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Doing Knowing Ethically – where social work values meet critical realism.

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Abstract

This article focuses on the injustices experienced by already marginalised groups when they are excluded from participation in society, specifically within the realms of knowledge production and transfer. In this sense they are wronged as 'knowers' and experience epistemic injustice, either as a consequence of perceived credibility deficits or due to a lack of understanding of their situation. As a result, their marginalisation and exclusion grows. This article argues that a values orientation of acceptance, awareness and virtue, combined with an analytical framework provided by critical realism, can better equip social work practitioners and policy makers in identifying and understanding sites of epistemic injustice.

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Introduction

The article starts with an outline of an ethical orientation premised on acceptance and awareness that I propose could form the foundation for a more ethical way of approaching knowing, something I term 'doing knowing ethically'. The discussion then turns to two key forms of epistemic injustice as outlined by Fricker (2007, 2013) and advanced by others such as Anderson (2012) Doan (2017) and Mason (2011): testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Within this discussion two key issues emerge, the traceability of epistemic injustice to prejudice and the ability to identify the relationship between the individual and collective – in terms of understanding the causal and sustaining mechanisms of the injustice. I attempt to

unpick both of these issues and, as the paper progresses, move to show how an analytical framework based on ideas from critical realism, primarily drawn from the work of Houston (2010), might not just unlock the issues identified, but may also offer practitioners and policy makers a practical analytical tool, which can be used to better identify sites of epistemic injustice. Critical realism is viewed as analytically helpful because it is able to provide an interpretive framework that can accommodate the stratified nature of the social world, something essential to tackling oppression given that its effects stem from individual differences and actions, together with systemic issues like concentrations of power and resource (see Clifford, 2016).

Over recent years there have been various attempts to apply critical realist ideas to social work research (for example Blom and Morén, 2011; Houston, 2010; Morén and Blom, 2003) and to qualitative research more generally (see Maxwell, 2012). With an emphasis on seeking to understand why certain interventions may work in one context and not others, together with a focus on social change, the appeal to social work is clear. Systemic understanding has long been an important aspiration for social work and gaining an insight into the interconnectedness, relationships and dynamic interaction of phenomena is vital if the effects of interventions are to be understood as best they might (see Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1990). So, if we are to tackle issues of injustice, an essential first step is to strive to understand them – as Houston asserts: 'it is only by understanding the deep causes of oppression that we can develop ways of dismantling it' (2010, p. 76). For advocates of realistic evaluation understanding demands analytical depth, something which starts with penetrating beneath the surface of what is observable in terms of the inputs and outputs of intervention programmes (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This is because, for critical realists, a real world is seen to exist, including in the form of real social structures that are independent

of beliefs (realist ontology), yet our knowledge of this world is accepted as being shaped and understood via our own constructions that are created as we interact with it (constructivist epistemology) (for example see Houston, 2010; Maxwell, 2012).

A starting point for what I am trying to convey, in the sense of setting out a holistic approach to countering epistemic injustice - one that draws on an ethically orientated analytical framework, which facilitates a critical analysis of individual and group agency within stratified social systems - can be found in a relatively simple adaptation of Pawson and Tilley's observation that 'interventions are always embedded in a range of attitudinal, individual, institutional, and societal processes, and thus programme outcomes are generated by a range of macro and micro social forces' (1997, p. 216). With the substitution of a few words, it is possible to see more easily the beginnings of what might be possible: '*social injustice* is always embedded in a range of attitudinal, individual, institutional, and societal processes, and thus *epistemic injustice* is generated by a range of macro and micro social forces'. Given the level of analysis needed to unpick these various processes, it is helpful to remove the somewhat static property that accompanies the term 'knowledge', and this is where ideas about knowledge as something you do – 'knowing' (see Engebretsen, Vøllestad, Wahl, Robinson and Heggen, 2015) – become not just interesting, but potentially helpful in terms possessing utility for undertaking such a task. This more active orientation lends itself more readily to being able to accommodate the dynamic nature of the subject and I think it better enables an analysis of some of the less tangible forces, particularly power, that influence knowing. Thus, it is an interpretation adopted throughout this article.

