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TABOO, HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE, AND EXPRESSIVELY FREE ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

In *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), Miranda Fricker has insightfully introduced the notion of a hermeneutical injustice, where historic conditions of marginalisation serve to deprive individuals of the appropriate hermeneutical resources with which to render significant patches of their experience fully intelligible to themselves and others. In this paper I draw attention to a shortcoming in Fricker's account: that the only hermeneutical resource she acknowledges is a shared conceptual framework. Consequently, Fricker creates the impression that hermeneutical injustice manifests itself almost exclusively in the form of a conceptual lacuna. Considering the negative hermeneutical impact of certain societal taboos, however, suggests that there can be cases of hermeneutical injustice even when an agent's conceptual repertoire is perfectly adequate. I argue that this observation highlights the need to expand Fricker's account to accommodate a wider range of hermeneutical resources and, in turn, a broader taxonomy of hermeneutical injustice. Specifically, my central case of a societal taboo presses the need to recognize as a valuable hermeneutical resource an *expressively free environment*, in which individuals can put their conceptual-interpretative resources to good hermeneutical effect.

> There is really no such thing as the voiceless. There is only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.
>
> Arundhati Roy (2004)

In *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker introduces the notion of a hermeneutical injustice: 'the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalisation' (2007: 158). This distinctly epistemic form of injustice arises when certain social groups are unfairly precluded from the processes by which a society generates shared meanings and collective understandings; the processes in which it generates, in Fricker's terminology, the *hermeneutical resources* that enable individuals and groups to interpret and attribute significance to their experiences. As a result of this marginalisation, collective hermeneutical resources develop in ways that fail to adequately capture the lived experiences of the marginalised, leaving gaps in their ability to render intelligible, to themselves and others, significant areas of their own experience.

In her compelling exploration of the topic, Fricker stops short of giving a precise definition of 'hermeneutical resources', instead referring to them as 'shared tools of social interpretation', 'meanings', and 'collective forms of social understanding' (2007: 6, 148).

However, whilst hermeneutical resources remain *theoretically* vague there is significant evidence that she has a particular *practical* understanding in mind: the appropriate interpretative terminology with which to conceptualise some important experience. In this paper I aim to demonstrate that a similar process is at play even in the presence of an adequate conceptual repertoire, by considering the previously unexplored hermeneutical impact of societal taboos. I argue that, in certain circumstances, taboos too can give rise to cases of hermeneutical injustice, and that recognising this necessitates broadening our understanding of hermeneutical resources beyond shared concepts and terminology.

In section 1 I provide an overview of Fricker's account, drawing attention to several salient features: namely, the conditions in which a gap in a society's collective hermeneutical resources can be classed as unjust, and the point at which a hermeneutical injustice is overcome. I note that, in each of her examples, the actual moment of overcoming comes from the acquisition of a concept that fills the 'lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be' (2007: 150). I explain my reservations about this as a general solution in sections 2 and 3, employing the example of the menstrual taboo to demonstrate how taboo subjects can have much the same negative hermeneutical impact as Fricker's paradigm cases of hermeneutical injustice, despite there being adequate terminology to conceptualise the experiences they cover. This suggests that an *expressively free environment* in which to discuss a particular subject has an important role to play as a hermeneutical resource. Section 4 concludes.

1. FRICKER'S CENTRAL CASES OF HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE

The story of Carmita Wood, recounted by Fricker in *Epistemic Injustice*, has come to serve as the paradigm example of hermeneutical injustice. Whilst working at Cornell University in the early 1970s, Wood was subject to repeated unwanted sexual advances from a distinguished professor who, whilst working, would brush past her breasts, wiggle his crotch in her direction, and forcibly attempt to kiss her. The effort of trying to avoid these molestations manifested itself not only in a highly unpleasant working environment but also in physical symptoms brought on by chronic stress, and eventually she requested a transfer to another department. When this fell through she quit her job, but upon applying for unemployment insurance she found herself unable to articulate why she had felt the need to do this. Crucially, this was happening at a time when the term 'sexual harassment' was yet to be coined, and Wood consequently lacked the ability to properly conceptualise what she had experienced. Ashamed and embarrassed she eventually stated that her reasons were 'personal', and her claim was denied (Fricker 2007: 149–52).

