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Epistemic Dependence and Oppression: A Telling Relationship

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Abstract

Epistemic dependence refers to our social mechanisms of reliance in practices of knowledge production. Epistemic oppression concerns persistent and unwarranted exclusions from those practices. This article examines the relationship between these two frameworks and demonstrates that attending to their relationship is a fruitful practice for applied epistemology. Paying attention to relations of epistemic dependence and how exclusive they are can help us track epistemically oppressive practices. In order to show this, I introduce a taxonomy of epistemic dependence (interpersonal – communal – structural). I argue that this particular taxonomy is useful for tracking epistemically oppressive practices in institutional contexts. This is because, first, the forms of epistemic dependence in this taxonomy yield, what I call, *diagnostic questions*. These are questions that help us track how relations of epistemic dependence could become exclusive and that thus help reveal epistemic oppression in institutional contexts. Second, the forms of epistemic dependence in the taxonomy are interrelated. Paying attention not just to each of three forms of epistemic dependence but also to the way in which they are interrelated is useful for illuminating epistemically oppressive practices. I conclude by demonstrating how the diagnostic questions can be used in analyses of concrete institutional practices in asylum law and higher education.

Keywords: Epistemic dependence; epistemic oppression; interpersonal epistemic dependence; communal epistemic dependence; structural epistemic dependence; social epistemology; feminist epistemology; applied epistemology

Introduction

Epistemic dependence, which refers to our social mechanisms of reliance (*what* we rely on and *how* we rely on it) in the process of knowing, has been an important philosophical tool for showcasing the social nature of knowledge production. Thus, it has been deemed central for social epistemology. Epistemic oppression, on the other hand, concerns persistent and unwarranted epistemic exclusions that obstruct individuals' or communities' contributions to knowledge production (Dotson 2014: 115). In a way, then, discussions of epistemic oppression aim to detect flawed practices where epistemic dependence is at work. The intersection between epistemic dependence and oppression, a space that has not been examined much, I believe, is a fruitful one for applied epistemology. That is why, in this paper, I inquire into the relationship between these two

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frameworks. I do so by asking the following question: Provided that epistemic dependence is almost always at work when epistemic exclusions take place, could attending to relations of epistemic dependence in their concrete forms help us track epistemically oppressive practices? I answer yes because attending to those relations allows us to realize where and how relations of epistemic dependence are exclusive and could become exclusive. In order to demonstrate that, I introduce a taxonomy of epistemic dependence (interpersonal – communal – structural) based on extant discussions in social and feminist epistemologies. I argue that this particular taxonomy is useful for tracking epistemically oppressive practices in institutional contexts. This is for two reasons: (1) Discussions of epistemic dependence in this taxonomy yield, what I call, *diagnostic questions* that signal us where each form of epistemic dependence could become exclusive and that can alert us to possible occurrences of epistemic oppression; and (2) the three forms of epistemic dependence in this taxonomy are interrelated. Paying attention not just to each of three forms of epistemic dependence but also to the way in which they are interrelated is useful for illuminating epistemically oppressive practices.

This paper proceeds in four sections. The first three sections introduce the taxonomy mentioned above. In section 1, I discuss *Interpersonal Epistemic Dependence*. Interpersonal epistemic dependence emphasizes our reliance on other persons, and specifically on the epistemic labor of other knowers and their testimonies. Epistemic labor, here, refers to the embodied cognitive work we do when *attending to, noticing, processing, and making sense of* aspects of the world.¹ In section 2, I talk about *Communal Epistemic Dependence*, which refers to relying on our communities for our practices of knowing. This reliance is irreducibly collective in that it extends beyond individuals.² Following these two forms of epistemic dependence, in section 3, I develop an account of *Structural Epistemic Dependence* based on our reliance on structures (social and political arrangements and institutions) for knowledge production. Structural epistemic dependence consists in the fact that, in knowing something, we rely on how structures manage ignorance and knowledge. In sections 1, 2, and 3, I underline the diagnostic questions that interpersonal, communal, and structural epistemic dependence, respectively, offer us. I suggest that these questions can be used to track epistemically oppressive practices in institutional contexts. In section 4, I utilize these questions and demonstrate the possibly telling relationship between epistemic dependence and oppression. I do so by turning to some of the institutional practices in asylum law and higher education.

