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Sexual Epistemic Injustice

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Abstract

Can predictable impairments of epistemic performance constitute injustice in the absence of harassment, manipulation, or prejudicial credibility deflation? I use this question to examine a case drawn from ordinary intellectual exchange: in mixed-sex settings, some male speakers may be distracted by the perceived attractiveness of a female interlocutor, with consequences for how their arguments are received. I argue that, in the stipulated case, the man has not suffered an injustice and the woman has not wronged him. The philosophical puzzle is why that verdict is correct, given a tempting inferential pattern in recent work on epistemic injustice from patterned epistemic disadvantage, especially when identity-linked, to an injustice verdict. I argue that injustice ascriptions require epistemic harm, wrong-making features, and accountability. The resulting framework distinguishes epistemic misfortune and thin unfairness from genuine epistemic injustice and helps assess contemporary disputes about the scope of the concept.

Keywords: Epistemic injustice; epistemic harm; wronging; accountability; structural injustice; social epistemology; conceptual inflation

1. A paradigmatic case

Consider a familiar academic scene. A man and a woman are engaged in an intellectual debate in a seminar room, a departmental common area, or at a conference. In this imagined case, the man finds the woman physically attractive. Nothing else about the interaction is unusual: she does not flirt, signal sexual interest, or attempt to derail the conversation. She offers arguments, listens to replies, presses objections, and develops her points as one normally does in intellectual debate. Assume, for present purposes, the absence of harassment, objectifying speech, or strategic exploitation.

Yet, the man performs poorly, more poorly than one might expect from his intellectual standing. He loses the thread of the argument, answers a different question than the one asked, repeats points already addressed, and fails to anticipate obvious objections. Consequently, observers register him as confused or outclassed, which is in many contexts reputationally costly. He may be seen as less competent, less insightful, or as having less epistemic authority than he otherwise would. At the same time, the woman is perceived as the better interlocutor. While that perception may be sincere and warranted

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by the exchange as it unfolds, the man may nonetheless experience it as a kind of epistemic loss: he cannot present his view with the clarity he believes it deserves.

The immediate explanation is mundane, that the man is distracted by the woman's attractiveness. His attention is partially captured by the attractiveness of his interlocutor, making it harder for him to hold the thread of the exchange and respond as sharply as he otherwise would, and that distraction is not fully under his voluntary control. Importantly, the woman need not do anything wrong; she can be entirely ordinary, professional, and respectful. Her mere presence as an attractive interlocutor seems sufficient. A large empirical literature suggests that sexual or attractiveness-related cues can capture attention and interfere with concurrent cognitive tasks (Murnen and Stockton 1997; Hamann et al. 2004; Rupp and Wallen 2008; van Hooff et al. 2011; Tian et al. 2019).

Many readers will judge, instantly, that it would be absurd to conclude from these facts that the man has suffered an *injustice*. At most, they will say, this is an unfortunate feature of human psychology. The man may have a duty to manage his own attention and keep it on the argument, or he may simply be unlucky. I agree with this immediate verdict, that in the stipulated case, the man is not wronged, and the woman is not a wrongdoer. The philosophical interest of the case lies elsewhere. In particular, a permissive inferential tendency in recent epistemic injustice theorizing appears to invite the thought that a patterned epistemic disadvantage, once shown to track identity or social power, is sufficient for an injustice verdict. The sexual distraction case is instructive because it appears to fit that tendency while remaining, on reflection, a clear non-case. The task is therefore diagnostic, for we need to explain why the injustice verdict is blocked here and then extract from that explanation a constraint that can discipline broader disputes about the scope of epistemic injustice.

2. The rise of epistemic injustice and its inflationary risk

Epistemic injustice, as introduced by Fricker (2007), is a moral wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. Fricker's two central categories are testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to assign a deflated level of credibility to a speaker. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when a collective interpretive gap puts someone at an unfair disadvantage in making sense of their experiences.