Wood was prevented from rendering the traumatising nature of her experience intelligible, to herself and to significant others, because society as a whole lacked a concept that adequately captured what it was she had been through. The absence of this collective hermeneutical resource disadvantaged her as a knower, preventing her from engaging in the fundamental epistemic process of using concepts to acquire, articulate, and convey knowledge. It was this epistemic disadvantage that inhibited her attempts to come to terms with the problem, leaving her confused and isolated.

Two features of this example drive the intuition that this shared epistemic disablement, which affected her entire sociolinguistic community, imposed an injustice specifically upon Wood. Most straightforwardly, whilst all members of society lacked the concept of sexual harassment and were thus inhibited in their attempts to fully and accurately understand

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their social environment, its absence was of particular *disadvantage* to Wood. It concerned a patch of her experience which was significantly in her interests to understand, for without said understanding she was left 'troubled, confused, and isolated, not to mention vulnerable to continued harassment' (Fricker 2007: 151). Whilst her harasser suffered from the same cognitive disablement as Wood, he cannot be said to have suffered the same disadvantage; indeed, it can be argued that he benefited from the collective lack of understanding, as it enabled him to continue acting in this way without having to acknowledge or confront the immorality of his deeds.

Of course, not all examples of asymmetrically disadvantageous lacunae in collective hermeneutical resources constitute cases of hermeneutical injustice: individual sufferers may be severely disadvantaged if their society is not medically advanced enough to diagnose a particular illness, but this would likely be classed as epistemic misfortune rather than injustice. The second factor indicating that the latter holds in Wood's case, that there is an ethical element that suggests that her epistemic impairment and its ensuing negative ramifications wronged her, can be found in the background conditions of inequality and marginalisation that gave rise to this hermeneutical gap. The presence of the lacuna Wood suffered under was *unfair*, arising as it did from the inequitable power relations prevalent in the mid-20th century United States. Women were largely excluded from those male-dominated professions, such as law, academia, and journalism, where shared social meanings are generated, rendering them 'hermeneutically marginalised' (Fricker 2007: 155). Hermeneutical resources were thus developed that suited the interests of men, leaving gaps over areas they didn't experience or which they had no interest in coming to understand. The act of sexual harassment, notably, was conceptualised in a way that reflected the experience of those who held the social power in that relation, the male employers rather than the female employees, meaning harassment was seen as 'flirting' and those who objected as 'lacking a sense of humour' (Fricker 2007: 153). Whether incidentally or, on some level, by design, these understandings ultimately served the interests of men, allowing them to commit these reprehensible acts whilst the traumatised feelings of their victims were hidden from the collective consciousness.

After diagnosing the problem of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker moves on to prescribing the remedy. The way to combat it, she argues, is through cultivating the ethical-epistemic virtue of hermeneutical justice. This virtue is essentially corrective in nature, involving a reflexive awareness that sometimes when a speaker is struggling to make herself intelligible it can be the result of a structural deficiency ('society lacks the hermeneutical resources that they need to process this area of their experience') rather than a subjective failing ('this person is talking nonsense'). Where time allows this might involve taking a more pro-active approach to listening than we usually engage in (as Fricker puts it, 'listening as much to what is *not* said as to what is said'; 2007: 171–2); otherwise, it might simply require reserving judgement on the credibility of a speaker's utterances when they appear to be making no sense.

It is doubtful, however, that demanding listeners revise their credibility judgments upwards to accommodate for hermeneutical marginalisation can be the ultimate solution to problems of hermeneutical injustice. As noted, hermeneutical justice is an essentially corrective remedy, introduced primarily as a guide for how individual interlocutors can try to mitigate the problems arising from distortions in the structure of our collective hermeneutical resources. A more fundamental response, surely, would be to correct the underlying structural problems (in the case of Wood, filling the relevant conceptual lacuna), so

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that the hermeneutically marginalised find it easier to make sense of their experiences in the first place.[1] If we return to Fricker's examples, we find that hermeneutical justice does in fact serve as a means to precisely this end.