Before I delve further into the paper, I would like to note two things. First, even though I think it is important to demonstrate the relationships between the above-mentioned forms of epistemic dependence, I do not think of these forms as encompassing one another. In other words, I do not think that structural epistemic dependence strictly determines relations of communal epistemic dependence, and that communal epistemic dependence strictly determines relations of interpersonal epistemic dependence. I will say more about this later. Second, when I am talking about epistemic dependence, I am talking about an epistemic agent's reliance on persons, communities, and structures. In this sense, this particular taxonomy of epistemic dependence is

¹Cognitive labor and epistemic labor have sometimes been used interchangeably. However, I think that the emphasis on epistemic labor harbors more possibility for processes that are not traditionally categorized as cognitive yet epistemically relevant (e.g. skilled capacities or practical skills) (Wagenknecht 2014; Shotwell 2017). This is why I mostly use the term epistemic rather than cognitive.

²This is to say that communal epistemic dependence concerns itself with cases where who we rely on for certain epistemic goods has to be the collective itself rather than any single person who is in the collective, precisely because none of those goods can be provided by a single person.

concerned with agent-based epistemic dependence as opposed to belief-based epistemic dependence where the emphasis is on, for example, what a belief depends on to be qualified as knowledge (Broncano-Berrocal and Vega-Encabo 2019). However, this epistemic agent, for me, is both “individuals-in-communities” (Grasswick 2004) and communities themselves. In other words, when thinking about interpersonal epistemic dependence, I am usually thinking about a person situated in communities who is relying on others. Yet, when approaching communal and structural epistemic dependence, I am thinking about both individuals-in-communities and communities themselves as the ones who are doing the relying on. In short, I am thinking of epistemic agency here as a framework the subject of which shifts depending on what we are trying to understand.

1. Interpersonal Epistemic Dependence: not so harmonious

As the most commonly discussed and acknowledged form of epistemic dependence, Interpersonal Epistemic Dependence emphasizes our reliance on other persons, and specifically on the epistemic labor of other knowers and their testimonies (Hardwig 1985; Goldberg 2010, 2011*b*; Townley 2011; Pohlhaus Jr., 2012, 2014; Wagenknecht 2014). Interpersonal Epistemic Dependence (IED) as a philosophical tool hosts two projects under its roof: a broader and more descriptive one about relying on other knowers (i.e. their epistemic labor and their testimonies) for knowledge production and a more normative one about how knowledge inquiries should take place. The first and more descriptive claim of IED highlights the necessity of relying on others’ epistemic work and their testimonies for knowing the world in general. The second and more normative part of IED suggests that it is problematic to exclude relevant epistemic labor of other knowers and results of that labor while producing knowledge on a given topic. In what follows, I will first briefly discuss each project of IED. I will, then, highlight the diagnostic questions emerging from these discussions, questions that could help us track epistemically oppressive practices. I will end this section with a brief discussion of what necessitates the transition from interpersonal to communal epistemic dependence.

The concept of IED has been developed (simultaneously) by looking closely into how we rely on testimony within everyday life, in general, and how knowing communities (scientific or not) operate, in particular. I see the development of IED as based on two, related, descriptive claims about how we operate when we know in general: we cannot but divide the epistemic labor (the necessity of division) and we cannot but rely on each other’s epistemic labor and the results of that labor (the necessity of reliance). The first descriptive claim speaks to the limits of our abilities and capacities when we know, and the second one speaks to how extensive our reliance on other people’s epistemic labor and testimonies is for knowing (Hardwig 1985, 1991; Webb 1995).³ Even though IED broadly represents the second descriptive claim by definition (the necessity and

³Goldberg (2013) separates this mere reliance on testimony for information from reliance on cognitive processing/epistemic work implicated in the production of the testimony. The former, for him, represents an informational dependence, while the latter is epistemic dependence. I do not follow this separation here. It might be the case that informational dependence speaks to a thinner sense of epistemic dependence while relying on other knowers’ epistemic labor speaks to a thicker one. However, I still think that both should be discussed under a broad concept of IED. This is precisely because of the connection that exists between these two forms of dependence: relying on other people’s testimonies is connected to relying on their epistemic labor implicated in those testimonies and relying on other people’s epistemic labor is connected to how that reliance is practiced, i.e. through testimonies. That is why I choose to include both senses of relying on other people in my discussion here.

presence of reliance), its development is strongly supported by the first one (the necessity and presence of division). In other words, the development of IED is based on the following observations: We are limited in terms of where and when we can be, and how much we can process and retain. Due to our particular locations or due to the particular activities we are engaged in at those locations, we will be in a position to know about some matters better than others (Craig 1990; Harding 1991, 1993; Code 1993; Webb 1993; Haraway 2004; Kukla 2006; Alcoff 2007; Collins 2009; Toole 2019). Knowing about those matters, then, will only be possible if we rely on the epistemic efforts people have undertaken and/or the results of those efforts conveyed in their testimonies.

