeneutical injustice in this broader sense, diverges from Fricker's account. As Medina states, the case of white ignorance reveals that "privileged subjects are also hermeneutically marginalized" and unable to comprehend certain things. Notwithstanding their privilege, their hermeneutical marginalization constitutes a case of hermeneutical injustice because it leads to wrongs committed against marginalized groups and individuals. Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 109.
[26] Mills, "White Ignorance," 23–24.

which the cognizer approaches the world."[27] This conceptual array, moreover, is not neutral but "oriented toward a certain understanding" or toward "a certain interpretation of the world."[28] It follows from this that our concepts, whether beneficial or harmful, limit our understanding of our surroundings and the world we inhabit.[29] When our conceptual resources do not inhibit anyone's flourishing this is not necessarily a problem, at least not prima facie. However, when the concepts we inherit are misleading or erroneous, the consequences of our limited understanding have the potential to be devastating.

Mills provides such an example in his extensive discussion on "savagery." For centuries, the concept of savagery obscured dominant perceptions and led to atrocities. It promoted a skewed view of civilization and was used to justify and perpetuate white supremacist ideology and imperialism. Conceptualizing a group of human beings as "nonhuman" or "subhuman"—"the wild man of the wood" as the term savage denotes[30]—made it possible for colonizers to view the world in a way that, although may seem absurd to us, made absolute sense to them. As Mills puts it, endorsing a perception of the world filtered through the concept of savagery makes it "possible to speak with no sense of absurdity of 'empty' lands that are actually teeming with millions of people, of 'discovering' countries whose inhabitants already exist, because the

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[27] Ibid., 24.
[28] Ibid.
[29] In my description of concepts, throughout the paper, I use the qualifiers *beneficial* and *harmful*. My choice of these terms relates primarily to their use-value. That is to say, a concept can be used in a way that yields beneficial consequences—in some capacity and for some person or group of people—but it can also be used in a way that causes harm. The use-value of a concept does not presuppose any normative or universal claims about that concept. A concept is not intrinsically and unequivocally good or bad; its being beneficial or harmful is completely a matter of context. A concept can be beneficial in one occasion but harmful in another, it can be beneficial for one person but harmful for another, but also, the same concept can be beneficial in some way but harmful in another. Given the nuance in determining whether a concept is beneficial and harmful, it is important that one does not consider concepts to be beneficial unless they are beneficial for all those who are implicated and do not unduly harm anyone, to the best of our knowledge. A concept that in a particular context is beneficial for some, but the benefits it engenders are premised on other people's harm, is considered harmful notwithstanding its benefits.
[30] Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 42–43.

nonwhite Other is so located in the guiding conceptual array that different rules apply."[31] These different rules made it possible to refuse equal moral status to nonwhites and to act against them in ways that would have been considered a violation of basic rights and liberties if committed against whites.[32] For instance, they made it possible to see no contradiction between declaring that "all men are created equal" and have an equal right to liberty, while simultaneously having a whole group of people subjugated under slavery.[33]

The example of savagery is telling of the horrific consequences certain concepts can have, especially when they are erroneous and distort our understanding of the world. More importantly, it demonstrates that concepts can have far-reaching consequences that outlive them. Even though the concept of savagery has long been rejected, as Mills shows, the dominant form of white supremacy that savagery rationalized has left traces that are the cause of great harms and adversities for marginalized and racialized populations. From mass extinctions to structural inequalities, concepts of othering have allowed people—in the past and to this day—to justify and normalize unjustifiable and excruciating acts. Of course, savagery is an extreme case of a concept with destructive consequences. Not all harmful concepts help justify slavery, genocide, and exploitation. However, all harmful concepts have the potential to yield undesirable and harmful consequences that inhibit human flourishing.

The Centrality of Concepts for Epistemic Justice

By emphasizing the importance of knowledge transactions and describing their obstruction as a distinct form of injustice, Fricker and other epistemic injustice scholars have highlighted the vitality of concepts as well as their potential for great harm or benefit. This

[31] Mills, "White Ignorance," 27.
[32] Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 56.
[33] Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 182–191.

vitality is most salient in the case of hermeneutical injustice where the lack of conceptual resources to make sense of one's experience can inhibit human flourishing. Conversely, being in possession of conceptual resources necessary for making sense of one's experience can have liberating effects. Of several examples that Fricker discusses in her book, two are especially revealing: the cases of Wendy Sanford and Carmita Wood.