Virtues, values and ethics (work)

The relationship between power and knowing is important for social work when considering how knowledge acts to shape the lives of individuals and communities, lives that often feature disadvantage, oppression and exclusion - contexts that are no stranger to social work. This point is particularly pertinent when thinking about who is and who is not included in policy and decision-making processes or, more pointedly, whose voices are heard and whose are not. Knowledge clearly plays a significant role in social (in)justice and if we are to consider all individuals, at some level, as 'knowers' of some kind, then part of the injustice experienced, either by a disadvantage or an intersectionality of disadvantage (Cabinet Office, 2017), is epistemic. Epistemic injustice occurs when individuals are wronged in their capacity as knowers (Fricker, 2007). As a consequence they experience exclusion, their voices go unheard and they are unable to affect the policy process or the interventions upon which their lives more heavily depend (Doan 2017). It is unfortunate that it is often not until a tragedy occurs that people start to listen and the voices of marginalised groups begin to be sought, as the enquiry investigating the horrific fire at Grenfell Tower, London, shows only too well: 'If it be subsequently shown to be true that deregulation had an impact and contributed to the Grenfell Fire then everyone can understand that, it adds to the outrage, of the voiceless, their frustration and its foreseeability' (The Grenfell Tower Enquiry, 2018, p. 38): a statement made, in part, as a response to the alleged disregard shown to the residents' concerns about safety in the tower block, prior to the outbreak of the fire.

While injustices against the voiceless may sometimes feel impossible to overcome, particularly when working with individuals who are struggling simply to survival – people on the breadline who are increasingly forced to make painful choices between basic needs like

food and warmth (for example Loopstra and Lalor, 2017) - pursuing an active approach to knowledge permits a greater consideration of transformability and the role of agency within this, both individual and collective. Although social workers may find it hard to realise positive social change, being seated - as social work is - between the lives of those less advantaged and the lives of those who have more (see Warner, 2015), social workers have access to a broad spectrum of different lives and can play a pivotal role in enabling and influencing social relations to be more socially just. If social work practice is to be effective and true to the profession's core values of enhanced social justice and greater emancipation, it requires a commitment and active engagement on behalf of workers in respect of 'seeing ethically salient aspects of situations, developing themselves as good practitioners, working out the right course of action and justifying who they are and what they have done' (Banks, 2016, p. 36).

For Banks, practice like this is 'ethics work' and the active processes it entails includes those of 'noticing, attending, thinking, interacting and performing' (2016, p. 36). To achieve social justice this must be the starting point for practice. It is therefore the practitioner's ethical orientation towards the people with whom they are working and the systems that surround them that can enable their increased representation and participation. In terms of knowing, the ethical catalyst enabling practitioners to notice, think and act in a way commensurate with the core values of social work, is that of acceptance. This is not to be read as a passive, inevitable, acceptance, but one which is embracing, outward looking and inclusive, one which celebrates difference and is open to alternative possibility. Without such acceptance it is hard to see how entrenched ways of being or knowing can be transformed (see Dore, 2018). With it comes tolerance and an ability to embrace the unsettledness that accompanies a more open, less imposing and uncertain way of being. As Rossiter (2011) suggests, in

abandoning quests for totally of knowledge (of the individual) ethics is put before knowing – in the sense that social workers refrain from invasive or oppressive practice and respect the fact that they cannot fully know the individual before them. This is a crucial point and one central to this article.

As envisaged by Banks (2016), part of ethics work involves 'framing work', where those attempting to make sense of situations within an ethical frame do so attendant to matters of harm, benefit, rights and responsibilities. Alert to context and omission, it is described as a process that involves moral perception and critical reflexivity – the latter involving 'seeing the bigger picture of social inequality of which a particular incident is part and recognising one's own role both in framing the picture and featuring in it' (p.40). These processes are not uncommon to social work and once more highlight that an active approach is required of practitioners, in order for them to practice ethically and work towards positive social change. As a starting point then, for knowing to become an ethical activity, we have acceptance and add to it awareness. An awareness that enables practitioners to consider policy positions as underlying structures and beliefs (see Banks, 2016) and, accepting that critical theory entails ideology critique, one that illuminates an understanding of maintained subjugated positions and how people in such positions are excluded from equal participation in society (see Brookfield, 2009).

Wronged as a 'knower'

With a value orientated position in place, what then is the challenge to be overcome? If the aim is to enhance knowing as an ethical activity, the implication is that it is not or it may not be in certain situations. Fricker identifies this as epistemic injustice - where someone is

wronged, in one of two ways, in their capacity as a knower: either they experience testimonial injustice 'in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge' or they experience hermeneutical injustice 'in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding' (2007, p. 7). She states that both forms stem from prejudice and, in making this a little more explicit in subsequent work, she terms both as sub-branches of 'discriminatory epistemic injustice' (2013, p. 1318). In the case of testimonial injustice the speaker receives a deflated level of credibility from the hearer owing to a prejudice in the hearer's judgement (2007, 2013). Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, occurs at an earlier stage in communication and happens when 'a subject who is already hermeneutically marginalized (that is, they belong to a group which does not have access to equal participation in the generation of social meanings) is thereby put at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of a significant area of their social experience' (2013, p. 1319).

