The Antidemocratic Harms of Mansplaining

Laura Montanaro

The neologism "mansplaining" captures an insidious dynamic in which men explain things to women that women already understand, assuming that, by virtue of being a woman, she lacks the man's knowledge. Mansplaining has started to receive some attention in contemporary scholarship, conceptualizing the phenomenon and identifying its epistemic harm. My purpose is to consider mansplaining and its harms from the perspective of democratic theory. Setting the problem of mansplaining against the norms we expect of democracy—equality, inclusion, and recognition—I argue that mansplaining poses harms that are not only individual and epistemic but also collective and relational. I distinguish two types of mansplaining based on women's expertise and experience to elaborate on its collective epistemic harms to decision making and its relational harm of political exclusion. Mansplaining poses further relational harms of inequality and misrecognition, undermining the equal social relations and social trust required for deliberation.

Keywords: Mansplaining, democratic theory, deliberative democracy, feminist theory, gender, social trust

During the 2022 British Conservative Party leadership debates, Liz Truss accused Rishi Sunak of "aggressive mansplaining" when he interrupted her 20 times in the first 12 minutes (Martin 2022). The term *mansplain* is a portmanteau of *man* and *explain*, popularized on social media. The definition "generally refers to a man explaining something to a woman in a tone perceived as condescending" (Bridges 2017, 94). Important to the concept is the mansplainer's assumption that the woman, by virtue of being a woman, is not as knowledgeable as a man (Rothman 2012). The term is mainstream and has started to receive some attention in contemporary scholarship (Dular 2021; Johnson 2020; Koc-Michalska et al. 2019; Lutzky and Lawson 2019; Manne 2020; Smith et al. 2022). The phenomenon poses important questions relevant to democratic theory and deliberative democratic theory, concerned as it is with talk-based politics. What is mansplaining? What are its harms? And what are its consequences for democracy?

The term was popularized in the wake of an essay titled "Men Explain Things to Me," by Rebecca Solnit (2012). Solnit described an encounter with a man who, upon discovering that she had published a book on the English photographer Eadweard Muybridge, began to tell her about a "very important" book on Muybridge published that year. It was Solnit's own book, and the man had to be told this several times before taking in that she was indeed the author of the book he had read about in the *New York Times Book Review.* Solnit did not use the term herself, but "mansplaining" entered the popular lexicon through the social media reaction to her article.

The term is useful, helping women to describe, and speak out against, sexist interactions with men that they were previously unable to name.[1] But it has its critics. Some argue that "mansplaining" unfairly pinpoints men, overlooking that women, too, can be condescending, and that the term is essentializing and an expression of "reverse sexism" (*Hansard* HC Deb. November 19, 2020). The term is also used, sometimes strategically, to characterize interactions between men and women that do not seem particularly sexist. For example, the Republican National Committee accused Senator Cory Booker of mansplaining to then Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen during a congressional hearing when he tried to hold her accountable for President Donald Trump's immigration policy, including family separations (CNN 2018). In this way, the term is co-opted by those who use it as a political attack, deflecting attention from, and engagement with, their positions.

Laura Montanaro (lmonta@essex.ac.uk, United Kingdom) is Senior Lecturer in Political Theory in the Department of Government at the University of Essex.

doi:10.1017/S1537592724001063

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mansplaining poses a potential problem for democracy. Democracy is not only a set of governing institutions but also a culture requiring a vibrant public sphere in which citizens learn to interact as equals and treat each other as worthy of inclusion (Anderson 1999; Dahl [1998] 2015; Dewey 1916; Habermas 1996; Warren 2017). On deliberative accounts, decision making should be preceded by equal inclusion in deliberation, which both enhances the quality of decisions made and grounds equality and inclusion in requirements of justice (Christiano 1997). As Williams and Warren (2014, 39–40) argue, deliberation is not only about "*what* is deliberated," but also about "the *relationships* that are established as a consequence of speaking and listening" (italics in the original)—specifically, recognizing in each other the moral status of agents. According to existing accounts of mansplaining (Dular 2021; Manne 2020), it is not merely a social nuisance and a matter of rudeness; a mansplainer fails to recognize a woman as a speaker, undermining her as a knower. My purpose is to set the problem of mansplaining against democracy's norms: inclusion, equality, and status recognition. This approach suggests *collective* and *relational* harms. If women are unable to equally contribute to epistemic content, then our collective decision making will fail to reflect expertise that could produce *epistemically better outcomes* and the experience needed to redress *unjust relations of power.* Moreover, women's experiences should be accounted for not only as a matter of epistemic content, but also as a matter of democratic equality, and so experience-based mansplaining poses a relational harm of *political exclusion.* Mansplaining's general failure to recognize women's equal sociopolitical status poses additional relational harms of *inequality* and *misrecognition.* This further violates the norm of equal social relations required for deliberation to function.