Fricker's framework is compelling and powerful, and the subsequent literature has expanded it in numerous directions. Some expansions remain close to the original, identifying new mechanisms of credibility distortion or interpretive marginalization. Others widen the target to include broader discursive harms, such as silencing and illocutionary disablement (Langton 1993; Maitra 2004; Kukla 2014). Still others explore epistemic oppression and resistant epistemic agency (Dotson 2012; Pohlhaus 2012; Medina 2013). Proliferation is not, by itself, a problem. Conceptual progress can involve discovering new species within a genus. The worry begins when the standards for membership become too permissive. One sign of this permissivness creep is the application of the term "injustice" in cases where the only clear feature is epistemic disadvantage, with no clear wrong, duty, or rights violation.

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2.1. The permissiveness concern: examples

To make the worry concrete, consider three recent examples that illustrate how easy it is to move from disadvantage to injustice.

2.1.1. Inquisitive injustice

Mallory introduces "inquisitive injustice" as a form of discursive injustice involving control over the "question under discussion" in conversation (Mallory 2026). He explicitly frames the phenomenon as "a category of discursive injustice" rather than as mere conversational inconvenience (Mallory 2026). The basic idea is that social power influences who gets to set conversational agendas and which lines of inquiry are treated as live. This can plausibly impair epistemic agency and distribute epistemic authority unfairly. Mallory distils the core mechanism as concerning a speaker's ability "to make their questions the question under discussion in a conversation" (Mallory 2026).

In many cases, inquisitive injustice looks like a genuine wrong. And in many cases, it *is* a genuine wrong. However, it is no new *kind* of wrong. If the proposal aims at more than identifying a new site for familiar wrongs, it must isolate a wrong-making feature not already captured by intimidation, exclusion, abuse of authority, or discriminatory gatekeeping. In the absence of such a feature, the label functions as redescriptive emphasis rather than taxonomic discovery. Treating it instead as an example of a new kind of injustice invites at least two major problems. The first is a near-boundless differentiation based on the specific domain or context in which a wrong is committed. As an impulse, this serves no purpose whatsoever; a clear reason why the creation of a novel taxon is needed must be argued for. When the wrong is real, the new label changes neither anything about who the perpetrator is nor how the injustice is to be addressed. Second, the concept's elasticity invites extension to mundane conversational dynamics, including strategic topic changes that may be rude or self-serving but not obviously unjust, thereby overgenerating both injustice and perpetrators. In short, the explanatory gain is unclear, while the overgeneration risk is substantial.

2.1.2. Identification-based injustice

Henckel argues that prejudiced dismissal of certain first-personal self-identifications constitutes a distinctive form of epistemic injustice, "identification-based injustice" (Henckel 2025). Many of the paradigmatic cases he highlights plausibly involve serious epistemic harms to standing and authority. However, a methodological concern arises in the inference from these harms to the assignment of perpetration. In particular, if the phenomenon is said to occur whenever there is background "systematic prejudice or misrecognition," then the account risks treating an individual interlocutor as a wrongdoer even when it has not been shown that the interlocutor is prejudiced or that the interlocutor violates a determinate duty in the conversational or institutional context. The wronging condition is not satisfied merely by the fact that a topic is politically charged or that disagreement is painful; a hearer can be mistaken, insensitive, or stubborn without thereby committing an injustice, unless their response breaches an obligation of respect, non-discrimination, or equal standing that applies in that setting. Without a clear separation between denials that enact prejudice and errors or disagreements that do not violate any settled duty, the injustice verdict risks functioning as a stipulation rather than as an argued conclusion. The bottom line is that the step from harm to injustice must identify the wrong-making features and the locus of accountability.

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2.1.3. Literature review as symbolic violence

Tupas and Tarrayo argue that the literature review is an enactment of symbolic violence, a kind of injustice, and "epistemic theft," shaping the questions scholars can ask by imposing privileged configurations of knowledge (Tupas and Tarrayo 2025). They explicitly start from the claim that "Writing the literature review is not a neutral act" (Tupas and Tarrayo 2025). In the same abstract they add that "Literature review becomes violent in the Bourdieusian sense" and describe literature review as "an enactment of symbolic violence" (Tupas and Tarrayo 2025). These are striking claims. They are also illuminating illustrations of inflationary drift.

Of course, literature review practices can be exclusionary and parochial, even when there is no ill-intent, as well as strategically self-serving. *Status quo* gatekeeping is well documented (Brooks 2025), as are citation cartels (Fister and Perc 2016). Nonetheless, the leap from "literature review is not neutral" to "literature review is violence" is a large one. The latter seems to trade on rhetorical elevation, whereby a practice becomes condemnable by being redescribed in the vocabulary of harm and injustice. If that move becomes routine, the theory begins to look like a machine for moralizing ordinary academic life – one that is all too easily abused as well.