The exclusion in effect here has potentially wide-ranging consequences, for individuals and groups alike. It can be seen to influence both participation and representation, undermining and jeopardising the ability to play an equal, or at least an active, role in society. Where there is injustice, there exists an imbalance of power and in the case of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker (2007) posits that imbalances in social power deprive those, less powerful, of the hermeneutical resources with which to understand some of their social experiences - primarily, as their marginalisation has led to diminished collective understanding. Fricker draws on the cases of sexual harassment (2007) and provocation in terms of long-standing domestic abuse (2013) to help illustrate what this form of epistemic injustice may look like and states that this type of injustice may occur systematically, resulting in persistent and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalisation, or incidentally, where hermeneutical

marginalisation is experienced very briefly and/or in relation to a very specific experience (2007). Fricker also contends that identity power; a type of social power; shows itself in the use of social stereotypes, utilised in a hearer's assessment of a speaker's testimony, and that if these stereotypes are prejudicial, testimonial injustice ensues.

An example of an epistemic injustice orientated analysis of social exclusion is offered by Doan, who, in analysing the actions of State Officials and the use of Emergency Management procedures in relation to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, introduces us to the term 'epistemic redlining' - 'the practice of denying conferrals of credibility to residents of specific municipalities, generally because those municipalities are deemed to be in a state of ''financial emergency'' (2017, p.183). This practice, Doan argues, disproportionately affects African-Americans, playing out in the imposition of State edicts on local populations, who become excluded from decision making and democratic participation. Within his work, Doan notes that it is whose knowledge matters that lies at the heart of the crisis being experienced by the Flint residents, with Emergency Management inflicting epistemic violence on entire populations. Such acts work not only to exclude but also to create limited versions of representation, where those who experience epistemic violence are cast in a distorted light, at risk of being unethically pushed into ill-fitting schemas (see Rossiter, 2011).

What is interesting in Doan's analysis is his conclusion that epistemic redlining 'cannot be traced to prejudice' (2017, p. 188), yet its effects seemingly affect those more disadvantaged. It should be noted that earlier in his work he uses move equivocal language, asserting that 'it is a form of credibility discounting *that cannot easily be traced* to the prejudices of individual officials – its sustaining causes are structural rather than psychological in character' (p. 186,

emphasis added). For Fricker a type of epistemic injustice, with which Doan's epistemic redlining has strong similarities - where certain social groups may not be asked for information or contribution - is that of '*pre-emptive* testimonial injustice' (2007, p. 130 emphasis original): this, according to Fricker, is a consequence of identity prejudice and, although she does not tie this to a structural form of injustice, she does consider, through the lens of social power, how pre-emptive epistemic injustice might function as a mechanism of silencing. Combine this with her comments that social power involves a 'capacity to control others' actions' and that it may operate purely structurally or be 'executed (actively or passively) by particular social agents' (2007, p. 13) and it is, I would suggest, possible to see the operation of prejudice at a structural level, something evermore apparent when thinking about cases of institutional racism, as identified, for example, by The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson, 1999) - a case Fricker (2013) considers herself, specifically with regard to testimonial injustice as perpetrated by the Police. Before moving on, it is possible to see that this interpretation is further strengthened when considering the need to ensure that individuals, from any social group, are able to have their voices heard as fully as is possible - part of which starts with the need for organisations and institutions to be socially inclusive (Fricker, 2013), the increased inclusivity and representation potentially curtailing the prejudice that can emerge in closed groups. This is part of what Fricker (2013) sees as a structural response to epistemic injustice, a theme which Anderson (2012) seeks to develop by similarly advocating that greater integration between different social groups should be part of structural solutions (I shall return to this a little later).