Alongside of this descriptive project, IED contains a normative one, which is implicit in its development as a concept. This normative project concerns how knowledge inquiries ought to take place and offers insight into *why* it is problematic for a knowing community to exclude *relevant* epistemic labor while producing knowledge on a particular topic (assuming understanding more/knowing more about that topic, according to a certain goal, is desired). IED, to use Pohlhaus Jr.'s words, emphasizes how "working in coordination with one another" leads to "a much greater chance at getting things right about the world" (Pohlhaus Jr. 2014: 106). However, as Pohlhaus Jr. suggests, "important to this kind of cognitive coordinating is each individual agent's ability ... to call others' attention to aspects of the world that those others do not notice ..." (2014: 106–7). This is to say that *not* relying on people who can call our attention to the aspects of the world that we do not notice, disrupts practices of IED in various ways and risks the success of knowledge production occurring as a result of those practices. If knowledge production in general requires various multi-directional practices of IED, then it stands to reason that excluding people with relevant epistemic labor and/or results of that labor for a specific inquiry can create problems for that inquiry. In other words, the descriptive project of IED emphasizes this extensive circle of interdependence (involving various multi-directional practices of IED) required for knowledge production in general. The implicit normative project of IED, on the other hand, indicates why 'including the relevant epistemic labor' is required for the success of knowledge production achieved through IED.

Initial discussions of IED emphasize the descriptive project more (e.g. Hardwig 1985; Webb 1993), possibly because it highlights when IED succeeds. This success rests on the assumption that our relations of interpersonal epistemic dependence are not exclusive to an extent where it can affect the success of knowledge production. Yet, to use Charles Mills' words, the picture of society we are working with is not so inclusive and harmonious (Mills 2007: 17). As many of us can attest to, it is not hard to notice countless cases where people have persistently failed to or refused to rely on others despite their contributions being highly relevant for the knowledge production under question. It is the case that we rely on other people's epistemic labor and testimonies. It is also the case that we persistently and unwarrantedly fail to do so many times. IED fails as much as it succeeds and the normative project within IED calls attention to these failures. Thus, pulling the descriptive and normative projects of IED apart and paying attention to how IED might fail signal us where IED can become exclusive and thus give us, what I'm calling here, the diagnostic questions:

- (a) Whose epistemic labor and testimonies are persistently found irrelevant? By whom? Why?
- (b) Who can afford to not rely on certain (relevant) testimonies and epistemic labor? Why?

These questions can be useful to detect persistent and unwarranted epistemic exclusions on an interpersonal level for they can help us pinpoint whose contributions to knowledge production are obstructed. In a given institutional context, we could raise these questions and see what the answers would indicate to us.

These questions also offer us a hint for why in this particular taxonomy, communal epistemic dependence follows the interpersonal one. Communal epistemic dependence in a way suggests that the descriptive project of IED needs further qualifications since, as the normative part shows us, it lacks important aspects when reduced to the claim that “we rely on others’ epistemic labor and testimonies.” The issues of relevance and comprehension have to enter the conversation here. Think, for example, about the recent discussions of epistemic bubbles and echo-chambers by C. Thi Nguyen aiming to describe what is happening in our current social and political landscape. Nguyen (2020) suggests that as social epistemic structures (of exclusion) epistemic bubbles form by leaving out relevant epistemic sources whereas echo-chambers actively discredit them. Both of these phenomena point to non-ideal (and harmful) practices of interpersonal epistemic dependence. When we are talking about situations where people either leave out or actively discredit relevant epistemic sources, it becomes important to ask: Where does our sense of relevance come from?

Furthermore, many scholars have also discussed the problem of comprehension in (not) relying on others. In dialogues taking place between members of groups holding social, political and epistemic power and members of those who do not, it is likely that marginalized testimonies will not be understood or that they will be misunderstood (Lugones & Spelman 1983; Schutte 1998; Alcoff 2008; DiAngelo 2011; Dotson 2011). This is about a problem of understanding and accurate comprehension that goes beyond failures to believe people or find them credible. Thus, we face the following question: Who can we understand and accurately comprehend before or while we find them relevant?