Wendy Sanford's discovery of "postnatal depression" reveals the liberating effects beneficial concepts can have in people's lives, particularly those from historically oppressed groups.[34] Sanford was experiencing symptoms of postnatal depression which she was unable to explain. As a result, both Sanford and her husband had been casting blame for her mental state on herself. However, when she discovered that her mental state was the result of a known medical condition experienced by many women and which is attributable to physiological and social factors, things changed. The concept "postnatal depression" allowed her to reframe her experience and revealed a new conceptual framework through which to make sense of it. This new conceptual framework allowed her to recontextualize her experience by emphasizing medical and social causes rather than internal. It allowed her to see her depression as a medical condition, discover biological factors that contribute to it, and, perhaps most importantly, uncover social factors that contribute to it such as female isolation and disempowerment within a patriarchal society. In other words, postnatal depression allowed Sanford to escape sexist conceptual restraints that controlled her life and revealed a reformative and liberating view of the world and her experiences. For Sanford, the inclusion of "postnatal depression" in her conceptual toolbox, was a truly enlightening experience with tangible benefits that improved her living conditions.

[34] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 148–149.

A similar, though in some ways different, example is that of Carmita Wood. Wood was trying to cope with sexual harassment while lacking the conceptual resources to fully grasp what she was experiencing. She was harassed by a colleague who continuously made inappropriate sexual gestures and bodily contact. This led to multiple stress-induced health issues which forced her to quit her job. Nonetheless, she was denied unemployment benefits due to her inability to express what she was experiencing and hence justify why her resignation was forced. Eventually, Wood, in collaboration with other women who had similar experiences, clarified the significance of this experience and decided on the term "sexual harassment" to represent it. Yet, the previous lack of such a concept had already done irreparable damage to Wood and her career.[35] This example perfectly illustrates the harmful effects that the lack of an insightful concept can have. In fact, because of the lack of such a concept, social understanding was dominated by a harmful concept with detrimental consequences for many women: namely, "flirting," which at the time was expansive enough to include cases that today would be considered sexual harassment.

These two cases are used by Fricker as examples of hermeneutical injustice. Nonetheless, there is a fundamental difference between the two cases. For Sanford, her condition was completely foreign to her. Though she felt sadness, she was unable to pinpoint the cause of this sadness. This led her to attribute blame for it on herself. Because of her inability to perceive her situation through the concept of postnatal depression, she experienced her sadness as abnormal and self-imposed. Sanford's lack of the appropriate concept led to a misinterpretation of her situation. For Wood, on the other hand, there was no such problem. She was fully aware of her colleague's inappropriate behavior and blameworthiness. The lack of a term did not make any difference in how she experienced the particular situation. Yet, as history has shown, her coining

[35] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 150–151.

of the term sexual harassment (with the help of other women who had suffered similar experiences) created a radical shift in the way this phenomenon is portrayed in dominant conceptual resources. Whereas in the 1970s men could get away with sexually aggressive behaviors of the sort by mislabeling them as flirting, today that the term sexual harassment has been coined most people realize that such a behavior is harmful and unacceptable. The hermeneutical breakthrough here was not in Wood's conceptual resources but in societal conceptual resources. Dominant conceptual resources, which were biased against women, came to embrace it as a common meaning and shifted the blame from the harassed (who was previously thought to be "lacking a sense of humor") to the harasser (who was previously thought to be harmlessly "flirting").[36] Wood's case is therefore best described as overcoming a contributory injustice.