2.2. The argumentative template

Examples such as those I offered above are numerous. From them, a recurring inferential tendency can be reconstructed:

> **Template T:** Identify a patterned epistemic disadvantage. Show that it tracks social power or identity. Conclude that an injustice occurs, whether or not any agent wrongs anyone.

I do not claim that Template T is anyone's explicit definition of injustice. Rather, my target is a recurrent move, whereby epistemic harm that tracks identity is treated as sufficient for injustice unless additional constraints are supplied. The move is intellectually seductive because it can be deployed almost anywhere, hence the aforementioned fecundity of epistemic injustice. Many social patterns correlate with identity, and many of those correlations generate epistemic disadvantages. If these facts suffice for injustice, the extension of the term becomes extremely wide. My sexual distraction case is thus chosen because it forces the question whether epistemic disadvantage suffices for injustice in the absence of wronging, inviting the reader to notice that the man *is* disadvantaged and to ask whether he is thereby *wronged* by the woman's ordinary participation in inquiry.

2.3. Sexual epistemic injustice

With this backdrop painted, let us return to the proposed sexual epistemic injustice and to Template T:

1. **Patterned epistemic disadvantage:** some male speakers, in the presence of an attractive female interlocutor, are distracted and perform worse epistemically.
2. **Tracks social identity:** the disadvantage is linked to sex, sexuality, and a social economy of attractiveness. It is also plausibly intensified by gendered norms about who is expected to be composed, who bears the cost of being sexualized, and how mixed-sex interaction is policed.

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3. **No intention required:** the woman need not intend to distract. The disadvantage arises from a stable interaction between cognitive architecture and social context.

The proposed case of sexual epistemic injustice clearly passes the test. Yet, the conclusion is highly implausible. This is not so because the man cannot be disadvantaged – he can. Nor is it so because the disadvantage cannot matter – it can. Rather, the locus of the implausibility lies in the label "*injustice*," which seems ill-fitting. I suggest that the primary normative reaction should be one of acknowledging that the situation is awkward, unfortunate, and perhaps unfair, but not an injustice. If the theory insists that it *is* an injustice, then the theory has become a mechanism for turning misfortunes into injustices.

2.3.1. The wrong place to locate the wrong

One might try to rescue injustice talk by locating a wrong somewhere adjacent. Or, more cautiously, one might try to explain what would have to be added to the case before injustice talk became appropriate. Let us consider the different options presented.

2.3.1.1. Option 1: blaming the woman. This is not credible in the stipulated case. She is engaging normally in epistemic exchange. She is not obligated to be less attractive, to conceal her appearance, or to manage male attention. Treating her as a wrongdoer would be perverse, and it would reproduce precisely the kinds of norms that feminist theory has long rightly criticized.

2.3.1.2. Option 2: blaming the man. Perhaps he has a duty to regulate his attention. Insofar as this is possible, sometimes he indeed does. Still, even if we grant a general duty of attentional discipline, the case does not become an injustice done to him by someone else. Instead, at most, it becomes a failure to keep his attention on the argument.

2.3.1.3. Option 3: blaming "the structure". One might insist that the wrong lies in structural conditions that produce the disadvantage. But if the only structural facts in play are the ordinary psychological dynamics of attraction and attention, that move is too rash and permissive. If a sufficient condition for calling something an injustice becomes so lax, the notion is inflated so that any patterned disadvantage ends up being treated as an injustice.

3. A proposed constraint: accountability

If injustice is to remain a meaningful category, it must be connected to something more than predictable disadvantage. The added constraint I propose is an *accountability condition*. In essence, to call something an injustice is to imply that someone is accountable for it in the sense that some corrective response is owed by an agent, institution, or collective practice. More formally, the condition can be stated as follows.

> **Accountability condition:** A harm amounts to an injustice only if there exists an agent, institution, or collective practice such that (i) it is a suitable target of moral criticism or correction, and (ii) it can intelligibly be held responsible for sustaining the relevant harm.

