

ARTICLE

Recognising and addressing wealth privilege in policymaking through an analysis of epistemic practice and agency

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The author makes the case that wealth inequality ramifies in the communicative practices of policymaking in ways which produce specific forms of epistemic injustice. Relative epistemic authority between richer and poorer knowers is established by limiting some speakers to being sources of information, and elevating others to the epistemically more sophisticated role of inquirer. In its systemic form, this differentiation has the effect of re-producing and maintaining ‘tracker prejudices’ (Fricker, 2007) and ‘tracker privileges’ (Medina, 2011) which then ramify in relational and distributive inequality (Fricker, 2016). The article suggests that in a context in which the inclusion of ‘lived experience’ has come to be seen as an intrinsic good in policy discourse (Smith-Merry, 2020), the lived experience we need to amplify isn’t that of the poor, it is that of the rich. Only in centring rich voices in social policymaking can we reveal and challenge the operation of wealth privilege and advance reparatory forms of epistemic practice.¹

Keywords: epistemic injustice; hermeneutical; testimonial; wealth; expert; credibility

Introduction

This article intervenes in an established field of sociological work exploring how individuals and groups are classified and treated differently (Bhambra, 2021; Skeggs, 2019; Tyler, 2015; 2020; Virdee, 2019). It considers the epistemic dimension of such classificatory practices and their ‘performative effects’ (Tyler, 2015, p.500) in two policymaking sites distinguished by the contrasting wealth and asset profile of the target demographic: Universal Credit claimants and ‘High Net Worth’ individuals.

Since the 2000s, policy sociologists have been making the case for shifting the gaze of sociological research ‘up’ towards the rich (Orton and Rowlingson, 2007; Rowlingson and Connor, 2011). A growing number of economists and sociologists, providing increasingly granular data on wealth inequality in its historical and regional context (Piketty, 2014; World Inequality Lab, 2018) and diverse analyses of why this mal-distribution matters (Dorling, 2014; Bhambra, 2021), are shifting the focus of sociological study towards wealth. However, the conceptual and intellectual frame within which this new writing takes place has arguably tended to leave certain

concepts and categories – notably the idea of ‘poverty’ – ontologically intact. This leads to calls for ‘a more robust sociological framing of the inequality debate’ which can ‘broaden our understanding of the full scale of the challenge that it entails’ (Savage, 2021, p.2).

I conceptualised *Wealtherty* as one such alternative sociological frame in which to think about wealth inequality sociologically, and specifically, through which to reveal and challenge divergent dispositions of the state towards richer and poorer people (Kerr, 2021, 2024).

I presented a working definition of *Wealtherty* as:

1. The state or condition of hyper-concentration of prosperity in abundance of possessions or riches, with a stark polarisation between the rich and the rest;
2. The active perpetuation of social and policy divisions based on this distinction (Fiscal and Social Policy; Winners and Losers; Claimants and Customers);
3. Concomitant unequal access to political power and influence (with rich voices predominating and gatekeeping) and resultant risks to the democratic process and social justice;
4. Constraints on full human flourishing of poorer people via the operation of privileged *restricted capabilities* (e.g. media and political influence) and policy-induced lack of opportunity to exercise basic human capabilities (e.g. alleviating hunger).

I suggested that *Wealtherty* exists ‘when the dynamic between these four elements is self-sustaining and has made itself invisible – a form of *wealth privilege*, which makes it unlikely that beneficiaries of the system will be motivated to enact change’ (Kerr, 2021).

The inequalities explored through the concept of *Wealtherty* build on Wacquant’s depiction of neoliberalism as a ‘Centaur’ state – ‘practis[ing] liberalism at the top of the class structure and punitive paternalism at the bottom’ (2012, p.66). Wacquant’s primary analytic focus, manifest in a significant body of work on workfare and ‘prisonfare’, is on the role of this state in ‘mould[ing], classify[ing], and control[ling of] *the populations deemed deviant, dependent, and dangerous . . .*’ (Wacquant, 2008, p.26 italics mine). In line with the scholars cited above, my focus shifts upwards to ask what the liberalism at the top actually looks like, and *its* institutional mechanisms of self-definition – the specific ways in which social membership is secured there.

These processes of self-definition are effected in part by establishing distance between the ‘head’ and the ‘tail’. Stigma is one such way to effect this distinction: marking (or ‘moulding’ and ‘classifying’) populations *at the bottom* as abject simultaneously produces or re-affirms the un-marked category (the stigmatiser – Tyler, 2020), helping to gain social buy-in for punitive paternalism, and to justify the ‘laissez faire, laissez passer’ (Wacquant, 2012, p.74) state orientation towards the Liberal head. *Wealtherty* is a way of bringing into the foreground the stigmatisers and their actions at both the symbolic, material, or, as is the case here, epistemic level. In explicitly looking ‘both ways’ in this article, I seek to flesh out how the institutions of a neoliberal state define and defend its liberal head, *as well as its* paternalist tail. I will show how the sites of analysis I have selected reflect and (re)

produce *Centaur* orientations at the level of communicative practice at both the head and the tail, in contrastive (Medina, 2011) and symbolic (Tyler, 2015) ways.