Fricker classifies both of these cases as hermeneutical injustices and assumes that both Sanford and Wood experienced a hermeneutical breakthrough. Many scholars, however, have questioned that this is the case, especially when it comes to cases like Carmita Wood's.[37] José Medina, for instance, claims that "we should be careful not to tie too closely people's hermeneutical capacities to the repertoire of readily available terms and coined concepts, as if oppressed subjects did not have ways of expressing their suffering well before such articulations were available."[38] Indeed, it seems more likely that those who are oppressed understand oppressive situations better, notwithstanding the lack of coined concepts. Medina discusses specific examples of pre-conceptual articulations being available in a variety of contexts such as in LGBTQ, women's, and enslaved people's communities. In fact, Medina further suggests,

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[36] Ibid., 153.
[37] Mason, "Two Kinds of Unknowing," 297–298, Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 99; Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice," 720–721.
[38] Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 99.

following Charles Mills, that given their marginalized position within society, oppressed groups must learn to see the world from multiple perspectives—as Du Bois' double-consciousness suggests at the very least two: their own and the dominant. This means that, in many ways, marginalized populations are epistemically superior to privileged populations.[39] They are therefore able to see limitations in dominant perspectives which, as suggested by the notion of contributory injustice, are often biased. Moreover, their worldview is more likely to be accurate, given their ability to use multiple hermeneutical resources which renders their situatedness "experience rich."[40] These criticisms of Fricker's account belie her claim that Wood experienced a hermeneutical breakthrough and corroborate the case argued above; namely, that reconceptualizing her experience as sexual harassment was a breakthrough for collective hermeneutical resources, and, hence, a case of overcoming contributory injustice.

This analysis reveals two distinct ways in which beneficial concepts disrupt epistemic injustice: (1) by helping individuals make better sense of their own experiences and (2) by questioning the legitimacy of harmful dominant concepts—thereby ameliorating dominant conceptual resources. The former way directly disrupts hermeneutical injustice. The latter disrupts contributory injustice by legitimizing marginally situated concepts, reducing the bias of dominant conceptual resources, and making it harder for privileged groups to ignore marginalized groups on grounds of involuntary ignorance. Furthermore, the latter case contributes to the overcoming of testimonial injustice, as people who are cognizant of marginalized conceptual resources are less likely to be prejudiced against members of marginalized groups or dismiss what they have to say. Michelle Moody-Adams states that, "[t]he 'conceptual space' that a society historically marks out for a disfavored group places very

[39] Ibid., 44.
[40] Pohlhaus, "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice," 721.

definite boundaries on what those not in that group will think of them." Yet, increasing awareness through exposure to marginalized concepts can help redraw or break down "conceptual boundaries" and view members of disadvantaged groups on their own terms, rather than on terms imposed by their oppressors.[41] Increasing student exposure to marginalized conceptual resources through concept proliferation, can thus help overcome all three types of epistemic injustice. Through exposure to marginalized conceptual resources, marginally-situated knowers become less likely to experience hermeneutical injustices and dominantly-situated knowers become less likely to willfully ignore such resources or dismiss marginally-situated knowers as knowledge-givers.

Conceptual Revolutions

How then do beneficial concepts help overcome epistemic injustices, and how does concept proliferation create the conditions for this overcoming? In her review of Fricker's book, Rae Langton describes hermeneutical breakthroughs as "conceptual revolutions"—shifts which allow individuals to articulate their experiences in previously inexistent terms, help them better understand and manage their experiences, and help them achieve greater levels of self-understanding. Given the interconnectedness of all three types of epistemic injustice, conceptual revolutions disrupt epistemic injustice as a whole. The acquisition of new beneficial concepts elucidates one's own experience (overcoming hermeneutical injustice) and the experiences of others (overcoming contributory injustice). Better understanding of others' experiences is likely to change a person's conduct and reduce their likelihood of dismissing testimonies on the basis of epistemically irrelevant factors (overcoming testimonial injustice). Yet the question remains, how do we succeed in accomplishing such conceptual revolutions? Fricker suggests that we need

[41] Michelle M. Moody-Adams, "Race, Class, and the Social Construction of Self-Respect," *Philosophical Forum* 24, no. 1–3 (1993): 259.

to cultivate epistemic virtues that disrupt epistemic injustices. This is an important educational tool and substantial scholarship addresses the cultivation of such virtues.[42] However, this is not the only or even best way to disrupt epistemic injustices. As Langton suggests, "a structural remedy" is more likely to be effective given the structural causes of epistemic injustice.[43]