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Note that the condition does not require malice. Nor does it require that a single individual be uniquely culpable. The demand is more modest, that injustice talk remains tethered to wrongs that have a locus of responsibility.

To be clear, this *is* a partly revisionary proposal about how the term "injustice" should be used, justified by its role in practical reasoning.

3.1. A structural injustice objection

The most influential challenge to the accountability condition comes from the literature on structural injustice, especially the work associated with Young (2011). Young argues that many injustices are produced by the normal, morally ordinary actions of many individuals and by background structures that no single individual controls. Responsibility in such contexts, Young claims, does not reduce to liability for wrongdoing (Young 2011). Subsequent discussions refined as well as disputed the specific details of the thesis, but the structuralist claim is clear in that injustice need not be traceable to individual wrongdoing (McKeown 2018, 2021).

This is a serious objection, and if it is right, the accountability condition looks too strict. Hence, I address the objection head-on.

Structural accounts are best read as complicating *who* is answerable for injustice in particular transactions, not as severing injustice from human agency. Structures and institutions are made, maintained, and revised through roles, rules, and enforcement practices. The wrong-making element enters the picture when those positioned to shape a practice can *reasonably* be expected to recognize its harmful effects and to correct them. Where harms are not yet identified, or where avoidance is not feasible under the informational constraints individuals face, the appropriate description is often misfortune or excusable error rather than culpable wrongdoing. Only once the harm is credibly identified, and reform *is* available, does continued maintenance without adequate justification become culpable. I do not thereby deny that there can be injustice before culpability is traceable. My claim is instead that injustice ascriptions still require some norm violation attributable to agents or institutions, even if the appropriate response is forward-looking rather than punitive. Where such norm violations are present, the injustice is no longer merely a patterned bad outcome, but an outcome sustained by failures of institutional design and governance for which office holders, rule makers, and other relevant agents can be held accountable. On this reading, the accountability condition accommodates structural injustice by treating persistent, informed non-reform as the point at which institutions and their stewards become apt targets of moral criticism and corrective demands.

So, the accountability condition comfortably accommodates structural injustice if the structure is wrongful in the sense of violating rights, duties, or fair terms of operation. What the condition rejects is the shift from perpetrators being difficult to pinpoint exactly in a specific instance to there being injustice merely because of a patterned, harmful outcome.

3.2. Injustice as patterned disadvantage

The structuralist point that injustice can be produced without malicious intent, and without a single uniquely responsible wrongdoer, is compatible with the idea that injustice still involves wrongdoing in the form of violated duties, rights, or wrongful institutional design. A different and more permissive move is common in adjacent

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literatures: treating *patterned disadvantage*, especially when correlated with social identity or power, as sufficient for injustice even when no breached obligation or accountable agency is identified. This is not so much a fully articulated theory as a recurring inference. It fits my sexual distraction case neatly: if men are predictably disadvantaged in some settings by attractiveness-linked attention capture, then there is a patterned unfairness linked to sex and sexuality, and on the permissive inference that suffices for injustice. The central claim of this paper is that this inference is mistaken. It renders the use of the label "injustice" revisionary in a way that undermines its discriminating value and its action-guiding force.

4. Contra injustice inflation

The central argumentative burden is to show that the shift from "wrong" to "patterned unfairness" is not a harmless terminological issue.

4.1. Normative grammar

In ordinary moral and political discourse, "unjust" is not merely a stronger form of "bad." It signals that the situation violates a requirement. The natural follow-up question is *who must do what*. If the answer is left wanting, reduced to the mere desire that things were otherwise, injustice talk is doing rhetorical work without supplying normative structure.

There are three distinctions worth emphasizing. First, not every epistemic harm is an epistemic wrong: a person may be tired, unlucky, distracted, or badly placed without anyone violating a norm owed to them. Second, not every epistemic wrong is a distinct kind of epistemic injustice: familiar wrongs can occur in epistemic settings without thereby generating a new taxon. Third, not every injustice is individuated by the mechanism through which it occurs. Concepts of harm, wrong, justice, and injustice need to discriminate among these possibilities if they are to remain action-guiding.