To make the case for understanding the harms of mansplaining as antidemocratic, I proceed as follows. I review the existing theoretical literature on mansplaining (Dular 2021; Manne 2020), and the theory used to explain its harms: epistemic injustice. I build on this literature, arguing that epistemic injustice usefully elucidates some, though not all, of mansplaining's harms for democracy. I highlight two distinct types of mansplaining, one based on women's expertise and the other on their experience, to argue that mansplaining poses harms that are not only individual and epistemic, but also collective and relational, including harms to the sociopolitical status of women. In the third section, I further elucidate these harms, drawing on speech act theory, particularly that of Habermas (1996) and Brandom (1994; 2000), to show that mansplaining undermines the social trust required for deliberation. I then briefly discuss some challenges to mansplaining, and finally, the question of who bears what responsibilities to prevent it.

Gendered Communication and Epistemic Injustice

Mansplaining has received some attention in contemporary scholarship. There is, of course, considerable research on communication between genders, mainly in psychology and linguistics. Studies count how often men and women speak (Mulac 1989; Nittrouer et al. 2017), measure the length of speech and periods of listening, and how often men and women interrupt and are interrupted (see, for example, Anderson and Leaper 1998; Brescoll 2011; Hancock and Rubin 2014; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Miller and Sutherland 2023; Weatherall and Edmonds 2018). Results show that men speak more often and for longer and listen less (Nittrouer et al. 2017; Weatherall and Edmonds 2018), and that men are more likely to interrupt, and interrupt intrusively, while women are more likely to be interrupted by both men and other women (Hancock and Rubin 2014; Miller and Sutherland 2023). These gendered ways of communicating matter because they are expressive of social status (Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz 1985; Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989).

There are three gaps in the literature. First, studies on mansplaining are often of the linguistic usage of the term, and not the act. Their purpose is not to understand the phenomenon, but to discover how and why the term is used, finding that men use it to signal their displeasure at a universalizing evaluation of their gender, and women use it to signal instances of verbal repression (Lutzky and Lawson 2019). Unless men unfailingly announce that they have been mansplaining, and women point it out to them every time it occurs, these are not the same.

Second, and relatedly, the literature often employs lay definitions of the term, which treats rudeness and condescension as essential to its definition. Bridges (2017, 94), for example, explains that "the term generally refers to a man explaining something to a woman in a tone perceived as condescending." And Lutzky and Lawson (2019, 1) explain that the term is used on Twitter to highlight "how rude, unthoughtful, patronizing, condescending, and sexist" men can be. As with concepts that we use and discuss in political science, meaning can be contested and shift over time, and it is important to understand how it is used in the vernacular, but using lay definitions might lead analysis of the phenomenon and its harms astray, preventing us from identifying and pushing back against strategic misuse and from appropriately responding to those who claim the term is sexist.

Third, there is little to no literature on its effects on and consequences for democracy. Koc-Michalska and colleagues (2019) usefully study the effects of mansplaining on political opinion sharing, finding that mansplaining can affect who is willing to post opinions online, though their analysis is specific to Twitter and is used to argue

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

against relying on digital trace data to represent public opinion.

I argue that mansplaining shares with gendered patterns of communication the feature of talking down to, or over, others who appear to be of lower social status, and in so doing asserting one's own social status. Though it does not necessarily include interruptions or rudeness and condescension—though it can certainly be accompanied by them—it shares with these characteristics a pattern of being disproportionately directed toward women (Smith et al. 2022). Mansplaining usually includes a refutation of a woman's claim and a restatement (sometimes, the same statement reframed). The term captures a style of communication that includes a bias, an assumption that a woman—and perhaps particularly a young woman, or a woman from a racialized background—could not possibly be an expert or be *as* expert as a man. The mansplainer's prejudice might be unconscious and unintended; equally, he might be a bad-faith actor. Johnson (2020) uses speech act theory to argue that men misunderstand women's illocutionary meaning, taking them to be asking a question when they are not, precisely because of a bias against their gender, and suggests that this leads to epistemic injustice. Two recent works (Dular 2021; Manne 2020) argue that mansplaining's harms are epistemic: women are harmed as knowers. I will argue that epistemic injustice is useful for elucidating some, though not all, of mansplaining's harms for democracy.

Mansplaining as Epistemic Harm

Kate Manne (2020) and Nicole Dular (2021) each consider, and reject, testimonial injustice as an explanation of the harm posed by mansplaining.[2] Testimonial injustice is "the injustice of not receiving due credibility as a speaker because of negative prejudice" or social stereotype, such as prejudice against a particular race or gender (Fricker 2007, 4, 34–35). Like testimonial injustice, mansplaining describes a style of communication in which a man refutes a woman's claim. Consider the following popular example. NASA astronaut Jessica Meir posted a video of herself in space and tweeted, "My first venture >63,000', the space equivalent zone, where water spontaneously boils! Luckily I'm suited!" (Meir 2016). A Twitter user with the handle "CaseyOQuin" replied, "Wouldn't say it's spontaneous. The pressure in the room got below the vapor pressure of the water at room temp. Simple thermo" (Bates 2016). A woman shared her expertise with others, and rather than accept her explanation, a man refuted her claim and offered his own restatement. These are not simply men "explaining-while-male" (Goodwin 2018); the mansplainer does not know more than the woman, and importantly, he has good reason to think he may not, given that her credibility is clear or made clear in the course of their interaction.