This issue of whether there are forms of testimonial injustice that are structural as well as individual, or more accurately traceable to the transactions of individuals, is an important point to resolve, in so far as being concerned with setting out the nature and form of

epistemic injustice. Not to do so would undermine the aim of the work at hand: to illustrate how it may be possible for social work to contribute to ways of doing knowing ethically, thus, we must return to Doan's analysis. Within it he considers Anderson's thoughts that testimonial injustice, or testimonial exclusion as she terms it in this regard, 'becomes structural when institutions are set up to exclude people without anyone having to decide to do so' (2012, p166). Anderson illustrates this with an example in which current practice is executed on the basis of historically outdated information. She notes that the current actors are not aware the information is out of date and thus comments that 'no one need be at moral fault' (2012, p166). Yet, somewhat contradictorily, her example links the historically outdated information to the prejudices of others, now retired. Furthermore, while the author of this information may be long gone, there has, quite clearly, been an act of omission on the part of current actors, potentially traceable to a prejudice of one kind or another: they have not exercised due diligence towards the information that guides their practice, meaning it goes unchallenged and unquestioned.

On this point of agency, Doan arrives at the conclusion that '*deliberately constructed* forms of structural epistemic exclusion ought to be counted as instances of epistemic injustice' (2017, p. 186, emphasis original) - the agency of individuals, seen in products of individual and collective decision making, acknowledged via acts of commission. Thus, to understand cases of structural testimonial injustice it is necessary to explore acts of commission (what individuals do) and omission (what individuals do not do) and to try to understand how they come to be. In essence, one needs to go beneath the surface and try to understand the influences that cause and sustain the situation observed. Without doing this, one is left with a perceptive absence, which obscures the layered nature of injustice. This includes the compounding impact of hermeneutical injustice which renders some groups mute - their

exclusion reinforces their exclusion and removes them from societal participation, the structural social power so dispersed it lacks a subject (Fricker, 2007) making it hard to quantify and explicitly pinpoint. As Hoggett, Wilkinson and Beedell (2013) found, resentment and grievance were more likely to be directed towards those in closest proximity to the individual, rather than those more powerful, but less visible, whose own privileges came at the expense of others' disadvantage – hence efforts to improve understanding, like much else in social work, call for critical analysis and a forensic unpicking of what is initially seen.

Before getting to how that might be achieved, it is necessary to probe the point made by Anderson (2012) which questions - as does Doan (2017) - the condition, asserted by Fricker, that instances of epistemic injustice have prejudice at their root cause. For Anderson, the key issue in relation to this is why even unintended epistemic errors cannot be considered as harmful to the speaker. This would seem to be a fair question and, again, I believe it is related to the knotty issue of identifiability and the stratified nature of social power - the heart of the problem being the relationship between individual and structural causes of the injustice. At times, social power exerts an invisible influence on social attitudes and behaviours - our social interactions owning much to the opaque power of privilege and prejudice that is deeply embedded in social systems: the world affects us, we affect the world. Often this happens without explicit recognition and, before you know it, in a few years' time a situation has come to pass that seemingly lacks coherent explanation. This is where I also think Doan struggles, in terms of his ability to articulate the connection between the individual and the structural, in terms of traceability to prejudice. While he states that individual prejudices and structural conditions will influence each other, commenting that 'the state legislature has codified a patently false story concerning municipal fiscal distress – a story that originates in,

and also takes advantage of, the sheer ubiquity of anti-black racism and hatred for the poor' (2017, p. 187), he adds – in relation to the structural manifestations of this particular form of epistemic exclusion – that they are not 'obviously or straightforwardly the products of the judgements of any particular individual or group' (p. 187) . For me, what is visible once more, in addition to acts of commission, are acts of omission (the prevailing situation has gone unchallenged) and I see these as being traceable to a prejudice of one kind or another, in contrast to Doan's less certain view. It is this difficulty, to be able to identify and better understand sites of epistemic injustice, which is central to the aims of this article – and its intent to provide an analytical framework to help enable this.

In recognising the interplay between the individual and the structural, the second point that Anderson (2012) raises, in relation to the issue of traceability to prejudice, is to propose remedial steps that embody a structural dimension. Something that, as we've seen, Fricker attends to in later work. What Anderson does along the way to proposing structural responses, is to offer some thoughts as to what may cause and sustain structural injustices: the issue of access to education for example, and how its denial results in further exclusion from participation. Some parallels may be seen here with the compounding nature of hermeneutical injustice discussed earlier, yet Anderson's contribution is noteworthy for drawing attention to the harm of segregation and the possible merits of group integration, something which she positions, perhaps a little more clearly, as a structural remedy, than Fricker. Sticking with the example of integrated education, she contends: 'shared inquiry also tends to produce a shared reality, which can help overcome hermeneutical injustice and its attendant testimonial injustices' (2012, p. 171). Indeed, at time of rising inequality (World Economic Forum, 2015) the need for effective responses to reduce the gap between the haves and the have nots, in both an educational and financial sense, has arguably never been

stronger. Before I move onto considering what the stepped processes of remedial action might look like, primarily at an individual level, it is important to recognise what has additionally been considered as part of the responses to epistemic injustice put forward by Fricker and Anderson - there is something present that is not only common to social work, but something which is an essential part of good social work practice: reflexivity and self-awareness.