Concept proliferation is such a structural remedy.[44] Instead of, or in addition to, inculcating epistemic virtues in students, we can maximize students' exposure to concepts which, in turn, increases their likelihood of experiencing conceptual revolutions—reinterpretations and reevaluations of their experiences and the world around them. Wendy Sanborn felt guilt for suffering from postnatal depression, unaware that she was unjustifiably blamed for something beyond her control. Exposure to the concept of postnatal depression allowed her to redescribe and reevaluate her experience, thereby changing the way that she felt about her condition. Such reevaluation, in the words of Charles Taylor, leads to "two kinds of conceptual revolution."[45] The first is a reconceptualization of one's prior state of emotion as a result of a newly acquired meaning that better explains one's situation. It signifies the rejection of one's previous feeling and the espousal of a new one. To stick to Sanford's example, she no longer felt responsible or guilty for her state of mind but rather a victim of social pressure who suffers from a known medical condition. The second is a meta-conceptualization and characterizes how one feels about her previous state of emotion. For example, in Sanford's case the feeling of guilt disappeared and a new feeling emerged; i.e., anger or indignation for having felt guilty even though she was not

[42] See for instance Jason Baehr, ed., *Intellectual Virtues and Education: Essays in Applied Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
[43] Langton, "Review of *Epistemic Injustice*," 462–463.
[44] See Elizabeth Anderson's "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions" for another account that provides a structural remedy to epistemic injustice.
[45] Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 69.

responsible for her condition.[46] Transposing this double conceptual revolution to cases of contributory injustice we see similar results. A privileged male, for instance, who was unaware of the shape or harmful implications of sexual harassment may reconceptualize cases that he previously considered to be harmless flirting as cases of sexual harassment. Moreover, he may feel guilt for disregarding the testimonies of women who rejected the characterization of such cases as harmless flirting. This, in turn, could render him more attentive to women's testimonies of sexual harassment and in general.

The notion of a conceptual revolution underscores the importance of an expansive conceptual toolbox, not only for individual persons but for society as a whole. This, of course, is not to say that a limited conceptual toolbox necessarily indicates a limited capacity for understanding, though it may also have that effect. Furthermore, it is not to imply that the level of one's formal education has anything to do with the breadth of one's conceptual toolbox. Rather, I argue that articulating one's feelings or experiences, though not necessary to beget or even refine them, shapes them in unique ways. As Taylor puts it,

> the nature of some of our feelings, those which touch the essentially human concerns, is partly shaped by the way we articulate them. The descriptions we feel inclined to offer of ourselves are not simply external to the reality described, leaving it unchanged, but rather constitutive of it.[47]

This is clear in Sanford's case where articulation reconstituted her experience—from feeling guilt and accepting blame to feeling liberated and assigning blame. Though the experience per se was not changed, her experience of that experience changed as a result of being reconstituted by the new concept. We can also assume that Wood, who understood her experiences prior to the

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 270.

coining of the term sexual harassment, underwent an experiential reconstruction once she was able to place the experience within definable boundaries. The fact that prior to the coining of the term "sexual harassment" they were suggesting other options such as "sexual intimidation" or "sexual coercion" suggests that the boundaries of the experience were still fluid. Coining the term solidified and better-defined the experience, rendering it more easily perceptible.

This constitutive dimension of concepts sheds light on how different vocabularies can lead to different, and sometimes incompatible, understandings of the same experiences. Depending on their conceptual resources, people often interpret the same experience or state of affairs in diverse, or even conflicting, ways. Going back to the example of savagery, white European colonizers interpreted (and some still interpret) the world through erroneous concepts that posit a 'natural' biological and social hierarchy. Yet, oppressed populations rejected this hierarchy as indicated from innumerable uprisings against their oppressors. Oppressed and oppressors experienced the same reality contradictorily because of their conflicting conceptual resources. This implies that people with different or conflicting conceptual toolboxes are never fully capable of understanding each other, since their vocabularies allow little to no room for overlap. What one believes and expresses does not directly reflect an external reality but rather a reality that is (re)shaped by their own understandings and articulations. The limitations that conceptual resources place on understanding necessitate greater access to broad and diverse conceptual tools. Such tools allow us to break away from our constraining perspectives and alternate frames on the same experiences, thereby, mitigating these limitations and creating opportunities for genuine communication—conducive to conceptual revolutions.