Thus, analyzing IED not only provides us with a set of diagnostic questions that can be raised to detect epistemically oppressive practices on an interpersonal level but also forces us to consider issues around relevance and intelligibility. Communal epistemic dependence tackles these issues and in doing so creates new diagnostic questions.⁴

2. Communal Epistemic Dependence: what’s relevant and intelligible?

Communal Epistemic Dependence (CED) aims to identify a form of epistemic dependence that is irreducibly collective. However, based on how we answer the question of what an epistemic community does and “provides for its members,” the characterization of this form of epistemic dependence changes (Townley 2011: 1). In what follows, my purpose is not to answer this question conclusively. However, I want to highlight two responses within social and feminist epistemologies, namely that epistemic communities provide us with (1) ranges of relevance and (2) interpretative resources.⁵ I

⁴I do not want to suggest that communal epistemic dependence strictly determines interpersonal epistemic dependence as many of us can witness people with different communal backgrounds succeeding to rely on each other’s epistemic labor and testimony. However, rather than taking this as a simple indication of how IED works free of communal influences, I think we should consider how IED works despite those influences and think about what might be at work in these cases.

⁵Another response we could consider that I do not mention here is epistemic skills. We depend on our communities for nurturing and developing our capacities as epistemic agents, e.g. our epistemic skills (Townley 2011: 2). As Grasswick notes, “we grow up in communities and learn our epistemic skills within communities” (2004: 100). In communities, “through our interactions with others,” we learn how to be “an active and reflective inquirer,” (Grasswick 2004: 102) we learn how to communicate, how to reason

will first talk about how I see these responses come up in feminist and social epistemologies and define CED by following them. I will, then, claim that this characterization of CED can also be used as a set of diagnostic questions to track persistent epistemic exclusions in a given context such as an institutional environment.

Epistemic communities have “communal ways of organizing things, and systems of connected theories, methodologies, and practices” (Nelson 1993: 139). They offer a limited set of epistemic resources (Grasswick 2004: 99), “a set of discursive possibilities” (Code 1991: 122), and “shape the construction of knowledge” (Grasswick 2004: 86). In short, they offer various sense-making mechanisms to render our experiences intelligible. These mechanisms have variously been referred to as hermeneutical resources (Fricker 2007; Dotson 2012; Pohlhaus Jr. 2012), interpretive frameworks (Collins 2009), tools (Grasswick 2004; Medina 2013), and interpretive resources (Medina 2013). Creating these epistemic resources is an irreducibly collective activity. This is because, first of all, creating new epistemic resources is itself a shared practice since it relies on common experiences of relevance and salience. Second, as a shared practice, creating new epistemic resources involves other shared practices and standards such as “habits of cognition” and “shared language” (Dotson 2017: 422). Hence, new sense-making mechanisms are developed by communities, shared/circulated within communities, and members contribute to their creation or learn about them within communities as well. Thus, we depend on our epistemic communities for development and circulation of various sense-making mechanisms.

However, epistemic communities are also *communities with priorities and commitments*. In other words, they can set certain priorities for and commitments to understanding the world (Grasswick 2004: 104). These priorities and commitments are influenced by and influence what they notice as important and consider worthy of attention, i.e. their ranges of relevance. Communities do and can form around and worry themselves about similar ranges of what seems relevant to them. They develop resources to make sense of what’s within that range of relevance. Since those resources are usually calibrated to notice what’s within those ranges, they in a way reinstate what should seem relevant to people. At the same time, those ranges can be extended and shifted by members calling attention to new phenomena and drawing on their communities as they engage with these new phenomena. This is why many feminist epistemologists have discussed the importance of members’ ability or power to stretch out a given community’s range of relevance (Dotson 2012; Pohlhaus Jr. 2012). For instance, José Medina’s (2013) discussion of the relevance dilemma is a reminder of our reliance on communities for ranges of relevance. When talking about being epistemically responsible about our social landscape and the social knowledge we produce about it, Medina raises the question of “what should be relevant to us?” It cannot be as limited as our immediate surroundings and it cannot be as extensive as everything and everyone. This question in some ways is one we answer with communities. For example, Medina suggests that one way to respond to this relevance dilemma is through shared responsibility to interrogate constantly what we found as relevant (2013: 158).

We can also think about Sanford Goldberg’s account of coverage-reliance as one aspect of this. Goldberg underlines the sentiment expressed in the statement “if that were true, I would have heard it by now” (2011a).⁶ Imagine someone saying: “If borders were violent, I’d have heard it by now.” This sentiment, for Goldberg, allows people to

(Grasswick 2004: 100), how to change our minds, how to criticize, how to affirm, etc. (Code 1991: 83–4). Different social and developmental histories we experience within particular communities lead to particularized epistemic skill sets (Grasswick 2004: 101).

⁶Also see Goldberg (2010: 154–84; 2011b).

support their beliefs that borders are not violent. This support is based on the coverage they have. Communities' ranges of relevance shape this coverage extensively.