Fricker provides two examples of people actually overcoming a case of hermeneutical injustice, and in these examples the process takes a distinctive form. For Wood, it was a matter of attending a consciousness-raising programme, where a group of women coined the term 'sexual harassment' to conceptualise the distressing ordeal all had experienced but of which none had spoken (2007: 150). She also provides the example of Wendy Sanford, a woman in 1960s America who only discovered that her crippling mental health problems in the wake of childbirth were not a 'personal deficiency' when she attended a workshop on women's medical and sexual health issues that introduced to her the notion of 'post-partum depression' (2007: 149). These speak-outs and consciousness-raising exercises were an attempt to circumvent the fact that gaps in our shared resources leave significant areas of a woman's experience obscure and unspeakable when encountered as an isolated individual. By working together, presumably employing proactive and sympathetic listening practices that Fricker would later describe as hermeneutical justice, the groups that Wood and Sanford were part of could piece together hermeneutical resources that were as yet only implicit in their social interpretative practices. They took individual experiences and, through the introduction and dissemination of new hermeneutical resources that conceptualised the experience, incorporated them into the shared social understanding. It is at this point, presented by Fricker almost as a 'eureka!' moment of revelation, a 'life changing flash of enlightenment' that pierces and dispels the 'hermeneutical darkness', that the lacuna in hermeneutical resources is filled (2007: 153, 149). The acquisition of concepts that actually conformed to their lived experience provided Wood and Sanford with a handle on their experiences of which they had previously been deprived, allowing them to understand it, communicate about it, and tackle it.

2. THE MENSTRUAL TABOO: EFFECT AND CAUSE

In *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker is elusive in her description of what forms hermeneutical resources actually take, characterising them variously as 'shared tools of social interpretation', 'meanings', and 'collective forms of social understanding' (2007: 6, 148). Whilst I do not necessarily take this vagueness to be a flaw in her account (indeed, it is one of the reasons why the theory has such exciting theoretical potential), it does leave it slightly unclear, in practical terms, what these somewhat abstract resources actually consist of. For an indication of this the reader must turn to Fricker's examples, which, as noted above, generally refer to some missing concept or piece of knowledge, a 'lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be' (2007: 150). It's also worth noting how she fills out the idea in later work: in 'How is hermeneutical injustice related to white ignorance?' she repeatedly refers to hermeneutical injustice occurring on the level of 'conceptual repertoire', the injustice manifesting itself as a 'poverty of concepts' or the 'lack of conceptual-interpretative resources' (2013b: 51), whilst in 'Epistemic justice as a condition of political freedom?' she explicitly demarcates hermeneutical injustice as 'owing either to the inadequately *conceptualised content*, and/or owing to an inadequately understood

1 A similar point has been made by Elizabeth Anderson (2012).

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expressive form' (2013a: 1319–20, emphasis retained and added).[2] It is thus perhaps not unreasonable to derive from her work the impression that all that is needed for a case of hermeneutical injustice to be overcome is for a concept to be developed and disseminated, both among members of the marginalised group and to significant others with whom they might wish to communicate, which encapsulates the otherwise ill-understood area of experience.

The fundamental aim of this paper is to expand our focus to cover not just concepts and terminology, but also other kinds of hermeneutical resource. My wish to do so is primarily motivated by the fact that many of the defining features of hermeneutical injustice can be present in social experiences even when there *are* well defined and widely disseminated concepts that capture, for the hermeneutically marginalised, the nature of the experience in question. This can be seen in certain societal taboos.

Taboos, in the primarily verbal form that concerns us here, are topics that are deemed inappropriate for discussion in many social contexts. Reactions to the mention of a taboo subject can range from discomfort and awkwardness to outright shock and disgust, depending on how strongly the taboo is engrained in the listener and the context in which the discussion takes place. As a general rule, however, it can be assumed that, insofar as something is a taboo subject, open discussion of the topic will be discouraged for fear of eliciting an adverse reaction from an interlocutor.[3] In broaching a taboo topic, it can be said, individual speakers become subject to a *social cost*. Whilst this cost is primarily intangible, in the form of these adverse reactions and the 'souring' of an environment, it can also have real, concrete ramifications, be it the exclusion from certain groups or social spaces, a straining of relations, or even, in extreme cases, physical harm. When talking about a particular subject is sufficiently costly in this way, as is the case with many taboos, the pressure on individuals not to speak of them can be overwhelming,