In Fricker's (2007) initial conceptions an emphasis was placed on individual, virtue based, responses: testimonial justice and hermeneutical justice. For the former, the hearer is alert to and corrects their credibility judgement and, for the latter, also entailing reflexive awareness, the hearer is conscious of how the 'relation between his social identity and that of the speaker is impacting on the intelligibility to him of what she is saying and how she is saying it' (Fricker, 2007, p. 196). The merits of reflective practice in social work are widely recognised (for example see Munro, 2011; Ruch, 2002) and while part of this may entail reflecting on unsettling experiences, as Anderson (2012) considers, if a self-aware reflective perspective is present at the outset unsettledness (in relation to what is thought to be known) may be provoked at an earlier moment, facilitated by workers questioning themselves and others. If so, this would enable practitioners to proactively challenge assumptions, prior to their contact with individuals, some of whom may have previously elicited a prejudicial response of one kind or another – unconscious or otherwise. As Anderson helpfully observes, in questioning the seemingly assumptive nature of Fricker's faith in the individual to challenge their own prejudices, particularly those hidden within unconscious cognitive biases, structural remedies may well be required to help enable individual virtue. In this sense, forums such as supervision, when supported and championed by organisations, can be seen as vital spaces with the potential to provoke curiosity as a virtue and enable workers to be alert to and

address any biases they may have. Cemented by acceptance and awareness, it is conceivable then that epistemic virtue can be realised at an earlier stage than has been imagined.

Critical realism, a valuable resource

While the ethical orientation (that of individual and structural virtue, combined with the foundational values of acceptance and awareness, as earlier described) is an essential starting point and one aligned to the realisation of justice and positive social change, social workers do not just draw on values and ethical perspectives; effective practice is both ethically grounded *and* tied to critical engagement with a range of knowledge sources. In terms of intervening, as it were, in respect of epistemic injustice, practitioners need to be able to detect and identify when acts of injustice have occurred or are at work. As such, they, and policy makers, need to be equipped with an analytical tool capable of supporting a structural exploration, one which incorporates Brookfield's conception of critical theory and critical reflection - namely that it must have a concern with 'uncovering, and challenging, the power dynamics that frame practice and uncovering and challenging hegemonic assumptions (those assumptions we embrace as being in our best interests when in fact they are working against us)' (2009, p. 293). With its emancipatory bent and intent to promote social change (see Houston, 2010), critical realism appears to have something useful to offer in this regard.

Critical realism, whilst not a perspective I fully subscribe to, given my preference for a constructivist approach (see Dore, 2018), can, as I have argued elsewhere (Dore, 2006), offer insight that is more ontologically astute than some of the harder, positivist orientated, incarnations that feature in discussions about knowledge and use of evidence in social work. The utility that critical realism offers, lies in the quest for understanding, together with it

pragmatically combining realist ontology with constructive epistemology. More pointedly, critical realism's philosophical interest in how things like actors' choices, intentions and motivations interact with the parameters of social structures (Houston, 2010) is likely to be able to offer at least some insight into how agency operates within social systems. It is envisaged that this insight could then help identify sites of epistemic injustice and the place of prejudice within them.

We are moving towards what it is that critical realism can offer in the quest for ethical knowing – that is, a tool to help strengthen ethical practice. For both types of injustice, testimonial and hermeneutic, the significance is clear: 'When we systematically exclude people of a particular social identity – such as women, people of color [sic], disabled people, and many intersectional identities – we enact both epistemic and political violence' (McKinnon, 2016, p. 442), as a consequence their situations become more perilous and that is why the quest for ethical knowing is so important. As you might expect, in trying to get to a position of ethical knowing, there are going to be a few bumps in the road and here it should be recognised that both types of injustice possess two interrelated and seemingly intractable issues: the divide between the individual and the collective and, secondly, the traceability to prejudice. While some attempt has already been made to unpick these, they require a level of analysis that can accommodate a stratified understanding and one that is able to consider some of the more opaque structures and powers that influence and shape the social world, along with the individuals within it.