Manne and Dular identify an important characteristic of mansplaining that distinguishes it from testimonial injustice: that the roles of speaker and listener are reversed or subverted. Manne (2020, 140) refers to an "epistemic role reversal," arguing that the mansplainer thinks he is entitled "to occupy the conversational position of the *knower* by default: to be the one who dispenses information, offers corrections, and authoritatively issues explanations" (italics in the original). Dular (2021, 9) describes mansplaining as a "*dysfunctional subversion of the epistemic roles of speaker and hearer*: those who *ought* to be in the role of hearer due to their lack of knowledge and expertise … falsely assume the role of speaker, and treat the rightful speaker … as a hearer on the topic" (italics in the original). With respect to Solnit's personal encounter, Manne (2020, 143) points out that the man positioned himself as the authority with Solnit "cast as the naïve one"—roles, she says, that are psychologically difficult to break from because of the "social dynamics in play."

Manne (2020, chap. 8) argues that because mansplaining is rooted in the man's entitlement to be the knower/speaker, it is better understood not as a testimonial injustice but as an epistemic harm of another kind: "epistemic entitlement." Epistemic entitlement is an unwarranted sense of entitlement that is assumed prior to any testimony as opposed to, as Manne explains of testimonial injustice, unfairly dismissing a less privileged speaker typically after they have provided testimony.[3] Of course, mansplaining follows, or is a response to, a woman's testimony. But Manne is claiming that mansplainers carry with them the ready assumption that they will be better positioned as the knower/speaker, no matter the topic, because of their gender. Manne (2020, 140, and see chap. 8, fn. 6) further distinguishes between epistemic injustice and entitlement by noting that the former is structural, and the latter attitudinal. Fricker (2017, 2) emphasizes "the absence of deliberate, conscious manipulation," claiming that the hearer discriminates against the speaker because they are "clouded by prejudice." With mansplaining, a man assumes he knows more than a woman, an assumption supported by social and cultural patterns of domination. Finally, whereas testimonial injustice describes an agent not meeting their epistemic obligations to listen to others, epistemic entitlement, as applied to mansplaining, occurs when a man assumes others are obligated to listen to him even when another is better situated as a speaker. This has implications for how we can redress mansplaining; it is not only a matter of men becoming better listeners, as I will discuss in the final section.

Epistemic entitlement and dysfunction provide trenchant insight into the phenomenon of mansplaining, and particularly into how men center themselves as the authoritative knower, displacing the rightful speaker because of prejudice against her gender. But these do not explicitly

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

engage with its harms and consequences for democracy—neither Manne's nor Dular's purpose. Mansplaining causes collective and relational harms for democracy, including collective epistemic harms, that are undertheorized by epistemic injustice.

Expertise- and Experience-Based Mansplaining, and Why We Need to Look beyond Epistemic Injustice

There are two types of mansplaining worth distinguishing.[4] Whereas the examples of Solnit and Meir are of men challenging women on their areas of expertise, mansplainers sometimes speak to women's experiences and identity, such as reproductive issues, rape, sexual assault, and sexism. Consider the following example of mansplaining, provided by Dular (2021, 3–4). Amanda Seales, a standup comedian, and Steve Santagati, an author, debate a viral video of men catcalling a woman as she walks through New York City. Seales explains that men might think they are complimenting her but are instead objectifying her. Seales sees Santagati shaking his head and tells him, "You are not an expert on this, my brother, because you are not a woman walking in the street." Santagati replies, "I am more of an expert than you … because I am a guy and I know how we think."

In *expertise-based* mansplaining, the mansplainer refutes a woman's equal or greater knowledge on a topic despite a clear indication of relevant knowledge established by shared standards of expertise. Mansplaining fails to recognize a woman's expert status. In *experience-based* mansplaining, the mansplainer refutes her knowledge of her subjective experience, shared within the group subject to such experiences. Mansplaining fails to recognize the status that every person has with respect to their location in social relationships.[5] To continue with the catcalling example, Santagati goes on to talk about how *women* think, claiming that if the men in the video were "hot," then the woman would be flattered because there is "nothing more that a woman loves to hear than how pretty she is" (CNN 2014).

In preventing a woman from contributing to the wisdom of the crowd in her areas of expertise and experience, mansplaining not only harms her individually as a knower but also harms the broader public. The broader public is harmed because they do not learn from her—an epistemic consequence that includes the mansplainer. This is an asymmetrical harm between the mansplainee and the mansplainer, to be sure—asymmetrical in that while both experience epistemic consequences, she suffers the intrinsic harm of not having her status as a knower of her expertise and experience recognized in the public sphere. Nevertheless, he does not learn from her.