In any given social environment there can be countless taboo topics, covering conventions of religion (the name of God in Orthodox Judaism), morality (incest, or paedophilia), taste (uttering swear words, or discussing income), and so on. I am interested in those that, as with Fricker's paradigm cases of hermeneutical injustice, have an asymmetrically disadvantageous hermeneutical impact on certain individuals and groups, such that an area of their experience being barred from public discussion actually inhibits their comprehension of and communication regarding it in ways that run counter to their own interests. Taboos that induce this negative hermeneutical effect and that can be seen to arise from conditions of hermeneutical marginalisation should be recognised as important

2 By 'expressive form', Fricker here means certain manners or modes of communication which, in a particular social context, are perceived to be irrational in some way. This is exemplified in the case of Marge Sherwood in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, whose attempt to contribute to a conversation is peremptorily shut down on account of her 'hysterical' way of expressing herself (Fricker 2007: 161). Expressive form will not be discussed further in this paper, in part because concepts are the hermeneutical resource that has attracted so much of the attention in the subsequent literature, but more importantly because I do not believe it to be significantly relevant for the issues at hand. Nonetheless, it is worth specifying that, when I discuss 'hermeneutical injustice' in this paper, unless otherwise stated I am referring to the form of injustice found in Fricker's central cases: that of a 'poverty of concepts'.

3 Counterexamples to this general rule might be the rock star incorporating taboo themes into their lyrics precisely for the shock value, or the social activist who attempts to break what they perceive to be a harmful taboo by 'bringing it out into the open'. Both would still expect a negative reaction, however, they merely choose to ignore (or, in the former case, revel in) it.

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cases of hermeneutical injustice, as I argue in the remainder of this section by highlighting the structural similarities between Fricker's central cases and a central case of my own: the menstrual taboo. The central purpose of this paper, however, is to argue that accommodating taboos within a theory of hermeneutical injustice requires expanding the theory beyond a concern with conceptual lacunae. This I do in section 3.

In Judeo-Christian cultures the stigmatisation of menses and menstruating women can be traced at least as far back as the Torah, in which menstruating women, along with anyone who touches them, are declared 'unclean' (Leviticus 15:19). This idea of menstruation as something dirty was incorporated into early Christian theology and endorsed by St Jerome, Thomas Aquinas, and other notable figures throughout the Church's history (Phipps 1980). As is the case with many religious practices, this stigmatisation permeated into secular culture and remains prevalent to this day: in one 'Revoltingness Questionnaire', menstrual blood was ranked by men to be the second most revolting substance that comes from the human body, more revolting than urine and pus, whilst women ranked it as eighth of the nineteen options. 'Normal' blood from a wound, on the other hand, was tenth on the scale, less revolting than sweat and nail clippings (Allan and Burridge 2006: 163).

At least in modern times, however, the menstrual taboo goes far beyond a simple physical aversion to menstrual blood. This would not explain, for example, why two-thirds of American women questioned in one study claimed that women shouldn't discuss their periods in professional or social situations, including indirect references to cramps and headaches, or why over a third of women in the same study thought one should conceal the fact that they are menstruating from their families (in Houppert 1999: 7). Admittedly this study was carried out in 1981, but the paucity of up-to-date information here is indicative of another peculiar phenomenon: that menstruation, a routine part of many women's lives and an important cross-cultural sign of maturation, is systematically overlooked in social research (Bobel 2010: 30).[4] Indeed, even if things have improved in the intervening period there is little sign of a dramatic sea change in attitudes. References to menstruation in the media continue to be rare, apart from where it is presented as a 'problem' needing a 'solution' (Kissling 2002); advertising for menstrual products continues to focus on their 'ability to keep safe the secret that the girl is menstruating' (McPherson and Korfine 2004: 194; see also Britton 1996), with packaging adopting euphemistic language to avoid words like 'vagina', 'bleed', and even 'menstruation' (Houppert 1999: 221); and girls continue to report feeling underprepared and ill-informed at the time of menarche (Cooper & Koch 2007; McPherson and Korfine 2004).

What this illustrates is an altogether more worrying aspect, from a hermeneutical perspective, of the menstrual taboo: an all-encompassing verbal taboo, where social convention dictates that menstruation is not even to be *discussed*. Of course, neither 'society' nor the strength and effects of the taboo can be treated as homogenous or uniform, and the stupefying effect of the taboo on discussion of or reference to menstruation will be partially determined by relations of social power and identity that are present between interlocutors: the same woman might avoid any allusion to her period around colleagues, strangers, or in-laws, whilst happily discussing it with close, particularly female, friends or family.