Defenders of the thin view sometimes respond that injustice talk can be expressive rather than action-guiding. It can mark moral salience even when obligations are diffuse. I do not deny that this aim is worthwhile. However, gravity and seriousness can be communicated without in the process inflating the concept of injustice and thus depriving it in the manner discussed. If injustice talk ceases to track obligations at least loosely, it becomes indistinguishable from an expression of general dissatisfaction. There is no progress to be found in that. More importantly, injustice talk is routinely used to justify demands for reform, sanctions, exclusion, and institutional redesign. If the label can be applied without identifying any violated requirement and any intelligible target of correction, then these concrete actions are licensed without constraint. That is a serious practical consequence that shows that the issue is not one of mere semantics but of a normative overreach masked by the moral authority of the label.

4.2. Injustice creep

Haslam (2016) describes "concept creep" as the tendency for harm-related concepts to expand in scope, often reflecting increasing sensitivity to suffering and injustice. The epistemic injustice literature appears vulnerable to a parallel dynamic of "injustice creep," whereby the term "injustice" expands to cover more phenomena because the moral vocabulary is available, rhetorically potent, and culturally rewarded.

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The sexual distraction case is a useful test because it acts as an intuition pump suggesting that something has gone wrong with the vocabulary, rather than that a new injustice has been discovered. Pointedly, it shows that the expansion is not constrained by the presence of wrongdoing but only by the ability to tell a story of patterned disadvantage.

4.3. A dilemma for the thin view

Suppose the thin view is correct and that injustice is patterned unfairness linked to identity and power. Then either:

1. The concept of injustice becomes so broad that it covers countless mundane asymmetries (differences in temperament, charisma, humor, height, voice timbre, facial appearance, and confidence), many of which predictably affect epistemic and social outcomes; or
2. The proponent introduces *ad hoc* restrictions to exclude the mundane cases.

Neither horn seems acceptable. The first yields trivialization; the second yields instability, with the restrictions becoming liable to sociological fashion, political taste, or rhetorical convenience rather than being fixed by principled conceptual criteria. In contrast, the accountability criterion provides a principled grounding. It rejects labeling the proposed sexual distraction case as stipulated as an instance of injustice because there is no breached duty or violated right. It also rejects many other would-be injustices that are better described as disadvantages, frictions, or misfortunes.

4.4. The undercounting concern

The objection may attempt to challenge the proposed view in a symmetrical manner by claiming that the accountability criterion errs in the opposite direction, by *undercounting* genuine injustices. Some patterned harms feel like injustices even when it is hard to assign wrongdoing.

First, the accountability criterion is compatible with structural injustice for the reasons given in Section 3.1: structural cases typically involve wrongful rules, incentives, or enforcement practices, and accountability can be located at the level of institutional design and governance, especially once harms are credibly identified and reform is feasible. The criterion therefore does not "undercount" simply by refusing to treat diffuse causation as exculpatory.

Moreover, it is not a defect if the label "injustice" is demanding. Calling something injustice is a serious claim. For the label to maintain the rhetorical and motivational power we expect from it, it *needs to be* demanding. Moral vocabulary should discriminate. If a concept does not exclude anything, it is not performing a meaningful conceptual function. Rejecting the label in a particular instance does not signal moral indifference: it is possible to criticize or to seek to correct unfair patterns without calling them injustices. Conceptual rigor ensures that the diagnostics are action-guiding and specific.

4.5. A constrained framework

By now I hope that I have convinced at least some readers of my thesis. Still, one may be left feeling somewhat uncertain as to where this leaves us: if we abandon the

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argumentative line captured by Template T, what does that mean for the concept of epistemic injustice? I have already intimated the key requirements; now I state them explicitly. I propose that epistemic injustice claims should satisfy three specific conditions:

1. **Epistemic harm condition:** the subject is harmed in their capacity as a knower or epistemic agent (credibility, interpretive resources, participation in inquiry).
2. **Wronging condition:** the harm is produced by a wrong, where wrongness is operationalized as duties, rights, or wrongful institutional rules.
3. **Accountability condition:** there is a suitable target of accountability (an agent, institution, or collective practice) such that some corrective response is owed.

The accountability condition operationalizes the wronging condition: if no duty, right, or wrongful rule is in view, there is nothing to be accountable for. The wronging condition, in turn, is neutral between rights-based and other moral wrongs; it requires only that the harm arises from a violation of a norm of a kind that can ground accountability.