The harms that follow are *collective* and *relational.* Democratic outcomes depend on the epistemic content of both expertise and experience, and so both types of mansplaining pose a *collective epistemic harm*, though with differing consequences. When women's *expertise* is not recognized, our collective decision making fails to reflect knowledge that could produce *epistemically better outcomes.* When women's *experience* is not recognized, our collective decision making can fail to reflect knowledge needed to redress *unjust relations of power.*

Mansplaining's harms are also *relational.* Because democracies are "owned" by the people, the people should have their experiences included in collective decisions, not only as a matter of epistemic content, but also as a matter of democratic equality. Experience-based mansplaining thus causes a *relational harm* of *political exclusion.* Expertise does not have the same moral force as experience as a justification for inclusion, though it does have epistemic force.[6] In both deliberative and epistemic theories of democracy, experts often occupy the roles of administrative execution and information-giving rather than providing grounds for political inclusion in decision making. In deliberative processes such as citizen's juries, for example, experts often play an information-giving role, helping citizens to learn about a given topic and make informed recommendations to the broader public. Deliberative democrats argue that inclusion should draw on the availability of perspectives (Bohman 2006) rather than expertise. This emphasis on perspectives, Bohman argues, is "due to the distributed character of social knowledge and experience" (176–77). Epistemic arguments for democracy emphasize the knowledge generated and captured by democratic procedures (Barry 1965; Cohen 1986; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018; Landemore 2021). Simply expressed, democracy's value is found in the capacity of "the many" to make correct decisions (Schwartzberg 2015). If democracy best taps the collective intelligence of its people, then we have a good justification for equal political voice. Further, such a justification might convince even those who do not accept the principle of political equality as a good thing in and of itself (Landemore 2021)—certainly relevant to a discussion on mansplaining and its gender bias. Including female voices, with the differing experiences and perspectives they provide, gives us a better chance of reaching the "truth," and not by accident (Lafont 2019). Again, the role of expertise is complicated, but it is not usually provided as grounds for inclusion in democracy's crucial moments of decision making and agenda setting.

For this reason, some might object that expertise-based examples seem largely inconsequential. Meir has not stopped sharing her expertise in virtual or analog life, we might point out. And her mansplainer was not taken particularly seriously, receiving response tweets such as "Man mansplains space to astronaut" (Paiella 2016). Still, that mansplaining occurs despite the recipient possessing the clear epistemic authority of an astronaut is revealing of the sexist culture that feeds such gendered interactions.

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Further, both expertise- and experienced-based mansplaining pose a *relational harm* to *women's recognition* and the *equality* that follows from recognition. Mansplaining reflects and perpetuates a bias against women, undermining her social and political status. Inequality and misrecognition can dampen women's political voice and political efficacy and reduce their capacity to sway others through speech. I will now discuss these relational harms —of inequality, exclusion, and misrecognition—in more detail.

Relational Harms of Mansplaining

My purpose here is to set the problem of mansplaining against the broad norms that we expect for democracy: equality, inclusion, and status recognition. Though these are interconnected, I parse these norms below, explaining how mansplaining harms each, and the consequences that result for democracy and deliberation.

Relational Harm of Inequality

Democracies generally operate on a principle of political equality that includes giving the people an equal voice in a collective decision-making process. "Political voice" is a broad category, including voting, campaigning, organizing, donating, protesting, and lobbying (Hirschman 1970; Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018, 24). It encompasses the many ways we influence that which affects our political lives, including government decision making. By securing freedoms of speech and association, citizens connect their voices (their capacity to inform and be informed, and to articulate preferences) with their agency (their capacity to make decisions). With equal political voice, we grant people a normative status that says they have an entitlement to act. However, access to and the exercise of voice varies across social groups (Phillips 2003; Schlozman et al. 2005). We know that, on average, well-resourced people and groups, with high levels of income and education, tend to participate more than those who are less well resourced. They further tend to be overrepresented in policy making (Schattschneider 1960). In informal realms, expressions of political voice are not protected by the equivalent formal principle of "one person, one vote," and so we find that political voice is stratified, drawn along the lines of gender, race, and ethnicity (Schlozman et al. 2005).