The *Wealtherty* frame aims to challenge enduring assumptions that structure policymaking repertoires, key amongst which are the idea that i) poor people are the central legitimate focus of social policy and that rich people are not part of the ‘social’ of social policy, and as a result; ii) rich people and their wealth are the concern of fiscal policy. These assumptions constrain social policy discourse and keep it ‘facing down’. They contribute to the legitimising of ‘different rules for the rich’ (Committee of Public Accounts, 2017, p.5). This article builds on points 3&4 of my exposition of the concept of *Wealtherty* to examine how epistemic practices produce and reflect ‘unequal access to political power and influence’. It considers how the restricted capability of *privacy* and its conceptual opposite, *disclosure* (through ‘enforced narratives of the self’ (Steedman, 2000)) contribute to epistemic injustice and the perpetuation of what I suggest we should recognise as *wealth privilege*.

Policy discourse involves explicit processes of shaping ideas. The stakes are high: as Ball observes, ‘Policies change what we do (with implications for equity and social justice) and what we are (with implications for subjectivity)’. Policy discourses and related technologies ‘mobilise truth claims and constitute rather than reflect social reality’ (Ball, 2015, pp. 306–307). Given this constitutive role, a concern with the ways in which policy subjects are called into being, made sense of and make sense in policy, and the relations of power that are renewed, established, endure or are challenged through communicative practices is a legitimate concern for critical policy sociology. Specifically, given the insights from applied Limitarianism highlighting the danger of ‘bleed’ between financial and political power (Robeyns, 2017), the role of wealth in these processes of classification should be an urgent focus of analysis, complicating and complementing existing work on “race”, sex and class (e.g. Hickman and Ryan, 2020).

Case context and data sources

My data derive from two sources. The first consists of oral testimony from the 2018 Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry (WPCI) into Universal Credit and Childcare (WPC, 2018a; WPC, 2018b). A televised oral evidence session on Universal Credit and Childcare ran on Wednesday 24th October 2018 (WPC, 2018a). The panel took evidence from four single mothers who were asked questions about their experiences in relation to working and claiming the childcare component of Universal Credit.²

The second set of data consists of the archived minutes of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) High Net Worth Unit (HNWU) External Stakeholders’ Forum (henceforth ESF) (HMRC, 2010–2014). The ESF was formed in 2009 ‘to discuss, develop and promote co-operative compliance strategies for dealing with the tax affairs of this customer group . . . and their representatives for the benefit of the operation of the tax system’ (HMRC, 2010–2014). The ESF represents the views of the super-rich *via their agents and professional bodies* to the government.

These two sites have been selected because each has a threshold requirement related to wealth: the ESF represents individuals with £20m+ in investable assets;

Universal Credit is a provision for people on low incomes with less than £16,000 in savings. The sites, then, represent the experiences of having little or no wealth and having lots. Distinct state orientations at each end of the spectrum are produced by and reflected in epistemic practices in each context. As noted in the introduction, there are clearly other variables at play. This article focuses on wealth on the basis that wealth has typically been subsumed into the category of economic class, as a dimension of elite group/upper class membership. However, research increasingly asks us to articulate the *specificities* of wealth: that it accrues over time, and therefore that its contemporary patterns of distribution carry with them and renew, historical power relations (e.g. of patriarchy – Federici, 2000; empire – Bhambra, 2021; and class – Savage, 2021). Simpson notes that, ‘Because past states of systems remain present . . . structural disparities often have as their corollaries epistemic disparities, unfair distribution of epistemic resources’ (Simpson, 2017, p.255). I am advancing a case here, then, that wealth is a legitimate and discrete variable in the analysis of epistemic practices and epistemic injustice.

Scholarly work on the role of policy mechanisms like the ESF and the WPC³ can tend to focus on their problem-solving or symbolic function (Hunter and Boswell, 2015), or their purpose and value (i.e. what they uniquely bring to policymaking processes) (Rowe and McAllister, 2006). My work on the *epistemic* practices in policymaking fora focuses on revealing state orientations as manifest in communicative practices between those with more or less epistemic authority. I borrow from analyses of individuals’ encounters with institutions of the state (e.g. health care institutions) in which power imbalances between those with more or less epistemic authority are (re)produced (e.g. Kidd and Carel, 2017 on doctor-patient interactions).