4 The exception to this, of course, is the extensive field of research that emphasises its pathology: premenstrual syndrome, or PMS (Houppert, 1999: 5).

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However, this reveals the troubling scenario that whether or not this area of a women's experience is appropriate for public discussion, whether or not it is *socially acceptable*, is dependent not on the woman who has to deal with it but on the attitudes of other people who are not directly affected by the issues (Bobel 2010: 7). If they perceive it not to be then they can impose a social cost on the speaker that could discourage them from raising the subject again.

Having a significant area of one's own experience treated in this way can have a hugely detrimental impact on how one comes to interpret the experience. As such, I believe this is a straightforwardly hermeneutical issue. The first-order hermeneutical impact affects the very way one comes to understand the experience, echoing how Fricker describes hermeneutical injustice forging an individual's social identity and changing the way they see themselves. The example she uses to illustrate how hermeneutical injustice can impact the very development of the self is a young Edmund White, trying to come to terms with his homosexuality at a time when shared social understandings of gay men all carried negative connotations (2007: 163–8). Such was the strength of these shared understandings of homosexuals as sexual deviants or 'queens' that, at various stages of his personal hermeneutical development, White actually came to see himself as embodying these caricatures.

Analogously, the social pressure not to discuss menstruation, and the adverse reaction if one does, can cause the individual to think of this area of their own experience as something shameful.[5] Karen Houppert, in her exposition of the 'culture of concealment' surrounding menstruation, summarises this effect as follows:

> If the sole conversation a girl has with her mother about 'down there' consists of a quick, covert discussion of sanitary protection logistics, if her teachers are secretive and vague as they line her and her fifth-grade girlfriends up for the sole public acknowledgement of periods, 'The Movie', and if every ad she ever sees reminds her that the worst possible thing would be for boys to discover that she bleeds, she is sure to think there is something wrong with the event … or herself. (Houppert 1999: 9)

The upshot of this social stigmatisation of menstruation, Houppert argues, is that menstruation is transformed 'from a benign inconvenience into a shameful, embarrassing, and even debilitating event' (1999: 10). Women themselves come to see their period not as a natural process and sign of good reproductive health, but as a shameful ailment, to be hidden and suppressed.

When this shame precludes meaningful discussion of issues pertaining to menstruation the first-order hermeneutical problem can in turn engender second-order problems, mirroring how Wood's inadequate understanding of her experience of sexual harassment led to additional problems in her professional and personal life. These are multitudinous, ranging from a barrier to serious dialogue on safe and sustainable menstrual products (Bobel 2010: 7–8) and the perpetuation of menstrual myths and misinformation (that it is harmful for menstruating women to swim or bathe, for example, or that women on

5 Although I have noted that both Edmund White's understanding of homosexuality and the effect of living under the menstrual taboo impact upon how one actually comes to understand one's experience, I believe that how this effect is produced differs importantly between the two cases. This distinction, which reinforces my belief that taboos are a case of hermeneutical injustice not covered by Fricker's account, will be explored in depth in section 3.

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their period have a different odour; see Houppert 1999: 79–84) to increased rates of school absenteeism (Houston *et al.* 2006) and adolescent girls failing to seek advice from medical professionals on menstrual issues.[6] At perhaps the most basic level, it simply manifests itself as young girls at the time of menarche feeling like they have no one to talk to about this new, and sometimes scary, bodily process (Lee & Sasser-Coen 1996). When this is the case, the same feelings of isolation, loneliness and confusion about one's lived experience that are so characteristic of hermeneutical injustice can take hold.

The menstrual taboo has a strikingly similar hermeneutical impact to Fricker's examples of hermeneutical injustice, with a collective aversion to discuss menstruation and thus inability to make sense of the experience proving asymmetrically disadvantageous for menstruating women. However, this alone is not sufficient for it to be a hermeneutical *injustice*. For this to be the case it must have a similar cause as well as a similar effect, arising from historic conditions of hermeneutical marginalisation. If this is not the case, then the fact that the menstrual taboo has this detrimental effect would just be a matter of 'circumstantial epistemic bad luck' (Fricker 2007: 152).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth account of the genesis of the menstrual taboo, but it seems undeniable that our collective understanding of menstruation arose amidst conditions of hermeneutical marginalisation for women. Julie-Marie Strange (2001), for example, has noted how at the beginning of the twentieth century the male-dominated fields of academia and medicine, despite only limited clinical engagement with menstruation, set about promoting an overwhelmingly negative and pathological view of it.[7] Houppert in turn provides a fascinating account of how the patriarchal institutions of the US armed forces and government managed to alter at will the collective understanding of menstruation during the Second World War, such that it would not be seen as a barrier to women contributing to the war effort. Needless to say, once the war was over and men wished to return to their peacetime occupations a whole raft of studies emerged 'proving' that menstruation renders women unfit for the workforce (Houppert 1999: 151–8).