The discussions I'm referring to here underscore how we rely on our communities for what's relevant and intelligible for us. Thus, communal epistemic dependence (CED) can be defined as relying on epistemic communities for (1) interpretative resources and (2) ranges of relevance.⁷ These, in turn, significantly shape what we produce knowledge about and how we do so.

Saba Fatima's (2020) recent discussion of microaggressions, I believe, is one place where we can turn to demonstrate CED in practice. One of the phenomena Fatima stresses in her piece "I Know What Happened to Me: The Epistemic Harms of Microaggression," is the fact that due to an unlevel knowing field, it is not always easy for people experiencing microaggression to develop epistemic certainty about their uncomfortable experience. It is only when these experiences of microaggression are shared with a community of people who suffer from microaggression, and when those communities reflect on their cumulative experiences of marginalization, that it becomes easier to make sense of experiences of microaggression: "What counts as microaggression generates from and builds upon the critical reflection of our cumulative experiences of marginalization" (Fatima 2020: 164). What's central to this is the sharing of stories Fatima notes, which, in a way, hopes to achieve consensus on what's relevant for experiences of microaggression. This sharing of stories and critical reflection on them is where shared epistemic resources are developed. Gaining epistemic certainty about experiences of microaggression becomes possible within marginalized communities, and Fatima notes: "This is in large part because over the many cumulative experiences of the marginalized, sufficient collective hermeneutical resources have been developed that allow the microaggressed to make sense of their experience ..." (Fatima 2020: 178).

Characterizing CED through interpretative resources and ranges of relevance allows us to raise the following diagnostic questions in a given institutional context:

- (a) Which ranges of relevance are operative in it?
- (b) Which interpretative resources permeate it?

In an institutional environment, for instance, these questions can allow us to track persistent epistemic exclusions on a communal level. They can help us track what persistently is not being considered relevant and intelligible in a way that obstructs communities' contributions to knowledge production taking place in that institution. This is where I would like to turn to structures. Even though structures are not the only reason why certain ranges of relevance and certain epistemic resources are prioritized, they play a significant role.

3. Structural Epistemic Dependence: the department of management

The impact structures have on knowledge production has been discussed by various authors (e.g. Harding 1991; Mills 1997; Davis 1998, 2003, 2005; Tuana 2004, 2006; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Medina 2013; Dotson 2017, 2018; Ruíz Forthcoming *b*). I use Structural Epistemic Dependence, in general, to refer to how people and communities rely on this impact (willfully or not) when they come to know something. In what follows, I first develop an account of Structural Epistemic dependence (SED)

⁷We can think of this dependence as something we practice intracommunally and intercommunally. I take this separation from Toole (2019: 609).

and suggest a particular way of approaching it that relates to the discussion of CED above. I, then, revisit the example of echo-chambers to emphasize why discussing SED is important. Following that, I state the diagnostic questions that we can draw from this discussion and that can help us track epistemic oppression on a structural level. I conclude by briefly hinting at why paying attention to relationships between different forms of epistemic dependence is valuable for disclosing epistemically oppressive practices.

SED can be understood here as an approach to epistemic dependence with “a structural epistemological lens” (Dotson 2018: 146). A structural epistemological lens, according to Dotson, is a product of structure-centered analyses and prioritizes investigations that dissect the influence of “social, political, cultural, and institutional environments” on knowledge production (2018: 134). Thus, SED aims to highlight how we rely on the ways in which social and political arrangements and institutions *condition* practices of knowledge production.

SED consists in the fact that in knowing something, we rely on how structures manage ignorance and knowledge. I use management of ignorance to refer to how structures can enforce what is worth knowing (what is not) and support practices of not knowing (Mills 1997, 2007; Tuana 2004, 2006; Sullivan and Tuana 2007). Looking into institutions of science and education, for instance, provides us with cases of this management in action. Different institutionalized practices such as the peer-review process, the existence of favorable research topics, or established relationships with various industries enable and limit research on certain topics. Different institutionalized practices within education such as curriculum development can function as mechanisms of exclusion/inclusion and determine what’s worth learning about (Malewski and Jaramillo 2011). As epistemologies of ignorance have been emphasizing, there are many ways in which structures manage ignorance (Sullivan and Tuana 2007).