Before getting into the detail about precisely how critical realism might help with this task, it is pertinent to further illustrate the nature of what we are up against, by considering two additional contributions, one concerning testimonial injustice and the other hermeneutical

injustice. In McKinnon's discussion paper, she draws on Dotson's notion of testimonial smothering, a form of testimonial injustice, that proposes the idea that if a speaker senses that an audience is unlikely to give them a credible hearing – perhaps linked to an identity prejudice of some kind – they will choose not to speak: she notes 'so while the speaker decides for themself not to speak, it's often due to a pre-existing injustice in practices of uptake and credibility assessments' (2016, p.443). This is valuable in terms of the current discussion, because it directs attention to acts of omission on behalf of the speaker, rather than the hearer, whilst continuing to call one to question the interplay between the structural and individual dynamic.

The next point comes from Mason (2011), who posits that, in terms of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker conflates two strands of collective hermeneutical resource – dominant and non-dominant – and therefore does not adequately account for the fact that there may be a gap in collective (dominant) hermeneutical resource, which, in fact, subjects the dominant group to a form of 'unknowing'. This epistemological ignorance means the dominant group lacks the resources to understand those in non-dominant positions, something enacted 'by disregarding or distorting interpretations offered by marginalized groups' (p. 306), the group's unknowing brought about by 'their ethically bad knowledge practices' (p. 295). Their action results in the non-dominant group also being subject to a form of unknowing, a consequence of their hermeneutical marginalization by the dominant group. Here Mason notes that privilege does not necessarily operate across all social domains - social perception being one of them. Once more, this guides us towards an interpretive framework that can accommodate the stratified nature of the social world and one which is capable of exploring causal powers and collective intentionality (see Elder-Vass, 2015). Given the operation of social power, a consideration of both causal powers and collective intentionality may well

prove helpful in facilitating an analysis of individual and group agency, particularly their interactional consequences – the salience of such seen in Mason's contention that 'identity power depends on the context of a functioning social world with shared institutions, shared meanings, and shared expectations that facilitate systematic identity-based prejudice' (2011, p. 299).

Seeing better with critical realism

In contemplating how ideas from critical realism might work alongside the method of action research to promote anti-oppressive social work research, Houston (2010) has offered much by way of inspiration for what I think critical realism can achieve with regards to ethical knowing. Recall earlier thoughts on traceability to prejudice, the unseen operation of power and the role of agency? It is here where the challenge of what is and, more pressingly, what is not seen, requires a little help from an analytical framework that is capable of contending with different 'versions' of reality, or, in critical realist terms, 'levels': 'the ''empirical'' (the level of experiences), the ''actual'' (the level of events) and the ''real'' (the level of generative mechanisms)'' (p. 88). It is this last, causal, level which can point policy makers and practitioners towards more inclusive, and therefore more epistemologically just, practices. The key question for investigation that arises here is 'what it is that generates the events (outcomes) seen?'.

To answer this, critical realists propose an analysis that takes into account context (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), together with time and agency (Houston, 2010) and one that includes theorising about the unseen generative mechanisms themselves (see Blom and Morén, 2011; Houston, 2010; Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Applying these conceptual ideas to epistemic injustice, or, more accurately, applying them in order to help increase our understanding of it,

means, for example, that if the outcomes of injustice are to be traced to prejudice, as I believe they can, the nature of the mechanism must be understood as fully as possible. Although the visible outcome may be all too apparent – manifesting in the exclusion or segregation of certain individuals, or groups of individuals, from equal participation in society – explaining its cause demands careful exploration and consideration of the layered nature of the social world.

Blom and Morén (2011) offer a useful window into what this may actually look like from an analytical perspective, applying their thinking specifically to social work. They describe three levels of social mechanism, operating at a micro, meso or macro level within society, and describe each mechanism as being a combination of powers – in terms of causes, motives, considerations and choices – plus social interaction and structure. Thus, each level of social mechanism has its own specific social and material structures that mediates it: for the micro this includes role expectations related to gender and ethnicity, and for the macro it includes education systems and political parties. For Houston (2010) this looks a little different, he describes five domains in social life, each embodying a different type of power (something I shall return to later) – these range from the domain of the person to the domain of the economy. For the former, he cites the attachment mechanism as a primary example of a mechanism operating at a psychological level and, for the latter, the various mechanisms inherent in capitalism, including the commodification of labour and consumption. Now, it is beyond the scope and indeed the aims of this article to unpick critical realist conceptions of the stratified nature of the social world in detail, as what is of ultimate concern is the assertion that to understand how events may occur, one must adopt a systemic approach that acknowledges that there is understanding to be had that goes beyond the level of experience and 'the actual'. An approach that is able to accommodate the following: the notion that an

outcome may or may not been seen, depending on the activation of a specific mechanism (or mechanisms), within a specific layer of social life, in a given context, at a given time and with due consideration of agency.