Indeed, conditions of marginalisation can be found in all the areas where the menstrual taboo has traditionally been generated and sustained, preventing women from contributing to the pool of social meanings regarding menstruation. Be it in advertising, academia, medicine, religion, the media, or governance, women have been relegated to the sidelines whilst men determined the way society as a collective responds to this experience. As Houppert notes:

> [B]y defining how women think and talk about menstruation, men – the mostly male CEOs of companies manufacturing menstrual products, as well as advertising executives, religious leaders, and sex-ed authors – have set a tone that shapes women's experiences for them, defining what they are allowed to feel about their bodies, and what they are allowed to feel about their sexuality. Menstrual etiquette matters because women are being manipulated. (1999: 9)

6 In one study only 2% of girls claimed to have spoken to a health-care provider about matters relating to menstruation, despite 75% of adolescent girls experiencing some form of menstrual disorder (Houston *et al.* 2006).

7 Again, it is not altogether clear that this situation has improved dramatically in the subsequent century. When the American Psychiatric Association made the controversial decision to include PMS in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* in 1993, the committee that debated the issue consisted of 4 women and 17 men (Houppert 1999: 179–85).

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3. WHEN A CONCEPTUAL PRESENCE MAY AS WELL BE AN ABSENCE

Hitherto I have been elaborating upon the similarities between the cause and effects of Fricker's paradigm case of hermeneutical injustice and the cause and effects of the menstrual taboo. Nonetheless, I believe the two phenomena come apart in the actual form they take. Whilst in Fricker's examples hermeneutical injustice tends to manifest itself as the inability to adequately conceptualise a significant area of an individual's experience, for tabooed subjects appropriate concepts often do exist and are widely disseminated, especially amongst those whom the taboo affects most strongly. This suggests an interesting disanalogy between the cases: whilst the starting conditions (hermeneutical marginalisation) and the end result (hermeneutical injustice) are the same, the path from the former to the latter is significantly different.

Consider, for example, the following first-hand account of the menarche, recounted by the pseudonymous Rose to Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen:

> Well, my first knowledge of menstruation, when I was 12 my mother gave me a tiny little pamphlet that explained things quite well and our total conversation was, she said, "you read this, you need this information", so I read it and when I finished this information, she said "did you understand what you read?" And I said "yes". She said "very well" and went off to do whatever she was going to do and that is as far as she ever went. No discussion whatever … I felt very strange and sort of terribly self-conscious … I wouldn't dare let my father know what was going on (laugh) you know, in those days … And I really felt sort of totally confused about the whole thing really. (Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996: 89)

We do not know what was in the pamphlet Rose was given by her mother, but given that she claimed it 'explained things quite well' it is not too much of a stretch to assume that it didn't leave any glaring gaps in her ability to describe what was going on, or a significant 'lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be'. However, her ability to make sense of this experience was still inhibited by the reactions of her parents, by her mother's aversion to any discussion and the need to hide it from her father. It is this that left her feeling 'strange', 'self-conscious', and 'totally confused'. This is not to say that the menstrual taboo doesn't give rise to more 'classic' cases of hermeneutical injustice, where individuals lack the terms necessary to adequately conceptualise the nature of their experience, and Rose does go on to note the variance in understanding amongst her friends, such that 'some of them had good information, some didn't know anything' (Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996). However, Rose's case introduces the possibility of another scenario, where someone possesses the adequate conceptual framework but where these concepts and their potential hermeneutical benefits are *disabled* by the actions and responses of others in a significant number of communicative contexts. The relevant concepts are present, but they can't be put to good hermeneutical effect.