Diverse conceptual tools help us develop, what Medina calls, a *kaleidoscopic consciousness*; a consciousness that is always "open to being expanded…to acknowledge and

engage new perspectives…to strive toward a better balance among possible perspectives."[48] Given that society is ever-expanding, we need to cultivate a consciousness that "can always adapt to the possibility of excess, that is, of there being more ways of experiencing the world than those considered."[49] A kaleidoscopic consciousness affords one the ability to see the world from multiple perspectives, but also see their limitations. It cultivates, what Medina calls, *meta-lucidity*: a "capacity to see the limitations of dominant ways of seeing."[50] Concept proliferation fosters both a kaleidoscopic consciousness and meta-lucidity. Exposure to diverse concepts that challenge one another, that interrupt and exceed dominant concepts and meanings, is "a way of resisting hegemonic conceptions and the form of oppression supported by those conceptions."[51] It also "makes it possible to redraw our cognitive maps, to redescribe our experiences, and to reconceptualize our ways of relating to others."[52] A kaleidoscopic consciousness helps overcome contributory injustice by enabling people to shift perspectives and access different conceptual resources. By increasing access to conceptual resources marginalized concepts gain prominence and equal exposure with dominant ones, which inhibits hermeneutical injustices and increases (self-)understanding. Moreover, people who are well-versed in diverse conceptual resources are prepared to resist social biases and heed marginalized viewpoints, reducing testimonial injustices.

Concept Proliferation as Educational Aspiration

Thus far I have shown that concept proliferation should be a central educational aim for those committed to epistemic justice. In this final section, I will present pedagogical implications

[48] Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 200.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 47.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

of concept proliferation. In practice, concept proliferation requires a combination of two distinct, yet complementary, processes: increasing exposure to and questioning of conceptual resources. In this final section I will explain what each of these processes entails.

Concept Profusion

I have argued for the importance and desirability of beneficial concepts—concepts that are likely to benefit people who use them and those around them who are influenced by their use. I have also argued for the need to reject harmful concepts—concepts whose use negatively impacts their users and harms those affected by their users' conduct. Yet education by concept proliferation need not—and best not—entail an educator who discriminates beforehand between beneficial and harmful concepts and then exposes students to, what they perceive to be, beneficial concepts alone. The reason for avoiding such discrimination is threefold. First, I am wary of the dangers of paternalism that come with allowing an educational authority—whether parent, teacher, or high-ranking educator—to make decisions about which concepts are beneficial or harmful. Any form of paternalism is problematic because it assumes that the person making the calls is unbiased and knows everything one needs to know to make good choices. It assumes, to recall John Stuart Mill, the *infallibility* of the person making the decision about which concept is more beneficial than others and for whom.[53] Second, benefit and harm are not intrinsic qualities of concepts but highly dependent on the context that each concept is applied. For example, racial discrimination when practiced by a dominant group against a marginalized group is harmful for the marginalized group, but, racial discrimination practiced by a marginalized group against a dominant group, in certain contexts, protects marginalized groups without causing harm to the dominant group. Finally, given the tentative status of knowledge, in

[53] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22.

the long run there is no way of knowing with absolute certainty which concept will be beneficial and which will not.

Students must be exposed to as many potentially beneficial concepts as possible. Leaving decisions about which concepts are appropriate to one person can hinder this goal, given that all human beings hold implicit biases that unintentionally influence their conduct.[54] As such, concept proliferation initially entails providing access to *more* concepts, particularly traditionally-silenced concepts, which have the potential to significantly increase understanding. Through greater exposure, students can access potentially beneficial concepts that educators may be unaware of or misunderstand. It is thus better to provide students with as many diverse concepts as possible, while maintaining a relatively agnostic attitude about whether said concepts are beneficial or harmful.