What does all of this tell us and how might it be used for the benefit of knowing justly? So far I have outlined the relevance of critical realism in three key ways. In summary, these are: the ability to enhance understanding of the stratified nature of social systems; the ability to accommodate the role of agency; the ability to conceptualise different levels of reality, particularly in terms of what cannot be seen – the level of the 'real'. Here we have a rough analytical framework that, I believe, is able to aid the identification of sites of epistemic injustice and the role played by prejudice within this. Let me flesh this out with a couple of examples. In Blom and Moran's conceptualisation, they note that intentionality is a fundamental human power that serves as a driving force behind motives, considerations and choices, and that – and this is where it comes alive in terms of epistemic injustice – 'intentionality can, in turn, be affected by previous causes and the circumstance that condition human opportunities to choose' (2011, p. 64). Using this as a lens, it is possible to see how history and context can, quite clearly, influence agency, both in terms of commission and omission. Thus, with this analytical framework in place, Anderson's (2012) claim that current practice – executed on the basis of historically outdated information, linked to the prejudices of others – does not need to involve the moral fault of anyone in the present, becomes more readily refutable.

Consider too, Doan's (2017) notion that credibility discounting cannot easily be traced to the prejudices of individual officials, because its sustaining causes are structural, in view of Houston's thoughts that the domain of culture 'refers to the belief systems, norms, rituals,

social practices, customs and tastes that generate meaning and social cohesion but also serve to divide and oppress' (2010, p. 81). Put this together with what has just been considered in terms of intentionality and agency, and again, it is possible to see that individuals play a definitive role in the (re)production of structural epistemic injustice. The final re-visit needed takes us back to an earlier suggestion that, given the influence of social power, a consideration of both causal powers and collective intentionality may be helpful in facilitating an analysis of individual and group agency. Although Mason's (2011) observation that identity power depends on shared institutions, meanings and expectations does much of the work for me here, in terms of providing a position statement, it is useful to try and tidy this up a little, within the parameters of what can be achieved in the remaining space of this article.

While Mason's views sit quite comfortably with my own, more constructivist interpretations of 'reality' (see Dore, 2018) – heavily influenced as they are by Searle's (2006) thoughts on collective intentionally and how enduring version of reality can be 'known', or rather be seen to be epistemically objective, despite being created by the actions and attitudes of individuals – this moves us to a different ontological place. This should not be a problem, given my aim of borrowing from critical realism in order to hone analytical capability, but, none-the-less, it is important to tie things off as smoothly as I can. This is where Elder-Vass' (2015) work, which gives voice to the idea that collective intentionality can help to explain some of the mechanisms that generate social causal powers, is sympathetic. In it, he considers whether or not collectively intentionality, causal power or both are evident in various types of social interactions and, what is especially handy here, is this rather simple statement: 'collective intentionality ultimately depends for its causal significance on the existence of an actual collective composed of individuals who share the collective intention' (p. 267). A collective

intent, such as, to continue to follow out-dated information or to not revise laws or policies that serve to subjugate or discriminate against certain individuals or groups or, thinking about a UK welfare policy, to persist with the implementation of a new form of benefit payment (Universal Credit) despite multiple reports that it causes harm to claimants and doubts about it ever achieving value for money (see National Audit Office, 2018). What is more clearly visible now is the somewhat elusive dynamic between the individual and the collective.

To bring these analytical underpinnings alive, in away befitting Engebretsen et al's (2015) notion of knowing as an active process – and to make them more practically employable – greater accessibility is needed. This is something that can be found in the critical realist method of retroduction (see Houston, 2010). A process which starts with asking questions that should already be a feature of good social work practice – questions like 'what is it that causes this situation to be as it is?' and 'why' questions, related to the behaviours and responses of service users. In critical realist terms these are transcendental questions and are those concerned with understanding the 'actual' level of reality (see Houston, 2010). This process concludes with emancipatory action (see figure 1) – namely to challenge and change the oppressive mechanism in play.

	Retroduction
StepOne	Asking a transcendental question
StepTwo	Developing a priori hypotheses to address the question in terms of: (a) the generative mechanisms at play (b) the role of 'agency', 'time' and 'context'
StepThree	Seeking for evidence of hypotheses by looking for the effects of mechanisms and their interplay with 'agency', 'time' and 'context'
StepFour	Refining, confirming, falsifying or reworking hypotheses and seeking more evidence

StepFive	Instigating emancipatory action to counter oppressive mechanisms and activating enabling mechanisms

Figure 1. Steps in Retroduction (taken from Houston, 2010, p. 83).