Two brief sanity checks help show that the framework is not engineered to exclude the sexual distraction case. First, standard cases of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice satisfy all three conditions: they involve epistemic harms, they involve wrongs (prejudicial credibility deflation or unfair exclusion from shared interpretive resources), and they have intelligible loci of accountability in hearers, institutions, and practices. Second, paradigmatic silencing cases likewise satisfy the conditions when a speaker's illocutionary acts are blocked by status norms or hostile uptake patterns: the harm is epistemic, the wrong is exclusionary treatment, and accountability attaches to agents or rule-governed practices.

This framework preserves Fricker's core insight that there can be wrongs that are distinctively epistemic. It also preserves the structuralist point that wrongs need not be intentional or directly individually blameworthy. On the other hand, it rejects the over-permissive inference from patterned epistemic disadvantage to injustice.

4.6. Taxonomic proliferation and the burden of a new injustice

The foregoing discussion has argued that a variety of newly proposed "injustices" are better understood as epistemic harms accompanied by thin unfairness, but not as injustices in the demanding sense. A further point worth emphasizing is that even if a pattern meets the three conditions I introduced and has distinctive features, this still does not by itself justify the creation of a new sub-taxon. A proposed subtype earns its keep only if it does distinctive explanatory and normative work. Minimally, it should change the diagnosis of what is happening, alter the distribution of accountability, or substantially reshape the remedies and reforms that are appropriate. Otherwise, the proliferation of labels becomes explanatorily impotent.

The sexual distraction case illustrates the point. Its broad description is intentionally permissive, foregrounding a patterned epistemic disadvantage while stipulating the absence of familiar wrongs such as harassment, objectifying conduct, or strategic manipulation. In response, one can revise the proposal so that it does *not* overgenerate by adding wrong-making and accountability conditions: for example, by introducing an agent who exploits the distraction, or a practice that culpably maintains harmful rules once harms are known and reform is feasible. However, once those conditions are

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added, the resulting cases are no longer plausibly a novel kind of injustice, collapsing into familiar categories of wrongs with epistemic effects.

If the distraction is exploited intentionally – for example, if an interlocutor weaponizes sexuality or attractiveness to derail inquiry, manipulate uptake, or secure epistemic authority – the wrong is straightforwardly a form of intentional interference or manipulation. If the setting involves harassment, coercion, or objectifying speech that predictably disables epistemic participation, then we are dealing with familiar wrongs, often already well captured by work on silencing, testimonial injustice, and gendered uptake norms. If the relevant wrong is located in an institution or practice, the crucial transition is temporal and epistemic: harms can be produced without culpability when they are not yet credibly identified or when reform is not feasible under the constraints agents face. But once harms are credibly identified and avoidable reforms are available, continued maintenance without adequate justification becomes culpable non-reform. At that point, accountability attaches to office holders, rule makers, and institutional stewards in the ordinary way.

The takeaway is not that sexual epistemic injustice reveals an additional subtype of epistemic injustice. It reveals something else: an overly permissive route from patterned disadvantage to injustice. When we tighten the case enough to make "injustice" apt, we are no longer looking at a novel category; when we keep the case broad, the label "injustice" is unwarranted.

5. The examples, a slight return

The aim of this paper is not to contest directly any specific injustice proposals. I return to the three illustrative examples from Section 2.1 in order to show that the three-condition test yields discriminating verdicts when applied in concrete cases. I then expose my sexual distraction proposal to the same test.

5.1. Inquisitive injustice

Mallory (2026)'s central descriptive claim is plausible: social power shapes what becomes discussable, which questions are treated as relevant, and who is permitted to steer inquiry. In that, the proposal easily satisfies the epistemic harm condition in many settings. Being blocked from raising questions can impair one as an inquirer and can distort epistemic authority.

On the other hand, the wronging and accountability conditions present greater challenges. The former is satisfied when agenda control breaches a duty of epistemic inclusion or procedural fairness, for example, when a chair, editor, supervisor, or senior participant uses role power to foreclose inquiry in a way that the practice itself prohibits, or when some speakers are treated as illegitimate question-askers because of their social position. In those cases the phenomenon is morally familiar, one that comprises intimidation, exclusion, abuse of authority, or discriminatory gatekeeping, merely with an *epistemic target*.