These two sites sit within a wider landscape of policymaking mechanisms, including *inter alia*, Inquiries; White and Green Papers, elected Members of Parliament, Statistics. Together, these mechanisms form part of an expertise network (Gil Eyal, 2010 in Hardos, 2018, p.274) which connects ‘professionals, semi-professionals, their clients, technical devices, and institutional arrangements’. Within this network, the mechanisms named above ‘determine how information, decisions, and attributions flow’ (Ibid.). Over time this network forms path dependencies towards specific kinds of communicative practices involving different types of epistemic contribution and different ‘enunciative modalities’ (Fairclough, 1992, p.43): inquiring, testifying, bearing witness, reporting, contributing hypotheses, interpreting, offering solutions. Policy *professionals* within this network are acculturated into these ‘modalities’: they learn to “talk shop” (Collins and Evans, 2007 in Hardos, 2018, p.274). Over time, these different modalities combine to establish more or less explicit hierarchies of evidence and knowledge (Smith-Merry, 2020; Lancaster et al., 2017), and hierarchies of expertise (Anderson, 2011 in Hardos, 2018, pp.279–280). Together, they help to establish a relative authority of voices and values in the policymaking landscape.

Theoretical frame

The analysis in this article uses theoretical insights from *Epistemic Injustice* literature in the discipline of philosophy (and supplementary literature from the

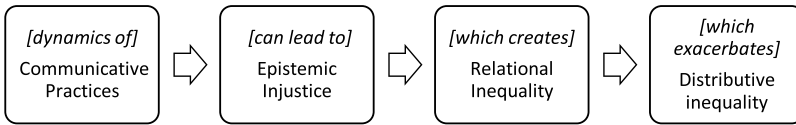


Figure 1: The relationship between epistemic injustice and forms of inequality

sociology of expertise) to analyse communication at the two case sites, identifying moments at which the relative authority of the speakers is (re)produced. It considers the epistemic dimension of classificatory practices and their ‘performative effects’ (Tyler, 2015, p.500). I introduce specifically here the concepts of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice; reciprocity and reversibility; and ‘tracker’ prejudices and privileges.

Epistemic injustice results from prejudice against someone’s status as a knowing subject (Fricker, 2007, p.1). It involves ‘all forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices’ (Kidd et al., 2017, p.1) including issues such as ‘exclusion and silencing, invisibility and inaudibility (or distorted presence or representation); having one’s meanings or contributions systematically distorted, misheard, or misrepresented; having diminished status or standing in communicative practices; unfair differentials in authority and/or epistemic agency; being unfairly distrusted; being co-opted or marginalised’ (Ibid.). I am primarily interested in how these issues are mediated by ‘*identity prejudices*’ (Fricker, 2007) relating to wealth, which I argue have a materiality that ramifies in social and fiscal policy. These identity prejudices evolve and calcify over time as negative tropes (e.g. ‘the scrounger’), and ‘acquire accreted form and accrue affective value in ways that have significant social and political impact’ (Tyler, 2008, p.19). As the weight of meaning accretes during the restatement of a single idea or image across different discursive fields and practices, stigma is produced. These fields and practices include the policymaking network sketched out above. The operation of identity prejudices in policy fora help to establish different levels of epistemic ‘credibility’ – excesses or deficits – for different speaking subjects. Then, in a process of concatenation, resultant epistemic injustice translates into social forms of relational and, ultimately, distributive inequality (Fricker, 2016, p.8; Figure 1).

These concatenating links between failure of fair epistemic contribution and relational inequality make it unlikely that the interests of those who are subject to epistemic injustice will have their values reflected in positions of political power: fair epistemic contribution in this analysis is a pre-requisite of fair political participation and representation. As Fricker notes, ‘social arrangements of relational equality will be strongly conducive to distributive equality [because] relational equality entails the equal weighting of people’s interests’ (Fricker, 2016, p.7) and as a result, epistemic injustices (which are inherently about a relational difference) are ‘intrinsically problematic from the point of view of social equality’ (ibid.). Epistemic injustice, then, serves to ‘maintain and enforce unjust power relations’ by creating groups of knowers considered ‘less than competent’ (Pohlhaus, 2017, p.17). Of course, at the same time – epistemic contribution being ‘comparative and

contrastive' (Medina, 2011, p.18) – other forms of knowledge are reified and raised up: epistemic injustice also creates groups of knowers whose epistemic authority exceeds their competence. I am interested in this relational and contrastive dynamic. As Medina notes, we need to be alive to the possibility that an *excess* of epistemic credibility in one area, or possessed by one group, might mean a deficit for another (Medina, 2011, p.24).

Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustices

Fricker identifies two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical. Testimonial injustice happens 'when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word (e.g. the police don't believe you because you are black) (Fricker, 2007, p.1). Subjects 'stigmatized by negative identity prejudices may not be regarded as . . . reliable conveyers of information, and therefore they will not receive proper recognition in testimonial exchanges and will be unfairly treated' (Medina, 2011, p.16). The 'testimonial' in testimonial injustice is about being a *giver of information* – of one sort or another – and the injustice relates to either not being able to give information, or not being heard when you do. The hermeneutical in hermeneutical injustice refers to the resources available for interpreting and making sense of experience. Hermeneutical injustice occurs 'at a prior stage [to testimonial injustice] when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences and communicating them. For example, you suffer sexual harassment in a culture that still lacks that critical concept. This is because the society lacks the interpretive framework through which to understand your suffering' (Fricker, 2007, p.1).

Reciprocity and Reversibility

Medina holds that "nothing short of . . . reversibility and reciprocity" can guarantee "the equality in communicative participation required by fair epistemic practices" (Medina, 2013, p.6). The operation of epistemic reversibility and reciprocity produces an environment in which each person can give resources *and* help to shape collective knowledge, and in which authority is thus dispersed, in a way necessary for the functioning of democracy (Blencowe, 2013). The degree to which reciprocity and reversibility are achievable will be shaped by context: all communicative contexts are 'typically populated by differently situated voices with differential epistemic agency' (Medina, 2013, p.5). The WPCI, for example, has a group of inquirers, and a group of people from whom information is sought. These roles are pre-defined, and apply in all contexts (i.e. even when rich people are providing testimony). The operative *variable* is the degree of constraint placed on the nature of the epistemic resources sought and accepted, and the rationale for this constraint. Are identity prejudices at play? Are people contributing based on a fair assessment of their (epistemic) merit? Within the strictures of the inquiry (WPCI) or the stakeholder forum (ESF) there are communicative choices to make in terms of the exercise of epistemic agency and the balance of authority. And it is in the exercise of these choices that there is potential for injustice to occur. As Medina cautions,

“The communicative relations that are established in epistemic interaction have to be in principle reciprocal, with their roles – of inquirer and informant, for example – being potentially reversible. Nothing short of this reversibility and reciprocity can guarantee the equality in communicative participation required by fair epistemic practices” (Medina, 2013, pp.5-6).

Systemic epistemic injustice: Tracker prejudices and privileges

Systemic testimonial injustice – where a negative identity prejudice of the type above ‘tracks’ a subject *through different dimensions of social activity* – economic, educational, professional, sexual, legal, political, religious etc. (Wanderer, 2017, p.31) – produces a *consistent* undervaluing of epistemic credibility. Fricker calls these ‘tracker prejudices’ (Fricker, 2007, p.27). Credibility excess, on the other hand, is a product of hearers giving *excessive* attributions of credibility to speakers (Medina, 2011, p.18). Its ‘systemic’ form results in ‘tracker privileges.’ Tracker privileges mean that some voices consistently gain credibility beyond their competence through the different dimensions of social activity.

For just social relations to prevail, credibility judgements need to aim to be *proportionate to epistemic deserts and credentials*. Credibility judgements are ‘implicitly comparative and contrastive’ (Medina, 2011, p.20), often based on assessments against norms and ideals. Medina asserts that ‘those who have an undeserved (or arbitrarily given) credibility excess are judged comparatively more worthy of epistemic trust than other subjects, all things being equal; and this is unfair, not only to them but also to others who do not receive this privileged treatment . . .’ (Ibid.).

Epistemic authority and the role of the expert

There is a long history in social policymaking of poor people being seen primarily as sources of information, with their testimony structured and circumscribed by a pre-ordained and restricted set of questions, resulting in a continuum of *enforced narratives of the self* (Steedman, 2000) from the 1600s to the present day. When those with experience of poverty are asked to share their ‘journey’, but *not* asked to contribute ideas, analysis, hypotheses – ‘next level’ hermeneutical skills consistent with the role of *inquirer* – their epistemic agency is constrained in a way i) which presupposes that what people have to say about *themselves* does not – and could not – hold within it solutions to their suffering with the same authority or status as solutions proposed by *others*, and ii) which prevents them translating lived or ‘lay’ experience into ‘expertise’ (Hardos, 2018).

Acts of testimony are bound up with issue of trust and credibility: an ‘expert’ needs to have epistemic authority if we are to trust her testimony.⁴ The establishment of a *relative* epistemic authority between different kinds of speaker is achieved in part through producing – and then policing the boundary between – the discrete epistemic roles of *source of information*, and those whose epistemic contribution is considered more epistemically sophisticated – so-called *inquirers* (Fricker, 2007, p.133). The norms governing *how* we attribute the relative epistemic authority necessary to identify and maintain this boundary are mediated

by our experience and prior beliefs (Hardos, 2018, pp.276–277), and are thus ‘prone to track identity prejudices and bias’ (Goldman, 2010, p.200 in Hardos, 2018, p.277).

Findings

I applied these theoretical insights to communication at the two sites introduced above.