I’m using management of knowledge, by contrast, to refer to how structures can condition how exactly we are going to know things. In other words, they can condition the possibilities for not only something to be known but also *how* it is known (Dotson 2017: 420). For instance, in *Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking*, Sally Engle Merry talks about living in a world of quantification, where one of the ways in which institutions today know social phenomena is through developing indicators that can measure “social phenomena in countable and commensurable terms” (Merry 2016: 1). For example, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has developed “a set of indicators for measuring violence against women that were to be used by any country around the world” (Merry 2016: 2). It, then, becomes quite important to ask: What does it mean to know violence against women through the indicators the UN has developed? As Merry notes, indicators developed and used by national and international governments and organizations could easily become a dominant way to produce ‘legitimate’ knowledge on that topic and significantly influence policy information and governance (2016: 3).

Thus, we rely on how structures manage ignorance and knowledge in our efforts to know things about the world. Management styles, so to speak, change from context to context though. This is to say that there are numerous strategies embodied in structures for managing ignorance and knowledge production. For the purposes of this paper two strategies, emerging from the relation between structural and communal epistemic dependence, are of particular importance: Structures manage ignorance and knowledge production by setting up ranges of relevance and by enforcing certain interpretative resources over others. SED refers to how we rely on this set-up and enforcement when we are trying to understand things. I do not suggest that our reliance on structures strictly determines ranges of relevance we can sustain and epistemic resources we could

develop, and thus always has the last word on what we can know about and how we know about that. Rather, the issue is that our (willful or not) reliance on structures makes it relatively easier to stay in certain ranges of relevance and use certain epistemic resources.

In order to see how this is the case, let's revisit the discussion of echo-chambers. Structural epistemic dependence is useful here to understand why it is that certain echo chambers are able to sustain themselves successfully more easily than others. According to Nguyen, an echo chamber can be thought of as "an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members" by "excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting while simultaneously amplifying members' epistemic credentials" (2020: 146). This disparity is sustained by "actively" assigning non-members "some epistemic demerit, such as unreliability, epistemic maliciousness, or dishonesty" (Nguyen 2020: 146).⁸ Nguyen further suggests that echo chambers can form around specific topics. In light of these, consider both current anti-migrant/refugee echo-chambers that actively discredit migrants and refugees as unreliable and dishonest as well as the U.S. immigration system. The whole system is largely devised as protection of borders from "trickers." From interview practices to actions of border enforcement officers, from immigration laws to encampment practices, displaced people (especially the ones who are not white, upper class, able-bodied, heteronormative, and/or cisgendered) – based on various rules and procedures – are primarily treated as people trying to trick officers into letting them into the country. Institutionalized practices within the immigration system in the U.S. constantly reproduce the fact that "those people from certain countries" must be contained in any way possible (Ruíz and Sertler 2019).

There is a relationship between these institutional attitudes and the ease with which the anti-migrant/refugee echo-chambers form and flourish. This is because these institutional practices not only support *citizens'* "obliviousness" of the worlds of migrants and refugees but also encourage discrediting and "deflecting" their realities (Sullivan and Tuana 2007: 3; Ruiz Forthcoming a). In fact, following Mills' work on white ignorance and racial contract, we can suggest that white citizenship itself mirrors the structure of an echo chamber where non-citizens are reduced to sub persons who are actively distrusted whereas (respectable, white) citizens are "granted full cognitive standing" in the polity, the "official epistemic community" (1997: 18). Institutional practices of a white supremacist state can encourage acts of disregarding people when they share their experiences of displacement and can "willfully ignore" interpretative resources (Pohlhaus Jr., 2012) developed to discuss what displacement can mean in a certain context. When institutions' knowledge practices are, to put it crudely, anti-migrant in so many ways, it is not at all surprising that we have communities of people who pride themselves on actively discrediting migrants/refugees. If "echo chambers prey on our epistemic interdependence" (Nguyen 2020: 143), institutions have something to do with it. They can manage ignorance and knowledge production by setting up ranges of relevance and by enforcing certain interpretative resources over others, and in doing so enable different practices of IED and CED.

SED, then, allows us to raise the following diagnostic questions in a given institutional context:

- (a) How are ranges of relevance set up, maintained and legitimized?
- (b) How are certain interpretative resources encouraged and enforced over others?

⁸Also see Dotson for the relationship between epistemic power and how people can deploy epistemic containment, where they are able to "isolate and contain otherwise relevant aspects of a given situation" (2018: 150).