Because mansplaining reflects a bias that a woman cannot be an expert or be *as* expert as a man, it undermines the equal relational standing that buttresses her equal access to voice and respect (Anderson 1999). Consider the fact that women who publicly supported Hillary Clinton rather than Bernie Sanders for the Democratic Party nomination in 2016 were dismissed as "vagina voters" (Dittmar 2016). The accusation was that a woman's preference for Clinton was essentialist and reductionist, and an expression of a crude identity politics (Denvir 2015; Jacoby 2015; O'Neill 2015). These men were "mansplaining away" (Goldberg 2015) the reasons women had to vote for Clinton, including both her considerable qualifications and, yes, the fact that she was a female candidate and that this mattered—not as a matter of biology but as a matter of shared experiences of sexism that make descriptive representation desirable (Dittmar 2016, 809). After publicly expressing support for Clinton, women who occupied positions in politics, law, and activism received death threats, had to change phone numbers, and began traveling with private security (Flegenheimer, Ruiz, and Bowles 2020). This occurred among women merely publicly expressing their political opinions, with women already more likely to be discouraged from expressing political opinions in public (Nadim and Fladmoe 2021). When women run for office, they experience higher levels of harassment, abuse, and intimidation—though levels for all candidates are undesirably high (Collignon, Campbell, and Rüdig 2022). But it is women who are consequently more likely to modify their campaign activities, avoiding voter canvassing and social media use, for example, which negatively affects their likelihood of winning office (Collignon and Rüdig 2021).

In talking down to, or over, women, mansplaining violates social equality, undercutting democracy as a culture or way of life (Dewey 1916; Mill [1859] 2011). On such accounts, democracy is not only a set of governing institutions but is also inscribed into everyday social relationships. As Dewey (1981, 227) argues, "The heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends … to converse freely with one another." This type of "associated living" (Dewey 1916) requires equality, reciprocity, and mutual respect. For Dewey, the way we relate to one another in the public sphere matters deeply; this culture carries over into our governing practices and institutions.

Relational Harm of Political Exclusion

Feminist theorists and theorists of representation often argue that marginalized groups require representation as a matter of inclusion and social justice (see, for example, Mansbridge 1999; Williams 1998; Young 1990). How we define those groups for the purpose of political inclusion in democratic processes is a matter of discussion and debate, with emphasis on interests, perspectives, and shared experience. There is, however, a shared commitment to the idea that our institutions, processes, and outcomes cannot be legitimate when historically marginalised groups are systemically excluded (Dovi 2018; Phillips 2020). As Phillips (2020, 77) tells us, "There can be no substitute for the presence of those with the more direct experience in

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decision-making assemblies." If women's voices and experiences are crowded out, "we cannot be confident that the issues arising from their location in gender or racial hierarchies will be adequately identified or vigorously pursued" (77). It is for this reason that experience-based mansplaining poses a collective epistemic harm as well as a relational harm of political exclusion.

Such political exclusion can affect our "collective agendas or wills" (Warren 2017). Some research suggests that women and men are concerned about different political issues, with women more concerned with children, the elderly, and the needy (Crowder-Meyer 2022), and supportive of government spending on healthcare, education, and other programs that redress issues of inequality and welfare (Huddy, Cassese, and Lizotte 2008; Lizotte 2020; Norrander 2008). Men are more likely to focus on "financial issues—outsourced jobs, energy and gas prices, and taxes, and military force" (Crowder-Meyer 2022; see also Mendelberg, Karpowitz, and Goedert 2014). Studies also show that among legislators, women are more likely to advocate for women's interests in issues like parental leave and sexual and reproductive health, and that men are often poor advocates for women's rights (Carroll 2001; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Wolbrecht 2002), supporting arguments for descriptive representation.[7] If women's voices are crowded out, as they so often are, there are real effects for policy adoption and state spending.

In addition to policy adoption, we know that women's sense of political efficacy—how equipped women feel for politics, including their political ambitions, and how/-whether they feel politics is responsive to them (Campbell et al. 1980)—can increase with descriptive representation (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007; Stauffer 2021; Strachan et al. 2020; Wolak 2018; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007). Indeed, the inclusion of women in legislatures is associated with higher levels of external efficacy among both men and women (Stauffer 2021). Conversely, observing the underrepresentation of women—and observing them being the subject of repeated, even if subtle, discrimination—may dampen women's sense of political efficacy. In their study of sexism in the media, Haraldsson and Wängnerud (2019) call this a "bystander effect," finding that sexist portrayals can reduce women's political ambition. There is evidence that negative effects on political efficacy start at a young age. Bos and colleagues (2022) find evidence of "gendered political socialisation": girls are taught that boys belong in political leadership roles and girls do not, with the effect strengthening as they age.

This is why, even if an individual woman does not feel undermined and silenced by mansplaining, there is the danger of the collective effect of a broader cultural context in which the status of women is not recognized. As Christiano (1997, 259) puts it, everyone has an interest in recognition, "in being taken seriously by others. When an individual's views are ignored or are not given any weight, this undermines their sense of self-respect." An individual woman may not feel affected in this way, which can happen for any number of reasons, including that she has degrees and qualifications in her field and life experiences that one or several mansplaining incidents cannot meaningfully dispute, that some individuals are resilient and more resilient than others, and that context matters—a face-to-face experience of mansplaining in the workplace might be more consequential than a brief online interaction. But regularly seeing women subjected to mansplaining can have collective repercussions on the status of women. As Mansbridge (1999, 629) explains, "In descriptive representation, representatives are in their own persons and lives in some sense typical of the larger class of persons whom they represent." She was speaking specifically of legislative representatives, but the experience of being a minority in a given field often feels just like this: you represent not only yourself but the larger class of persons as well. However, the representation is dysfunctional in that your successes remain yours, but your failures reflect on the larger class of people you represent. In undermining their equal status, mansplainers deprive women of their entitlement to action, to influence their political lives.