Experience, expertise and epistemic culpability

At the start of the WPC/CC session, Panel Chair Frank Field says, ‘Come on then. Sock it to us’ (WPC, 2018a, 10:56). This betrays an expectation of ‘authenticity’ and plain-speaking and it effectively serves to contain the contribution of the witnesses within a lower status knowledge category, one that is about feelings and emotion, the plain speaking, intellectually-unsophisticated ‘what people know’ – their ‘lived experience’.⁵ Its effect is to set limitations on the level of epistemic sophistication expected from the contributors and to establish a pre-emptive limit on the ‘epistemic authority’ of the witnesses (Hardos, 2018).

Medina suggests that we need to attend to culpability when we are examining issues of epistemic injustice on the basis that some groups and publics ‘within a hermeneutically unjust culture can bear different kinds of responsibility for their hermeneutical neglect in certain areas and/or for their hermeneutical resistance to certain expressive or interpretative efforts’ (Medina, 2017, p.42): there is always a ‘doer’. Here, in pre-empting and delimiting the kinds of input expected of the women, Field betrays his preconceptions about their hermeneutical capabilities. He becomes culpable.

At the end of WPC/CC, after an hour of questioning of the four single mothers, Field says:

‘You’ve been hugely helpful in shaping what we’re going to say and what reforms we’re going to ask for... Thank you very much’ (WPC, 2018a, 11:12:12–45).

This intervention in effect terminates the contribution of the women. The literature on expertise makes a distinction between experiential knowledge (of the kind the witnesses have here) and expertise (the pairing of that experiential knowledge with an ability to use that knowledge to address a problem (Borkman 1976 in Wicker, 2022, p.514; Goldman, 2001 in Hardos, 2018, p.272). Field here re-asserts the boundary between those with experience and ‘the experts’, and defers the detailed, sophisticated epistemic work of translating accounts of experience into suggestions for change or instruments of critique to these experts, and to another time and space. This distinction establishes a *relative* quality and authority of speakers: ‘... the epistemic agency of an informant qua informant is [confirmed as] limited and subordinated to that of the inquirer’s’ (Medina, 2013, p.93).

Epistemic Smothering

In addition to the gatekeeping demonstrated above between source of information and inquirer, between ‘experience’ and ‘expertise’, there are other ways of ensuring a relative authority. In the same session, Heidi Allen enacts what Dotson calls ‘testimonial smothering’ (Dotson, 2012). Lucy Collins had to leave her job in the police force and retrain as a nail technician because of the lack of fit between her shift work and childcare provision. Lucy lost her career, a pension, and what she clearly perceived was a job of high social standing. Allen seeks to make light of the situation, diverting attention to what Lucy looks like. Communicative conventions in play at the site – politeness – mean that Lucy is expected to join in with the laughter. Her testimony is smothered:

- Lucy: ‘There’s not a lot of continuity’.
 Frank Field: ‘The lack of childcare in the police resulted in you losing a job where you did get a good pension.’
 Lucy: ‘Yes, it did.’
 Heidi Allen: ‘But she has got fabulous nails though!’ (laughter). (WPC, 2018a)

Refusal of epistemic contribution

In addition to gatekeeping and smothering, the session also contains examples of more straight-forward *refusal* of epistemic contribution. In making a case for epistemic participation being a ‘capability of special egalitarian concern’, Fricker (2016) suggests that it is the epistemic equivalent of *giving*, of being able to reciprocate hospitality: uptake of epistemic ‘gifts’ so proffered evidence the kind of reciprocity and reversibility Medina makes the case for above. When the women at the WPCI attempt to assert themselves as *inquirers* in contexts where this is not expected there is low or no uptake of their contribution. Thuto Mali, for example, asserts that her experience and that of the other witnesses represents “a women’s human rights issue as well as being a mother and benefits issue” (WPC, 2018a, p.31). This part of what she says – a form of analysis – sits within the epistemically sophisticated role of inquirer. It is simply ignored. Her articulation of the problem as a women’s human rights issue is not one that the panel wishes to explore. She is refused as an expert, as a *producer of knowledge*. Her epistemic ‘gift’ is rejected.

Patches of silence

The aggregate effects of these actively-policed differential epistemic contributions is the production of what Medina calls ‘patches of silence’ (Medina, 2013, p.91). Being a source of information – a respondent to immediate administrative questions or framing – makes knowledge of the self that falls outside the informational needs of the interlocuter, irrelevant. The partial and patchy inclusion of voices of poorer people in policymaking creates a complex web of silences by failing to seek representation because of perceived lack of credibility (Fricker’s pre-emptive credibility deficit). These patches of silence also result from calling into being only

the ‘testifying’ epistemic subject at the exclusion of the inquiring (hermeneutical) subject, when both facets would be necessary for the just representation and participation of first-hand experience in policy-making articulated by Medina (2013, pp.5–6) and for the dispersal of authority described by Blencowe (2013).