Asking these questions, I claim, can help us identify institutional practices developed to maintain persistent and unwarranted epistemic exclusions. In a way, then, if tracking practices of IED allows us to record persistent failures in relying on others, tracking practices of CED can allow us to note persistent failures in finding different ranges of relevance and various interpretative resources meaningful. Tracking practices of SED, furthermore, gives us an opportunity to question how these ranges of relevance and intelligibility are managed by the institutions in place. In other words, structural epistemic dependence gives us a platform to explain the preferential treatment certain ranges of relevance and intelligibility receive in institutional contexts – preferential treatment that not only obstructs certain contributions to knowledge production but also renders them impossible. In other words, sometimes, for certain institutions, what might appear as failed practices of IED or CED might be precisely what the structure in place is designed to do.⁹ When certain ranges of relevance and intelligibility are non-existent for institutional practices, then epistemic labor concerning those is not recognized as such. Thus, it is crucial to pay attention to different relations of epistemic dependence in their concrete forms to reveal epistemically oppressive practices.

4. Where to go from here: applied epistemology

I have so far introduced and discussed a taxonomy of epistemic dependence that highlights different relations of reliance in knowledge production: interpersonal, communal, and structural. I have argued that this particular taxonomy is useful for tracking epistemically oppressive practices in institutional contexts. This is because each form of epistemic dependence in this taxonomy focuses on different aspects of knowledge production and hints at where and how it could become exclusive. Each form of epistemic dependence yields in its discussion, what I have called, *diagnostic questions* that could nudge us towards identifying epistemically oppressive practices. Furthermore, I have suggested that this taxonomy highlights how these three forms of epistemic dependence are related to each other and can build upon each other. What I want to do in this section is to illustrate how these diagnostic questions can be utilized in analyses of some of the institutional practices in asylum law and higher education. In so doing, I hope to show why the relationship between epistemic dependence and oppression is of significance for applied epistemology.

Let me start by listing the diagnostic questions that could be helpful in identifying epistemically oppressive practices in an institutional context (Table 1).

What then do we begin to see when we raise these questions in the context of U.S. asylum law? To begin with, raising the first set of questions shows that asylum-seekers are epistemically excluded from the production of social knowledge (about their countries, cultures, and experiences) by the institution of asylum. This is to say that their epistemic labor and/or their testimonies are frequently found irrelevant by decision-makers and they are usually not relied upon at all when producing knowledge about the situation they are in (e.g. McKinnon 2012, 2016; Nayak 2015; Ruiz and Sertler 2019). This is the case especially when the results of their epistemic labor challenge the expert and country reports produced by international organizations and governments (McDonald-Norman 2017).

Asking the diagnostic questions corresponding to CED can show us what is within the range of relevance of the asylum system in the U.S. and which interpretative

⁹This should make us question why we keep building institutions that are structured to support flawed practices of IED and CED. It would be crucial to ask whether the resilience of epistemological systems has something to do with it (Dotson 2014). Also see Ruiz's "Structural Trauma" (Forthcoming a) for the relationship between design of our current structures and settler colonial epistemic systems.

Table 1. Diagnostic questions for institutional contexts.

Interpersonal Epistemic Dependence (IED)	Whose epistemic labor and testimonies are persistently found irrelevant? By whom? Why? Who can afford to not rely on certain testimonies and epistemic labor? Why?
Communal Epistemic Dependence (CED)	Which ranges of relevance are operative in it? Which interpretative resources permeate it?
Structural Epistemic Dependence (SED)	How are ranges of relevance set up, maintained and legitimized? How are certain interpretative resources encouraged and enforced over others?

resources are utilized to make sense of that. For instance, we can see that certain forms of violence are more relevant for the asylum system in place. If you are seeking international protection due to your fear of being persecuted on the basis of gender or sexual orientation, not only is it the case that the form of violence is less likely to be recognized as relevant for asylum seeking but also that interpretative resources present in the system can make sense of that violence as “private” or “not public” and consider it not worthy of attention.¹⁰ We can further ask what the resources used by decision-makers make intelligible and what they obscure.

SED allows us to ask how these failures to believe asylum seekers or failures to understand their plights are structurally maintained through myriad institutional practices. For instance, the current asylum system uses the categories set by the Refugee Convention, i.e. race, religion, nationality, political opinion, and membership in a particular social group. The use of these categories systemically manages ignorance and knowledge by excluding other categories (such as gender or sexual orientation) or resisting to understand that it might be difficult to fit neatly into any of the categories suggested by the Refugee Convention. These institutional practices make it so that finding certain applicants credible or relying on them is rendered impossible no matter what they say. These are, I believe, a few among many epistemically oppressive practices we can detect within the institution of asylum. This discussion is obviously cursory. However, I hope it illustrates how the questions I developed above could guide a more thorough analysis of the institutional context of asylum as well as other institutional contexts.