Of course, on Fricker's account there is another way in which a conceptual framework can be deemed hermeneutically inadequate. Even if one possesses the terms and understandings with which to *name* an area of their experience, these terms and understandings can be rendered unfit-for-purpose if they carry with them overtly negative connotations, as was the case for Edmund White. I have noted that, for Rose, the hermeneutical problems she faces do not appear to arise from the kind of conceptual lacuna faced by Wood but

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from her inability to use these concepts in significant communicative contexts.[8] It might initially appear plausible, however, that the reason this is the case is that these concepts call to mind negative shared social understandings, much as 'homosexual' did for White.

I do not think that this is so. White's inability to make sense of his homosexuality was a consequence of a collectively developed concept that was inextricably linked to derogatory distortions of what it means to be gay, such that it had become impossible for White to think of himself as a 'homosexual' without at the same time ascribing to himself these negative characteristics. In his socio-temporal context, in other words, terms such as 'homosexual' were themselves inadequate, given that in his mind describing himself as a homosexual was tantamount to becoming 'that vampire' (Fricker 2007: 165). Perhaps the most telling part of his account in this respect is where he claims that 'what I wanted was to be loved by men and love them back but not be a homosexual' (Fricker 2007: 165). He recognised a distinctive and significant area of his social experience, that of loving and being loved by other men, but, despite an abundance of widely available words that putatively described this very experience, there nonetheless remained the lacuna of an appropriate name that he was comfortable using.

Not only was Rose not struggling in search of a concept that was not present, however, she also gave no indication that the conceptual framework with which she had been endowed was explicitly imbued with negative associations. What created the feelings of self-consciousness and confusion for her was how others treated this topic, and, by extension, how they treated her. Imagine Rose's experience had gone differently: she is given the same booklet that again provides her with adequate information, but this time both her parents make it known they are available and open to discuss any questions she might have ('but not that it's a big deal'). In this case it's hard to imagine that, despite possessing exactly the same information and conceptual framework, she would have come away with the same feelings of confusion and self-consciousness. It seems like what is doing the work in suppressing positive hermeneutical engagement here, therefore, is not the negative *connotations* that are attached to it by the *individual*, but rather the *reaction* its mention elicits in *others*. For Rose, it was this reaction, the social costs of openly discussing her period both actual (the strange dynamic permeating her encounter with her mother and the feelings it left her with) and potential (the laughable prospect of discussing it with her father), that prevented her from properly understanding her experience and created the feeling that menstruation is something shameful, to be hidden and suppressed. This is an altogether different phenomenon from a conceptual lacuna.

For clarity's sake, it might be worth noting some claims that I am *not* making here. First, I am not denying that interlocutors, be it Rose's parents or society generally, might associate negative connotations with the experience of menstruation. The important issue for present purposes is how these associations amongst others can prevent specific

8 Interestingly, Suzette Haden Elgin, when attempting to create a 'woman's language', *did* choose to incorporate more extensive terminology for menstruation, such as *hushaana* (to menstruate painfully) and *ashaana* (to menstruate joyfully) (laadanlanguage.org 2009). Furthermore, some have criticised the medical/ biological focus in teaching about menstruation to the detriment of experiential and affective elements (Britton 1996; Houppert 1999). Whether or not these concerns are valid, I do not believe that they should be treated as mutually exclusive with what I am discussing. It could well be that, to attain a more satisfying comprehension of menstruation, people require both a more extensive conceptual framework and a less hostile environment in which to use these concepts.

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individuals from acquiring a proper understanding of a significant area of their own experience, leading to the first- and second-order hermeneutical problems noted in the previous section. Rose's story illustrates that, at least some of the time, the most likely explanation is not via their bestowing a conceptual lacuna, but through their treating this experience and attempts to talk about it in a hermeneutically detrimental way.