The wronging condition is not satisfied merely by the fact that conversations are strategic, uneven, or status-sensitive. Topic shifts, impatience, attempts to avoid embarrassment, and ordinary jostling for conversational control can be objectionable without constituting an injustice. If inquisitive injustice is framed so broadly that such mundane cases are subsumed under its umbrella, then the label overgenerates perpetrators. If it is framed narrowly enough to avoid that result, it ends up redescribing a preexisting wrong rather than identifying a new kind.

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5.2. Identification-based injustice

Henckel (2025)'s cases often satisfy the epistemic harm condition in a strong form. Dismissal of first-personal self-identification can undermine a speaker's standing as an authoritative self-ascriber. The question is which responses count as wrongings and which agents are thereby perpetrators.

A useful pressure point comes directly from Henckel's own formulation. By allowing the phenomenon to occur wherever there is "systematic prejudice or misrecognition," the account risks treating an interlocutor as a wrongdoer even when that interlocutor is not prejudiced and does not violate any determinate duty. This is important because the wronging condition is not met merely by the background fact that a topic is politically charged, or that a category is contested. A hearer can be mistaken, insensitive, or even stubborn without thereby committing an injustice, unless the response breaches an obligation of respect, non-discrimination, or equal standing that applies in that context.

I do not thereby dismiss the notion in its entirety. There are many contexts in which the wronging condition is straightforwardly met; for example, prejudicial dismissal in institutional settings can violate duties that are clear and enforceable. My caution is rooted in a methodological point. One must separate denial that expresses prejudice or enacts discriminatory standing norms from disagreement over linguistic or social classification where the obligations are not yet specified. Without that separation, the injustice verdict becomes a stipulation.

5.3. Literature review as symbolic violence

Tupas and Tarrayo (2025) draw attention to the ways literature review can reproduce prestige hierarchies and constrain what questions can be asked. There are indeed cases where the epistemic harm condition is met. Citation cartels, exclusionary "canon" policing, and retaliatory reviewing can suppress inquiry and distort who is treated as a serious contributor (Fister and Perc 2016; Brooks 2025).

For the wronging condition to be met, one must identify a violated obligation, for example, duties of fair engagement with relevant work, non-discrimination in editorial processes, or professional norms against coordinated suppression. For the accountability condition to be met, one must identify where and by whom correction is needed, such as journals' policies and editorial boards, departments' hiring and promotion criteria and administrative staff, reviewing practices and reviewers, and enforcement mechanisms and those entrusted with administering them. If the thesis is instead that literature review is *inherently* violent, and thus unjust, simply by virtue of its participation in social hierarchy, then the moral predicate outruns the normative structure. The result is condemnation without a clear wrong or duty-bearer.

5.4. Sexual epistemic injustice

My formulation of sexual epistemic injustice clearly satisfies the epistemic harm condition in the stipulated case. As in the previous three cases, the more difficult question is whether it satisfies the wronging and accountability conditions. I maintain that it typically does not. The woman's participation is not wrongful in any intelligible way. The man's distraction may be unfortunate, perhaps self-undermining, but to claim that it is a wrong against him appears implausible. The broader social environment may

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be lamentable in various respects, but it is not clear that anyone violates a duty: it would be rather far-fetched to claim a duty to protect men from the cognitive costs of their own arousal; depending on means, declaring the existence of such a duty would plausibly violate duties against others, such as the woman. Thus, in conclusion, on the constrained framework proposed, the sexual distraction case, as stipulated, is an instance of epistemic misfortune rather than an injustice.

6. Conclusion

I introduced the sexual distraction case as a candidate epistemic injustice. It is, in the stipulated form, not in fact a form of injustice, which is precisely why it is interesting and instructive. The case clarifies why epistemic harm and patterned disadvantage are not, by themselves, sufficient for injustice. It shows how a common template in contemporary epistemic injustice theory can generate verdicts that even sympathetic readers should reject. If we reject those verdicts, the rejection should not rest on taste or intuitive embarrassment but should rather identify the permissive step in the template and supply a principled constraint. The accountability condition I proposed offers such a constraint. The condition preserves the critical power of epistemic injustice theory while resisting a slide toward injustice talk as a synonym for patterned displeasure.

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