This form of concept profusion may lead to a couple of problems. First of all, it could expose students to harmful and even erroneous concepts with the potential to obscure their experiences rather than elucidate them. For this reason, when necessary, educators must protect their students from concepts that can harm them, especially when their students are developmentally incapable of processing them. Certain concepts that render younger students more vulnerable to harm (such as concepts that pose a threat to their physical and emotional well-being) or susceptible to manipulation (such as concepts used for indoctrination) should be delayed until students are better able to process and critically evaluate them. The same applies for concepts that could shut down avenues to further learning. Concept proliferation is impeded if a concept that one embraces forecloses possibilities for further concept acquisition. Since profusion is the goal, any concept that hinders it should be delayed until a substantial degree of

[54] See Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald, *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2013).

profusion has been achieved and students are capable of evaluating said concept. Finally, given that proliferation maximizes exposure to concepts in a timely fashion, if done appropriately, exposure to harmful concepts should be balanced out by exposure to beneficial ones; viz., beneficial concepts can counter the negative effects of harmful concepts. As mentioned above, beneficial concepts instigate conceptual revolutions with liberating effects.

Concept profusion may also lead to another problem: the sheer magnitude of existing concepts could be paralyzing to students, not to mention the time constraints that educators face which force schools to limit what is taught. A solution to this problem is for schools to play a complementary role to that of other socializing agents for the purpose of maximizing overall exposure and avoid privileging dominant and hegemonic concepts over marginalized ones. After all, as a tool for disrupting epistemic injustice, the primary purpose of concept proliferation is to uplift marginalized concepts and give them equal consideration—though not necessarily assign them equal value—with dominant ones. In his discussion about the role of memory for remembering and forgetting, Charles Mills states that conflicting cultures necessarily have conflicting memories: "both official and counter-memory."[55] It is helpful to think of concepts in a similar manner so as to determine the role of the school. Namely, there are official hegemonic concepts and there are marginalized counter-concepts. Since it is primarily from the lack of counter-concepts that our education suffers, the inclusion of counter-concepts must take precedence over the inclusion of official ones. More importantly, counter-concepts are better able to challenge dominant beliefs about knowledge and interrupt normalized conceptual resources which predominantly shape our interpretations of the world. By exceeding hegemonic cultural norms, counter-concepts facilitate conceptual revolutions. While students have ample

[55] Mills, "White Ignorance," 29.

opportunities to be exposed to dominant discourses and conceptual resources, they have few opportunities to be exposed to more diverse marginalized ones.

Counter-conceptual resources are crucial in helping marginalized students, who are more severely affected by hermeneutical injustices. Marginalized students with expansive conceptual toolboxes are better equipped to reinterpret their situations, increase their self-understanding, and better their living conditions. Moreover, they can more effectively contribute to conversations around injustice and enrich other people's—both marginalized and privileged—perspectives. Nevertheless, to disrupt epistemic injustices, privileged students must also be exposed to counter-conceptual resources because they are far more likely to be perpetrators of testimonial and contributory injustices. Expansive conceptual toolboxes force privileged students to rethink things in terms that subvert their current understandings, foster meta-lucidity that compels them to question dominant conceptions on which their belief system is based, and lead to a better interpretation of reality—a hermeneutical breakthrough which helps overcome epistemic injustice.

Another important consideration is that, although concept proliferation can be practiced in all settings, it is best practiced in diverse settings. Schools with a diverse faculty and student body are places where students, through meaningful interactions, can question their categories not only in theory but also in practice.[56] Of course conceptual revolutions can occur in all settings through meaningful conceptual analysis and conceptual history, as I will discuss in the next subsection. Nonetheless, they are more likely to occur through genuine interactions with people who embody diverse concepts and are, thus, better representatives of them. People who embody diverse concepts can provide better, more encompassing, and more accurate accounts of

[56] Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 253.