More generally, and as noted above, I do not deny that the menstrual taboo can give rise to 'classic' conceptual cases of hermeneutical injustice, either in the form of a conceptual absence or a conceptual inadequacy. Nor do I deny that, in some cases where the initial hermeneutical injustice is the consequence of the reactions of others, concepts do become associated with negative images and feelings, not only for interlocutors but also for the experiencer herself. Indeed, in section 2 I explicitly argue *for* the claim that taboos can have a profound affective impact by prompting feelings of shame and confusion, since this is part of what it means to be a hermeneutical injustice. This does not make it a conceptual issue, however; these feelings can arise just as readily from external hostility as from a conceptual lack. Furthermore, it is perfectly possible that individuals like Rose might *go on* to develop a view of menstruation as 'dirty', either as an independent injustice or in an attempt to somehow justify their feelings about the experience and how others have treated it. In such a case, arguably as with the collective understanding, it can be hard to determine the order of cause and effect; whether the causal chain runs from taboo to negative associations or vice versa. However, a negative association of this form is not a necessary feature of a taboo topic, whilst the creation of an adverse feeling or reaction when mentioned is. This reaction can inhibit meaningful discourse or social engagement with an experience *regardless* of how individuals themselves actually feel about it, creating the feeling that it must be suppressed and hidden and thus encouraging misunderstandings.

Put positively, then, my claim is that the social costs associated with taboo topics can disable or at least obstruct the use of concepts that would otherwise help individuals render an experience fully intelligible to themselves and to others. I believe this indicates that there is more to our collective hermeneutical resources than the words and concepts we use. Specifically, we require access to an *expressively free environment* in which to put these concepts to work: an open and receptive social context in which a particular experience that individuals or groups have a significant interest in coming to understand can be discussed in hermeneutically conducive ways. If discussion of a particular patch of one's social experience is systematically met with awkward or hostile reactions and the imposition of social costs, then the intelligibility of this experience will almost inevitably be stymied. When this is the consequence of historic hermeneutical marginalisation, as I argued in the case of the menstrual taboo where men have dictated that periods are not to be discussed, it is important that we recognise these problems as those of a hermeneutical injustice.[9] Concentrating on conceptual lacunae would cause us to overlook this.

If the absence of an expressively free environment can be every bit as hermeneutically damaging as the absence of an appropriate concept, it is finally worth noting that the acquisition of one can be just as life-changing. This can be seen in the story of Kami

9 There are some taboos where we would not want to say that reacting with shock or disgust is an unfair consequence of hermeneutical marginalisation. This might be the case with certain moral taboos, such as that pertaining to paedophilia.

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McBride, a 'feminist-spiritualist' whose story is detailed in Chris Bobel's sociological history of menstrual activism:

> During the lunch break of a class with herbalist Jane Bothwell, the students went swimming to beat the heat. When McBride declined an invitation to join everyone in the water because she was menstruating, her teacher encouraged her "just do what we do – bleed on the ground and wash it off in the pond." McBride recounts her epiphany: "I don't really remember anything else we talked about that weekend, but that statement rocked my world. Something cracked open and I saw that the shame around my blood was part of what kept me suppressed in general." (Bobel 2010: 65–6)

It is notable here that, unlike in the cases of Wendy Sanford and Carmita Wood, McBride didn't overcome this injustice through the generation of a new shared concept. What helped her understand this significant area of her experience in a way that was pursuant to her own interests was simply a change in the way that others reacted to it. Rather than imposing a cost on her for bringing up the subject of menstruation, Bothwell's sympathy and nonchalance helped foster an expressively free discursive space in which McBride could employ the conceptual hermeneutical resources already available to her. It was through the combination of these two resources that she came to see through her shame and develop a far more appropriate understanding of this part of her lived experience.

4. CONCLUSION

One of the great strengths of Fricker's account is the recognition of just how damaging the inability to understand something in a social context can be for an individual's hermeneutical development. She is undeniably right to point out that this requires the adequate words and terminology with which to conceptualise one's experience, and a focus on conceptual repertoire is a valuable undertaking in itself. Nonetheless, this focus risks precluding discussion of the potentially numerous alternative ways in which historical conditions of hermeneutical marginalisation render individuals and groups ill-equipped to make sense of their own experience.

I have argued that, regardless of how widely disseminated the appropriate concepts are amongst the hermeneutically marginalised and how confident they are in conceptualising a particular aspect of their lived experience, if they lack access to an expressively free environment then significant areas of their experience can remain socially unintelligible: concepts are useless unless individuals can actually put them to expressive work. We require dialogue with others about significant areas of our social experience both so we don't come to feel isolated and stigmatised in virtue of it (overcoming a first-order hermeneutical problem), and so that we can acquire valuable practical information about it (overcoming a second-order problem). To accommodate this insight within a theory of hermeneutical injustice, we must expand Fricker's theory and acknowledge the vital role that an expressively free environment has to play as a hermeneutical resource.[10]

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