Relational Harm of Misrecognition

This failure to recognize the status of women undermines the equal social relations required for deliberation to function. Speech act theory, and particularly that of Habermas and Brandom, helps to explain this. Broadly, speech act theory tells us that language does more than simply identify referents with words. Following Austin (1962), Habermas (1996) distinguishes locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, in which a speaker says something, performs an action in saying something, and produces an effect upon the hearer, respectively. As per the classic example, a speaker says "it is hot in here." The locutionary act is the statement, "it is hot in here"; the illocutionary act captures the speaker's intention for the hearer to open the window, or to keep it open; and the perlocutionary act is the hearer opening, or leaving open, the window. For Habermas (1989, 175), the illocutionary act is essentially equated with "communicative action," which broadly refers to the idea that language is not merely a medium for reaching understanding but is a process of "social integration and socialization."

By claiming, promising, informing, and so on, a speaker attributes to their listener the moral status of an agent (Williams and Warren 2014, 40). When a speaker makes a claim, promise, and so forth, the speaker becomes responsible to their listener for their speech. In turn, the listener can hold the speaker accountable. As Williams and

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Warren point out, Brandom (2000, 81) referred to this as "deontic scorekeeping," in which participants keep track of one another's commitments and entitlements to those commitments. Mansplaining affects illocution, in that communicative speech acts include an invitation to engage others. Johnson (2020) argues that men engage women's claims as if they are requesting information; the same claim from a man would be correctly understood as making an assertion. Because gender affects how men understand the illocutionary force of women's statements, they undermine the social integration and socialization to which Habermas refers, both reflecting and perpetuating a bias in our cultural contexts. When mansplainers do not recognize women as speakers, this is an epistemic harm not only to her knowledge and authority, but also to her status as an equal moral agent who makes commitments and can be held accountable for them.

Further, when a man deprives a woman of the normative status of speaker, mansplaining damages the capacities of two or more people to influence one another through talk. Important to deliberative democracy is the idea that discourse partners commit to adjusting their behavior, actions, and decisions on the basis of new information —"the conflicts, positions, and principles that are expressed in words commit an actor to, say, a vote for or against, to a bargain or compromise, or to an agreed consensus" (Warren 2023). In the process of "making it explicit," as Brandom (1994) puts it, trust develops. Speakers trust that their claims can affect the commitments of their listener and repeated interactions between speakers and listeners help to constitute publics who trust each other to behave nonarbitrarily (Williams and Warren 2014, 40). As Habermas (1989, 175) explains, when two or more people speak and listen to each other, they are at the same time "taking part in interactions through which they develop, confirm, and renew their memberships in social groups and their own identities." This harm of misrecognition is not only epistemic. In talk-based politics, we offer more than "cognitively compelling reasons about matters of collective concern"; we establish social relationships with each other that enable democracy to function (Warren 2017, 47). It is in these ways that mansplaining harms democracy and deliberation.

Responding to Challenges to Mansplaining

There are two commonly offered objections that claim the term "mansplaining" is sexist, and so undermines men's status and voices. The first challenge is that the term is an expression of "reverse sexism." On November 19, 2020—International Men's Day—Ben Bradley, a Conservative member of Parliament for Mansfield, UK, said, "In recent years, it seems like more and more phrases coming into use are designed to undermine the role and confidence of men in our society." Bradley goes on to mention "mansplaining" and "male privilege," before saying that "somebody seeking equality of fairness does not need to mean they drag down everyone around them. I am fairly sure that bad behaviour is not limited solely to the male of the species, nor is rudeness gender specific" (*Hansard* HC Deb. November 19, 2020).

Consider also Australian Labor Senator Katy Gallagher, pointing out to Senator Mitch Fifield that he was mansplaining the legislative process to her, interrupting her, and being patronizing and condescending. Fifield argued that Gallagher was making a "sexist implication about how I'm conducting my role." He went on: "Imagine, senator, if I said you were womansplaining? Imagine the reaction." He accused her of "making gender an issue," and said, "Let me continue what I was saying. I am not endeavouring here to give a *Cabinet Handbook* description of the legislative process. What I am endeavouring to do is give you just a general outline of how it works. I was trying to be helpful" (Commonwealth of Australia 2016).