them, based not only on external knowledge but lived experiences. Diverse schools expose students to diverse conversations and hence to diverse concepts and counter-concepts. Such exposure is more likely to foster a kaleidoscopic consciousness than mere teaching, as students *see* diverse concepts embodied by other students with different perspectives. Concepts may influence our perceptions, but our perceptions can also validate newly acquired concepts. Another important benefit of diverse environments is that they naturally foster "epistemic friction," which is necessary to avoid hegemonizing any concept.[57] The aim of concept proliferation is to interrupt and exceed, to create conceptual revolutions and hermeneutic breakthroughs. Should counter-concepts gain such momentum that they become "new hegemonies" then the purpose of concept proliferation is defeated.[58] Epistemic friction is necessary for the continuation of proliferation.[59]

In addition to receiving greater exposure to concepts, students must learn to discriminate between beneficial and harmful concepts for themselves. This ensures greater diversity of opinion in class debates about the value of a concept, but also the students' ability to apply said analytical and historicist skills when they are no longer in school. For this reason, in addition to concept profusion students must engage in conceptual analysis and conceptual history.

Conceptual Analysis and History

Concept profusion works best when accompanied by conceptual analysis. Simple exposure to concepts is inadequate as concepts can be complicated and hard to unpack. Students should be able to define and clarify the concepts they use. For this to occur concepts need to be

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[57] Ibid., 293.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Harry Brighouse makes a similar argument when he discusses the importance of schools being discontinuous to mainstream society. See Harry Brighouse, "Channel One, the Anti-Commercial Principle, and the Discontinuous Ethos," *Educational Policy* 19, no. 3 (2005): 528-549; Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

contextualized. When used in the abstract concepts often lose their meaningfulness. This is characteristic of today's mainstream political discourse where concepts are sloganized and abused. For instance, freedom is used to justify any governmental action even if that ends up limiting basic freedoms for the majority of the population. People think of freedom as an ideal to be worshipped without realizing that freedom is a useless concept until we define it as freedom for or from *something*. Moreover, familiar concepts cease to mean what they used to. For example, democracy has been reduced to mere spectatorship as citizens all over the world are limited to voting for predetermined candidates. The concepts of freedom and democracy need to be reclaimed which entails understanding and scrutinizing their meanings. We need to be able to distinguish between bad freedoms, such as freedom to exploit, coerce, or cause harm, and good freedoms, such as freedom of speech, religion, or association.[60] We need to be able to distinguish between varieties of democracy such as "social, liberal, radical, republican, representative, authoritarian, direct, participatory, deliberative, [and] plebiscite."[61] We need to free vital concepts from the status of meaningless slogans and rhetorical devices, and elevate them to the status of meaningful and substantive conceptual tools that better demonstrate and help solve social problems.

Conceptual analysis must further be supplemented with conceptual history. Concepts change over time and their historicity often leaves traces that can be problematic, especially if disregarded. For instance, Mills' historical analysis of the social contract demonstrates that it is a racialized concept, an aspect concealed from seemingly colorblind philosophical texts. Such a historical examination was necessary not only to uncover the social contract's racialized character, but also so that contemporary philosophers and political theorists can address this

[60] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 36–38.
[61] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 19.

aspect rather than actively ignore it. Before Mills' analysis, the perpetuation of racialized oppression remained less visible, allowing a harmful concept to surreptitiously influence our perceptions.[62] Conceptual history uncovers this insidious effect of harmful concepts.[63] Medina's emphasis on Foucauldian genealogies accomplishes a similar aim. Genealogies challenge dominant narratives and concepts that control our perceptions of the world. They "are *insurrections* against monopolization of the social imagination" and, as such, expose the inadequacy of hegemonic concepts. By bringing to light counter-concepts, genealogies create epistemic friction that subverts hegemonic concepts.[64]

Given the character of conceptual history, it may be well suited for critiquing harmful concepts that are value- rather than error-dependent. In such cases where simple conceptual analysis may reach an impasse, conceptual history may reveal a concept's harmful implications by tracing its use throughout history and explaining how it still perpetuates some of its harmful consequences. The debate on reproductive rights can serve here as a case in point. A large portion of the population supports women's rights including reproductive rights. This has generated a conservative backlash premised on the claim that conservative conceptual resources, such as 'the right to life,' are unjustly marginalized in a secular society. This, the argument goes, compromises some groups' religious freedoms and ability to pursue their values which go against birth control and abortion. In such a case where a notion such as 'reproductive rights' becomes open to debate and critique, and acceptance of it is contingent on one's values, it is useful to trace how similar values have been historically employed to control women's