From the established body of literature discussing epistemic injustice in relation to people experiencing mental ill-health, some examples of what emancipatory action might look include the use of advocacy - primarily useful for alleviating testimonial injustice (Newbigging and Ridley, 2018) - and, in relation to those experiencing mental distress who have also been the victims of crime, the need to create conditions of empowerment which ensure that voices are not just heard, but also where opinions are held with equal weight within criminal justice and other state systems (see Carver, Morley and Taylor, 2017). These thoughts share common ground with the remedial processes considered by Fricker and Anderson, in terms of promoting inclusivity within institutions and integration between different social groups, yet such actions are dependent on first identifying and recognising sites of epistemic injustice. This is where the analytical framework provided by critical realism is of use, as it can provide an enhanced understanding which may then be drawn on to inform enhanced intervention. Social workers and policy makers who are aware and alert to how their and their employing organisations' social power may unduly subjugate the voices of the people with whom they are seeking to work, are more likely to be able to identify the underlying – prejudicial – mechanisms that cause the situations they encounter to be as they are. This requires workers to be critically and systematically astute in their questioning of events and mindful of how things like their identity, privilege and professional training shapes what they see and what they do not (steps two to four of the retroduction process are salient here - see figure 1).

In terms of further enhancing emancipatory action, I suggest that when practitioners also embrace acceptance, they will be better placed to both identify structural causes of epistemic injustice and to further question how they can use their agency help remedy them; perhaps by creating conditions where they are able to give at least some of their power away. Accepting the limitations of their own ability to 'know' and recognising service users as experts by experience is a good starting point for change, something which the concept of co-production may further strengthen. Co-production is a model of partnership working that goes beyond involving service users in the planning and design stages of service delivery. It also means that people who use services takeover some of the work done by practitioners (SCIE, 2015) - another example of inclusive action which could help foster a re-alignment of status and power relationships. In sum, through the stepped process of retroduction - which upholds the principles of analysis as systemically critical - those involved in social work practice and policy making can be seen to be equipped with a practical tool that may help strengthen their capabilities for ethical knowing. Its use in supervision, either on an individual or group basis, perhaps the most obvious place to start - organisational support permitting.

Conclusion

In considering the nature of social work as ethics work, together with the notion of knowledge as one that is active and dynamic, influenced and shaped by social power, it has been possible to set the foundations for ethical knowing, premised on the principles of acceptance and awareness. A starting point that positions the individual 'doing' the knowing in a place where there is an ethically guided openness to transformability, supported by a critical orientation that is systematically astute. Such a position may allow practitioners to take more confident steps towards understanding the nature of maintained subjugation and how this works to perpetuate exclusion and unequal participation in society, particularly in

relation to knowledge production and transfer. Here, an understanding of exclusion, marginalisation and the nature of social power has been advanced through an exploration of epistemic injustice, both testimonial and hermeneutic. This has served to highlight the way in which certain groups appear to be caught in a spiral of social exclusion, with each twist, their stake in society and credibility further eroded, further discounted.

Attempting to understand manifestations of epistemic injustice has revealed some interesting areas for development and expansion, something that this article has endeavoured to build upon - making links between social work, epistemic injustice and critical realism. Most notably, what I have tried to set out are the beginnings of an analytical framework that can help practitioners and policy makers better identify and understand sites of epistemic injustice, recognising it as a form of social injustice that also causes moral harm, either directly as a result of being harmed as a knower – given the central importance to humans of epistemic life (McKinnon, 2016) – or indirectly as a result of subsequent social exclusion. A key instrument aiding this task has been critical realist thinking, which has enabled some of the previously unanswered questions, such as those related to the traceability to prejudice, to have more tangible answers. As a concept, its strength, in relation to expanding the understanding of epistemological injustice as applicable to social work, has been in its ability to do three things: contend with the stratified nature of social systems, to accommodate the role of agency and to conceptualise the different, unseen, levels of reality. The importance of this last point, neatly expressed in this statement from Houston: 'Social work, to be truly anti-oppressive, must understand the nature of and interplay between these different levels if it is to rise to the challenges posed by modern life' (2010, p. 88). Some of those future challenges will continue to involve questions about exclusion and representation and there is, no doubt, further scope in exploring what ideas about epistemic (in)justice and critical realism have to

add to questions about things like social participation and equality, subjects of keen interest to social work.

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