As discussed, mansplaining reflects a bias, an assumption that a woman does not have equal or greater knowledge and experience—even when it is reasonable to assume that she might. Fifield behaved as if Gallagher did not fully understand the legislative process, even though she, too, is a senator. And, as I argued above, one harm of mansplaining is how it interferes with our collective agendas and decision making. Here, Fifield turned the focus from the legislative agenda at hand—welfare and families bills—toward his accusations of reverse sexism.

A related claim is to argue the term is essentialist, typecasting all men as mansplainers. "Not all men" mansplain, we are often told. There is of course gendered language used against women—historically, "hysteric" and "nag" are examples—which might help us to understand why some men might find such a term upsetting. However, where these terms are used to undermine and dehumanize, the term "mansplaining" points out a power imbalance between men and women, buttressed by a sexist culture. For this reason, the term and its usage are not equivalent to sexism and cannot be "reverse sexism."

Whether wittingly or unwittingly, such objections serve to redirect a discussion about sexism to one about how it is "not all men," and further suggest that the individual man shares no culpability. Indeed, these challenges of "reverse sexism" and essentialism are about being called a "mansplainer." Such objections center men, making the individual man the subject of discussion rather than the act of mansplaining.

A more concerning challenge is to suggest that by using the term "mansplaining," women silence men. To this, I offer two responses. First, I have just discussed that as a matter of intent, the term is meant to raise consciousness of a biased act that has collective and relational consequences for voice, equality, and the recognition needed for

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democratic trust. By using the term to name this act and its bias, men are not losing their political voice; they are losing what Manne (2020) might refer to as the entitlement to assert their voices over those with equal or greater knowledge and expertise simply because they are women. In the Gallagher–Fifield example, the term was not successful at breaking down this practice. Fifield was not only undeterred but, arguably, mansplained about mansplaining when he said, "I am not endeavouring here to give a *Cabinet Handbook* description of the legislative process. What I am endeavouring to do is give you just a general outline of how it works." Further, some empirical evidence shows that when mansplaining includes condescension, women are consequently reluctant to speak, whereas men are much less affected (Briggs, Gardner, and Ryan 2023).

Second, this challenge is relevant to misapplications of the term. Cory Booker, in one of the opening examples here, did not seem to be mansplaining, but was accused of it to dismiss the concerns and objections he raised. This speaks to the importance of understanding what mansplaining is—and is not—to prevent misuse and strategic misuse by antifeminist actors. By taking mansplaining seriously, we acknowledge and learn about a biased act and its relationship to the harms of inequality, exclusion, and misrecognition that people experience in their private and public lives, with consequences for democracy as culture and practice. It is a part of a sexism that is normalized—threats to equality are often gradual and by degrees—and so we can fail to recognize it and take it seriously.

Responsibilities

How we conceive of mansplaining and its harms has implications for the way in which it should be redressed. If mansplaining were solely an epistemic injustice, then the solution Fricker (2007, 19) poses—that an epistemic agent must train themselves to be a "responsible" hearer, in which they attribute credibility commensurate with the evidence that she is telling the truth—would be sufficient. Because mansplaining's harms go beyond the epistemology of testimony between speaker and hearer, with collective and relational harms that affect women's relative status and the social trust required for democracy to function, individual solutions should be supplemented with cultural and institutional ones.

Individual recommendations for women to push back against mansplaining (Hedges 2018) include verbal "hip checks"—as in ice hockey, less than a shove but more than a nudge, signaling a boundary and an encouragement to back up; humor—though studies show that funny men, but not funny women, are perceived as high status (Evans et al. 2019); the "outdoor voice"—though volubility works better for men than for women (Brescoll 2011); and redirection, which involves women helping each other to gain more air time and take credit for their own ideas—though this requires having more women in the room. Other recommendations include "leaning in" (Sandberg 2013)—though this has been criticized for accepting male norms (Ryan and Kirby 2018).

Cultural solutions speak to the possibility of consciousness-raising, so that people notice bias and repression in everyday life and develop ways to combat them. The term "mansplaining" itself is intended to do exactly this, raising people's awareness of these daily repressions that they commit against others and/or are subject to themselves. There have been humorous, and helpful, efforts to help mansplainers avoid mansplaining. For example, Goodwin (2018) provides a simple chart that suggests that men can simply ask themselves, did she ask for the explanation? If not, then they are mansplaining. Does she have more relevant experience? If so, then they are likely mansplaining. There is a pragmatic emphasis here: mansplaining is likely something men do, embedded as they are in a cultural context that encodes these status distinctions, but they can avoid it. Of course, this requires well-intentioned actors and as I have argued, mansplaining is also strategically employed by bad-faith actors. Allyship, in which men support women in workplaces where mansplaining is pervasive and with negative consequences for job satisfaction, burnout, and psychological distress (Smith 2017; Smith et al. 2022), runs into a similar challenge, also requiring well-intentioned actors.