[62] Mills, *The Racial Contract*. Carole Pateman's analysis of the gendered dimensions of the social contract is also pertinent here. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
[63] Another great example of how conceptual history can expose the harmful implications of our concepts is Darby and Rury's historical account of the achievement gap. Derrick Darby and John L. Rury, *The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
[64] Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 292.

reproductive (and other) rights and to maintain white supremacist political power by increasing reproduction rates for northern European descendants.[65] In such cases, a historicist lens can serve the purpose of dismantling presentist biases which tend to disregard the historical weight and consequences of certain concepts, and separate their use from the historical context which begot them—in the case of opposition to reproductive rights a context associated with eugenics, sexism, and white supremacy.

Finally, conceptual history can also help us reject or revise old and outdated concepts which may no longer serve their purpose or have disastrous consequences for society. As Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner have warned, the concepts we use tend to "fix" the meaning of what is named "obscuring the effects of change" that force us to reconsider what our concepts mean today and what purposes they serve. Like expired medicine which "might have been therapeutically valuable at one time may have fatal effects at another—even though the *name* remains the same," so can concepts that once were helpful and necessary may now be impediments for growth and harmonious coexistence.[66] "Isolationism," for example, which is gaining ground all over the world, tends to signify national sufficiency. Such a concept, nonetheless, is misleading given that globalization has rendered most countries dependent on other countries for their well-being and survival. Isolationism is therefore merely an illusion that if taken seriously can jeopardize a country's well-being.

Conceptual analysis and conceptual history are indispensable components of concept proliferation and must go hand in hand with concept profusion. Concepts can be misleading or misused to serve the interests of people in power in a way that unjustly disadvantages others.

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[65] Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 87–91.
[66] Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), 108.

Conceptual analysis exposes such misuses and their implications. Concepts can also be threatening or harmful to people, a fact concealed by their frequent decontextualization and dehistoricization. Conceptual history brings such accounts and histories to consciousness and, by doing so, interrupts the forgetfulness that is fostered through education and other socializing agencies. Conceptual analysis and history are particularly important because schools cannot control what concepts students are exposed to at home. Even when schools delay exposure to concepts that are harmful or obstructive to concept profusion, students may be exposed to such concepts outside schools. For this reason, schools must not only expose students to counter-concepts but also help students process—and learn how to process on their own—concepts that are erroneous or harmful, and that are often misrepresented to conceal such implications.

Conclusion

The current system of education is characterized by conceptual poverty, especially with regard to counter-concepts, and a fundamental lack of critical analysis and historical understanding of concepts in general. The limits placed on students' conceptual resources have led to hermeneutic distortions and epistemic injustices in urgent need of remediation. Student dependency on official and dominant concepts to understand current problems impedes both their understanding of said problems and their ability to find viable solutions. Dominant concepts are often highly inadequate and culturally or socioeconomically biased. As a society we do not suffer from a lack of adequate concepts, though there are never too many concepts in an effort to understand the great nuance of modern society. Colleges and universities are examples of educational institutions that can potentially provide a plurality of concepts to students, including counter-concepts developed by marginalized communities and that official concepts tend to render invisible. Such concepts and counter-concepts help higher education students challenge

their erroneous beliefs. We have a responsibility as educators and as academics to share this conceptual wealth with all learners from a young age. Sharing such knowledge helps expand students' meaning-making capacities, enhance their skills in conceptual analysis and conceptual history, and affords them a better more pluralistic—kaleidoscopic—perspective of the current state of things. Educating through concept proliferation, allows students to develop a capacity for meta-lucidity and question hegemonic concepts. It helps overcome epistemic injustice and foster an epistemically balanced and egalitarian society. It develops human beings who can be and aim to be epistemically just. Such an education is imperative today, more than ever, when division and injustice reigns uninhibited. Concept proliferation allows us to find outlets where our current conceptual categories have led us to an impasse. It allows us to reform society, to make it more just, more accepting, more humane. More importantly, it allows everyone, regardless of status, to live better and more fulfilling lives.