So far, I have looked at some epistemic dynamics in a policy site with a low wealth threshold (£16k in savings), focused on populations existing at the ‘tail’ of Wacquant’s *Centaur* state. I have suggested that aspects of communicative practice there produce intersecting forms of epistemic injustice. I now move on to ask how the balance between ‘sources of information’ and inquirer, between experience and expertise, is produced, policed and maintained at the other end of the wealth spectrum – the Liberal head.

Making Shared Knowledge – Reciprocity and reversibility

The *raison d’être* of the HMRC’s High Net Worth Unit’s External Stakeholder Forum (henceforth ESF) is

“...to start the process of explaining the HNWU to customers and their representatives. This has included writing ‘welcome letters’ as a way of starting an enhanced relationship with... customers and their representatives, giving them details of a named contact within the unit and providing the opportunity to discuss concerns or open issues’ (HMRC, 2010-2014 (ESF Minutes, March 2010, p.2)).

These named contacts – Customer Relationship Managers – will provide continuity and will use their enhanced understanding of their customers to

“... be responsive to agent/customer needs. This should ensure that questions are resolved quickly and any enquiries are proportionate, to avoid adding unnecessarily to their compliance burden’ (March 4th 2010, p.3)).

This relationship will translate into one that will facilitate co-development of future operations, in which

“... representative bodies (of the wealthy) [to] understand and *contribute to the development of* this part of HMRC’s operations’ (March 4th 2010, p.1. Italics mine).

In short, the intent here is to *co-produce* knowledge. In the following examples, the agents of the rich occupy the role of inquirer, and the HMRC becomes a source of information – there is full reversibility. In the first meeting of the ESF, for example, members request and receive confirmation from the HMRC that a policy drafter attends the meeting

“... to ensure a joined-up response on such occasions’ (March 4th 2010, p.2).

In a later meeting, during a discussion about cooperative compliance, the Chair and then Head of the HMRC HNWU, says he is

‘... keen to look for examples of how it has worked to date and *what forum members felt cooperative compliance should mean and how it should develop*’ (September 2012)

In saying this, he is explicitly inviting a process of policy co-creation around fiscal law, and specifically *compliance* with the law. The minutes reveal that members of the group regularly make demands of the HMRC, which are acceded to. For example, in a discussion on progress within the HNWU,

‘Martin (HMRC) was interested in members (sic) views about whether HNWU is heading in the right direction and what else [it] should be doing to develop’ (September 2010, p.3).

This *demand-accession model* is further manifest in the November 2011 meeting in which the HMRC lead ‘agreed to respond to questions after the forum’, indicating that a forum member had asked for an offline conversation, which was acceded to.

The distinction between sources of information and inquirers in the ESF is reversible and reciprocal, in a notably different way to the practices at the WPCI, and in a way which led the Public Accounts Committee to suggest ‘left the Department [HMRC] open to the perception that, in its dealings with taxpayers, there is one rule for the rich and another for everyone else’ (CPA, 2017, p.5).

Virtuous listening

In March 2013, the ESF engaged an external consultant (Ipsos MORI) to help it to understand its customers

“... from different perspectives, including their compliance history, their attitude to risk, their attitude to wealth management etc... [in order to] provide a basis for a more cooperative and informed model of engagement with HNWIs and their agents’ (March 2010, p.3).

This is with an aim of allowing HMRC to offer “enhanced processes and products”. The detailed survey of agents becomes a recurring agenda item at the ESF meetings. In March 2011, HMRC explains how,

“Ipsos MORI had *consulted the agent community in approaching its design and execution*, and outlined the timescale for finalisation of the design and pilot” (March 2011, italics mine).

The concern to understand the needs of the rich reveals the state as an assiduous and attentive listener, evidencing a stark contrast between interest in the ‘different perspectives’ of the lives of customers at each end of the wealth spectrum (Butler, 2018): the epistemic smothering and refusal at work in the WPCI are forms of

refusing to listen. It demonstrates a disparity specifically with regard to the link between feedback and action (what Fricker might call ‘uptake’) arguably in part shaped by the fact that the state is not seeking to give *to* the poor, but it does want to get *from* the rich.

“Wealthed ignorance” as an effect of unequal epistemic participation

So far, I have introduced examples of epistemic practice which advance the case that when some people are (epistemically) included in a partial, subordinate way, and others are offered epistemic reversibility and reciprocity, resultant ‘patches of silence’ mean that these groups are ‘heard differently’ (Medina, 2013, p.3). I have suggested that the state hears from, and listens to, rich people and poor people differently, in ways which embody the operation of Wacquant’s Janus-faced *Centaur* state. I now want to move to my final and most urgent point, relating to the failure to recognise and account for ‘rich’ voices in social policy. This is the issue of meta-blindness relating to this state’s culpability in these discriminatory processes.