As a second case in point for how these questions can be utilized, I want to now turn to institutions of higher education. Situating Nora Berenstain’s discussion of epistemic exploitation in higher education is particularly useful here. For Berenstain, epistemic exploitation

occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face. Epistemic exploitation is a variety of epistemic oppression marked by unrecognized, uncompensated, emotionally taxing, coerced epistemic labor. It maintains structures of oppression by centering the needs and desires of dominant groups and exploiting the emotional and cognitive labor of members of marginalized groups who are

¹⁰State-centricity of the Refugee Law has encouraged an understanding of persecution where the main persecutor is state and/or government. This understanding of persecution shaped by the historical development of the Refugee Law and consolidated via institutionalized practices made it more difficult to understand gender-based/gender-related persecution where the persecutor was not necessarily state/government.

required to do the unpaid and often unacknowledged work of providing information, resources, and evidence of oppression to privileged persons who demand it – and who benefit from those very oppressive systems about which they demand to be educated. (Berenstain 2016: 570)

As Berenstain suggests, epistemic exploitation is quite common, among other places, in higher education and, I think, it presents an important case where we can see all three forms of epistemic dependence and their problematic operations in action. If we pay attention to practices of CED in an institution of higher education, we are likely to see different ranges of relevance and various epistemic resources cultivated across its population (faculty, administrators, students, workers, etc.). One thing that happens in cases of epistemic exploitation is that the institution demands that workers and students who are members of marginalized groups share the results of their communal epistemic labor with dominant groups without the institutional consideration that there are significant differences between ranges of relevance and interpretative resources among those communities. This, then, puts people in a position where they are required to do the extra work of providing that information while knowing that there is often the risk of their labor being found irrelevant and misunderstood. Furthermore, people who demand or expect that extra labor can *afford* to find it irrelevant because they can rely on how the institution in place manages ignorance and knowledge with respect to oppression – a problematic practice of IED enabled by the existing practices of SED. For instance, an institution can easily support not knowing oppressive practices taking place in it, can seriously not engage with the changes suggested, can continue supporting ranges of relevance and interpretative resources that fail to capture what parts of its population talk about, can promote disengagement with different ranges of relevance and interpretative resources (e.g. diversity work presented as belonging to a certain group and not concerning others), etc. Paying attention to SED and raising the respective diagnostic questions in institutions of higher education could allow us to track whether the institutional practices in place work towards rendering the epistemic labor done within marginalized communities relevant and thus try to develop an environment where less exploitative practices of IED and CED are possible.

Furthermore, Berenstain notes that in institutions of higher education, it is common for epistemic exploitation, in the form of asking people to explain the nature of the oppression they face, to masquerade “as a necessary and even epistemically virtuous form of intellectual engagement” – “an indispensable method of attaining knowledge” (2016: 570). This disguise is only possible because many of our institutions still work with an understanding of interpersonal epistemic dependence that harbors the assumption of an inclusive and harmonious society. An understanding of IED which assumes that simply being asked to speak about one’s experiences guarantees an uptake as a reliable knower. An institution working with this understanding of IED demands extra labor without simultaneously working to cultivate an environment that is tuned to its relevance and that works to render it intelligible. These cases not only show that institutions can ignore *how* practices of IED can fail. They also illustrate how these institutions’ obliviousness to this failure, insofar as it is part of how they manage how knowledge about oppression should be obtained, enables exploitative and problematic relations of epistemic dependence.

These two examples from asylum and higher education suggest that raising the diagnostic questions above in an institutional context can help us track persistent and unwarranted epistemic exclusions within that space. These questions allow us to pay attention not only to where and how relations of epistemic dependence can become exclusive, but also to how they are interrelated in an institutional context. Paying

attention to both of those dynamics alerts us to possible occurrences of persistent and unwarranted epistemic exclusions, and thus it is a valuable practice for tracking epistemic oppression.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I suggested that figuring out how epistemic dependence and oppression are related is a fruitful activity for applied epistemology. Given that some form of epistemic dependence is always at work where persistent and unwarranted epistemic exclusions take place, I asked whether paying attention to relations of epistemic dependence (and how they succeed and fail) in a given environment can signal us possible epistemic obstructions taking place. In an effort to answer that question, I introduced a taxonomy of epistemic dependence. This taxonomy draws on extant discussions in social and feminist epistemologies and identifies three forms of epistemic dependence (interpersonal, communal, and structural). Each form of epistemic dependence emphasizes different aspects within our practices of knowledge production and thus needs to be considered when we ask where and how those practices *could become exclusive*. Based on this taxonomy, I formulated diagnostic questions that could be utilized to track epistemically oppressive practices in knowledge production in institutional contexts. I, then, discussed some institutional practices in asylum law and higher education briefly to indicate how those questions can be employed.

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