Socialization can play a large role. Above, I spoke of the importance of descriptive representation, and its effects on political efficacy, and that merits a reminder here. For empirical evidence, I draw on Bos and colleagues (2022), who argue that "gendered political socialization" may require early childhood intervention. They suggest that textbook materials—both examples and illustrations—likely need updating to include women rather than exclusively or predominantly men; and that the goals of political leadership and politics might be shown to be about community and consensus. In these and other ways, politics may be seen as a less antagonistic space and a more communal and cooperative one, and therefore more likely to appeal to girls.

Finally, institutional techniques are needed. While the principles of deliberative democracy are against sexism and other forms of oppression, deliberation nevertheless occurs within sexist, racist, contexts (Sanders 1997). Inclusion of voices is, of course, key, but insufficient, and should be supplemented by a critical eye to power structures and associated accommodations. Elucidating the harms of mansplaining provides a justification for deliberation to be sensitive to cultural biases and disempowerments. And indeed, deliberative democracy practitioners are creative in coming up with techniques to avoid reproducing bias in deliberations, including requiring each person to repeat the point that another person has made before responding

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to it (see, as examples, Curato, Hammond, and Min 2019; and Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019).

Conclusion

This article had two aims. One, to build on existing understandings of "mansplaining" that help us to reveal it as a biased act. Men refute and restate women's claims, causing collective and relational harms that affect our democracies. Conceptual clarity helps us to better identify it—particularly important when strategically misused to deflect attention and engagement with political positions and issues. And two, to determine the specific harms that mansplaining poses for democracy. I argued that in addition to its epistemic consequences for democracy's outcomes, it also poses relational harms—to women's inclusion, equality, and recognition, undermining the social trust required for deliberation.

We may be unable to measure mansplaining in the way that we measure interruptions, lengths of speech and listening, and other speech patterns. But possible future research could, through qualitative research including interviews and perhaps text analysis, further analyze mansplaining and pay particular attention to the effects of, and consequences for, democracy. Given that I have posited mansplaining as posing relational harms to sociopolitical status, such empirical work should be driven by an intersectional analysis that will account for race, ethnicity, and relative age, as well as distinctions between sex, gender, and sexual preference. This could help to shed light on whether, and if so how, mansplaining produces more severe outcomes for young, progressive, women of color, for example. This would provide a fuller picture of its consequences for political voice and efficacy, as well as the reciprocal relations required for deliberative democracy to function.

When mansplaining occurs, whether privately or publicly, in the home, in the office, or in political conversation, a woman is told that her voice does not matter or does not matter as much as a man's. Her status as a speaker is undermined, even silenced, potentially dampening participation and efficacy, with consequences for deliberative democracy. No matter how subtle or covert, it is a coded form of discrimination with antidemocratic consequences.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Mark E. Warren for insightful comments on the paper, and the editors and three anonymous reviewers for this journal who provided such careful attention; their comments and suggestions improved the paper greatly. I also wish to thank audiences of the Nuffield Political Theory Workshop, Oxford; the York (UK) Political Theory Workshop; and the ECPR Political Theory Seminar for helpful feedback.

Notes

1 For this reason, I use gendered language throughout, though gender is not dichotomous and people likely experience mansplaining intersectionally (Crenshaw 1989), so that race, sex, class, and disability affect occurrences of mansplaining.

2 Miranda Fricker (2007, 1) identifies two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical. Hermeneutical injustice occurs "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences." It is the injustice of being unable to make intelligible one's social experience because the collective hermeneutical resources are lacking due to social inequality. Fricker provides the example of the term "sexual harassment," which helped women better explain their experience. Indeed, the term "mansplaining" is another such resource, helping women to identify and signal instances of verbal repression (Lutzky and Lawson 2019).

3 Manne claims that epistemic entitlement also underpins gaslighting and violent language that seeks to silence women. Gaslighting is a type of psychological abuse, a core feature of domestic or intimate partner violence. It makes someone seem or feel irrational or delusional in part by convincing victims that what they are experiencing is not real or important, and further blames them for their experience (Sweet 2022). I argue that mansplaining has collective and relational harms and consequences that differ from the individualized harm of epistemic entitlement.

4 With thanks to Cécile LaBorde and Mark Warren for their help with this distinction.

5 See, for example, standpoint theory as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins (1997).

6 The role of expertise in, and its relationship to, democracy and democratic theory is one of much debate. For some, expertise is treated as if in opposition to democracy, particularly in discussions going back to Plato about delegating authority to experts. For others, expertise is crucial for enlightened reasoning (see J. S. Mill, for example). I cannot do justice to the arguments around expertise and democracy but, for my purposes, I point out that expertise is not usually a vector of inclusion.

7 Context matters: the proportion of women in legislatures can affect outcomes, as can party discipline (Celis 2008). Further, not all women are feminists, and among those who are, there may not be unanimous agreement on a feminist agenda, complicating what counts as "women's issues" and who can speak for women (Alcoff 1991). My point is not that there is "a woman's voice," but that mansplaining can undermine and even silence women's voices.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001063 Published online by Cambridge University Press