Meta-blindness and meta-ignorance (where ‘meta’ denotes action at the hermeneutical – or discursive – level) ‘describe the failure of people to recognise that there are things they cannot recognise’ (Medina, 2011, p.28), that they are ‘blind to their own blindness, insensitive to their own insensitivity’ (Ibid.). Mills’ work on *white* ignorance (Mills, 1997 in Pohlhaus, 2017, p.17 and Mills, 2008) demonstrated that ‘those who have created and benefit from injustice remain largely ignorant of the unjust arrangements through which they benefit.’ Mills advocates for the application of this privilege lens to other areas of elite group studies, and I do this here by reflecting on the absence in *social policy* testimony of the voices of wealth. If we take the ‘social’ of social policy to be an inclusive term, as my concept of *Wealtherty* asks us to, we need to ask why it only focuses on the poor.

Chair of the WPCI, Field, has ‘lived experience’ shaped by a particular degree of wealth ownership. He has an office (he refers to this several times. He means he has access to a physical constituency office and staff), a well-paid job and a stable salary. His life lacks the precarity of the women he is interviewing, and he has certainly benefited from structural factors that have afforded him a relatively propitious pathway through life compared to them. But he and the other panel members – by virtue of the norms governing the communicative practice of WPCIs which I discussed earlier – do not have to account for themselves in terms of this wealth privilege. The assumption that only one group is considered to have ‘lived experience’ whose relevance is pertinent to the policy area is a key underlying assumption of the inquiry and select committee format. But it is also evidence of a form of meta-ignorance, and on this vector it warrants further attention and scrutiny.

Conclusions

I observed a relational dynamic between different kinds of knower, knowledge and ways of knowing at work in two sites with effective wealth thresholds. The act of putting them alongside one another provided insight into the values and assumptions made about the *relative* epistemic ‘value’ of differently-wealthed

groups. Communicative practices at the WPCIs were shown to ‘create and maintain a class of sub-knowers’ against a class of dominantly situated knowers (Pohlhaus, 2017, p.17), with the combined effect of diminishing the epistemic contribution of the former and allowing the latter to continually fail to see – and to be held accountable for – the wealth nature of its privileges and prejudices. Meanwhile, the agents of the rich in their participation in the ESF have full epistemic agency. They operate as the epistemic peers of the state, benefiting from the ‘reversibility’ that Medina describes as necessary to equitable epistemic practice (2013, pp.5-6). The rich themselves – by their absence – are granted a right to silence and privacy, to non-participation in the classificatory mechanisms of the state. Although there are clearly other dynamics at play – of which sex, “race”, and class are of primary importance – the wealth threshold at these sites does suggest that this is an operative variable in each case.

I suggested that constraints placed on epistemic participation arise from identity prejudices caused by and contributing to epistemic credibility deficit (for poorer people) and excess (for richer people) on the part of the ‘hearers’ in each context, and they both represent forms of injustice in different ways. First, poorer people are prevented from occupying epistemically sophisticated roles (inquirers) by epistemic gatekeeping, smothering or refusal. Second, they provide testimony in a space where the lived experience of wealth goes un-articulated and this perpetuates the harmful idea that this (rich) knowledge is neutral or non-operative in the context of social policy. I suggested that this constitutes a form of *wealthed ignorance* in which rich voices become hermeneutically marginalised in social policy, and I made the case that this goes hand in hand with their political advantage. Its effects are the perpetuation of a partial knowledge base: as Pohlhaus notes, because our epistemic lives are ‘fundamentally intertwined with one another . . . one cannot simply ignore other knowers and know well’ (Pohlhaus, 2017, p.16). In such contexts, how might we know better? ⁶

Reparatory epistemic practice?

A *Wealtherty* lens would ask us to ‘pull back’ – as Bhambra (2022) does – from the epistemic to the epistemological – to challenge the validity of the policy mechanisms themselves, and their productive role in maintaining the *Centaur* state’s differential dispositions. What might better epistemic practice look like? Practice that attempts to amplify the ‘patches of silence’ existing where the voice of hermeneutically marginalised individuals (the rich) and groups should be?

A *reverse select committee*, for example, might see the witnesses taking the place of the panel and vice versa, establishing the terms of reference, selecting the witnesses, defining the questions, taking answers away and developing recommendations and responses.⁷ It might involve hearing from those responsible for precarious contracts – the small business owners, the multinationals inflicting zero hours precarity, the politicians progressively degrading labour protections – rather than simply from the people now suffering the *effects* of this multi-faceted precarity. This would rebalance the testimony currently focused on symptoms and individuals (the *responsibilisation* that is the fourth pillar of Wacquant’s analysis (Wacquant, 2012)) towards accounts of structural factors.

In terms of remedy for ‘meta’ level ignorances, such a format might disrupt the concatenation described in Figure 1. A *reverse* select committee would enable an ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault 1980) and a return – albeit forced – of the self-exiled knowledge of the rich. An insurrection of subjugated knowledges after all, cannot simply be at the level of *what* people know, it must surely also account for *how* people know, and the relative status of knowledge and knowers.

Transplanting the asks that Dang (2019) makes in her article on the epistemology of survival to our context of wealth, we could ask policymakers, “How might policymaking have been informed by your assumptions and experiences of wealth?”, “How might you rebalance the epistemic dynamic of social policymaking so that the politically powerful were also epistemically central (i.e. brought into being as social policy objects)?” and “How might an epistemology of *Wealtherty* (Kerr, 2021) challenge or transform your own ways of knowing?” Fricker talks about the ‘self-serving epistemic fault’ of the white community in the context of white ignorance. She describes this as a ‘conscious or unconscious resistance to accepting or learning about the sources of their social advantage’ (Fricker, 2016, p.15). So one form of remedy would be breaking down resistance to accepting or learning about the sources and operations of wealth advantage. Medina asserts that ‘... [politically] privileged subjects are also hermeneutically marginalized subjects, for they are conceptually ill-equipped to make sense of certain things; but the things that they are ill-equipped to understand are precisely the things they may not want to understand, the things that could be in their advantage to remain opaque – perhaps the things that they need not to know if they are to keep enjoying their privileges without having to face uncomfortable questions’ (Medina, 2013, p.109, italics mine).

Tyler notes that ‘What Bourdieu, Ranciere, Brown and Skeggs powerfully contribute to sociological understandings of class struggles today is a reminder that demands for equality are demands not only for economic and social justice, but *demands for redistribution within the fields of visibility and intelligibility within which class-based inequalities are naturalized, reproduced and legitimated* (2015, p.507, italics mine). We might add to this list, demands for a fairer distribution of epistemic resources within the fora in which epistemic credibility and authority are contested and corroborated.

In this article I have sought to create space in which to think about knowledge arising from the lived experience of wealth as a necessary component of a reparatory form of social policymaking. I suggest that it is important to hear more, and hear better, about poverty from poorer people. But listening better cannot simply mean hearing more from one group. It must also mean hearing less from another: for some to take up space requires others to step back. In the context of lived experience in social policymaking, it is important to start hearing more about and from the wealthy so that wealth can urgently take its legitimate place as a variable in conversations about poverty and justice.

This early work suggests fruitful further inquiry to refine and distinguish the analysis of wealth and the wealthy as social policy problematics, and to think about what might constitute better epistemic practice in contexts in which testimony is sought (or not sought) from richer and poorer people. These early directions illustrate that a focus on epistemic justice in sociology can make useful contributions

to our understanding of the relationships between what people have, how and what people know, and ultimately, what they can do or be.

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Notes

- 1 In line with the approach in Hecht and Summers (2020, p.3) I use the labels 'rich' and 'poor' heuristically, whilst recognising that these are reductive categorisations that people might not identify with, and which occlude important intersectional distinctions. Recent work on the complex relationships between financial and other forms of capital (e.g. Glucksberg 2018 on gendered elites) highlights the fact that *at both ends of the wealth spectrum*, the effect of the possession or otherwise of wealth in terms of its ability to translate into other forms of capital is mediated by other characteristics of, for example, sex, race and class. This is the subject of an existing, rich body of scholarly work (Federici, 2000; Mies, 2014; Bhambra, 2021; Tyler, 2015, 2020; Skeggs, 2019, inter alia).
- 2 Witnesses at this inquiry gave evidence in a public context, using their own names (which I use here), and participated in a televised session. The ethical considerations relating to privacy and anonymity that might otherwise need to be taken are not operative here as this information is fully in the public domain. The names of the clients of the HMRC ESF are never disclosed in the minutes.
- 3 Rowe and McAllister (2006) trace a historical trajectory from the efflorescence of Royal Commissions in the 1850s through to a much more diffuse and (relatively) informal network of commissions, committees, reviews and 'other types of inquiry' (p.100). Both of my sites are nodes in this network.
- 4 See Hardos (2018) for a useful reference article on defining experts and expertise.
- 5 There is a significant and distinct body of work on 'lived experience' which I engage with in other work (Kerr, 2024).
- 6 Bhambra (2021; with additional detail in Bhambra, 2022) suggests that "A reparatory sociology... requires a reconsideration of the histories that are taken to be central to it as well as a reorientation of our conceptual understandings as a consequence. It further requires us to be committed to epistemological justice in our practices'. My intent is to suggest that a reparatory social policy requires such a 'reconsideration'.
- 7 In recent work in the poverty sector the role of so-called 'lived experience' is being rethought to address this epistemic limitation, replacing 'journey' narratives with active co-production of knowledge, evidenced in the work of The Poverty Truth Commission and The Commission on Social Security led by Experts by Experience. <https://povertytruthnetwork.org/> and <https://www.commissiononsocialsecurity.org/>

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