

# Conceptual baggage and how to unpack it

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## Abstract

Our interpretive resources enable us to make sense of, navigate, and communicate about our shared world. These resources not only carve the world up into categories, but also guide how we, individually and collectively, are oriented towards it. In this thesis, I examine how these resources, and the dispositions they guide, may be harmful. A vital kind of interpretive resources are frames, which equip us with unified *perspectives* on the world. Perspectives are suites of open-ended interpretive (inquisitive, attentional, inferential, evaluative, and affective) dispositions. Frames thereby guide how we interpret, respond to, and navigate the world. I show that these perspectives are epistemically powerful and indispensable. I argue that flawed perspectives, and the distorting frames that produce them, are deeply pernicious and I examine their relationship to oppression.

In Chapter One, I develop an account of how narrative framing may equip us with perspectives. I argue that narratives which frame the overcoming of refusal as erotic may equip viewers with perspectives which obstruct recognition of sexual violence. In Chapter two, I turn more broadly to the way in which our shared interpretive frames may lead us to misunderstand the world. I develop an analysis of these ‘mis-interpretive resources’ and how they may operate to uphold oppression. In Chapter three, I examine how attempts to communicate one’s perspective may be frustrated, analysing how mis-interpretive resources may lead to an overlooked form of communicative disablement. In Chapter four, I examine how distorting frames can be reproduced and argue that attempts to identify injustice can inadvertently replicate distorting frames. Finally, in Chapter five, I consider how we may attempt to revise and replace harmful frames. I argue that, in light of the vital epistemic role of perspective, leveraging frames is an indispensable tool for resisting oppression.

*Dedicated to Katherine Hawley.*

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## Introduction

Many terms produce a particular ‘way of looking’ at their target: for example, ‘domestic labour’ versus ‘housewifery’; ‘escort’ versus ‘sex worker’; ‘unborn child’ versus ‘foetus’. Sometimes this effect is especially pronounced, such as in slurs, while in other cases subtle, for instance, in ‘code words’ like ‘shrill’ and ‘inner city’. In addition to particular words, metaphors and stereotypes (e.g., ‘the war on cancer’) have similar effects.

We sometimes describe these words and metaphors as having ‘conceptual baggage’. In doing so, we suggest that these representations come with more than just a thin descriptive meaning, but also a range of associations, connotations, and implicit values. When we refer to this ‘baggage’ we are suggesting that this way of representing or thinking about things is embedded with a wider range of ideas and practices in complex – and, often, undesirable – ways. These ways, we sometimes say, need to be ‘unpacked’. That is, in order to get down to the idea being expressed, we need to untangle the ways various ideas, evaluations and norms have been bundled together. This thesis examines how our ways of thinking and communicating can become entangled in this way, how this relates to injustice, and how we may approach untangling them. In this thesis I explore how this ‘baggage’ may be acquired and its relationship with our social practices. I will develop an account of how these effects may be distorting, the role of distorting representational resources in upholding oppression, and outline how we may attempt to address these distortions.

Let me begin by putting forward some more precise terminology. These ideas will be introduced in more detail as they arise, but as this project has multiple 'moving' parts it is worth sketching what each mean at the outset. The different 'ways of looking' described above describe differences in *perspective*. Drawing on work by Elizabeth Camp (2006; 2007; 2017; 2019; 2020) and Rachel Fraser (2018; 2021), perspective is defined as an open-ended suite of interpretive dispositions which guide what we are inclined to notice, question, infer and our evaluative and affective responses.

Perspectives are a matter of how one is disposed to mentally organise and navigate information. Which perspective is deployed will guide how we *interpretively structure* information. For a given body of information, an interpretive structure is a way of attentionally, inquisitively, evaluatively and explanatorily structuring information. The difference between a term like 'foetus' and 'unborn child' is thus analysed as a difference in the perspectives they cue. We can interpretively structure the same information in diverging ways and when we inhabit diverging perspectives we will be disposed to do so. I will show that these perspectives are epistemically powerful and indispensable; as such, I will argue, flawed perspectives are deeply pernicious.

When we coordinate our perspectives, we are disposed to also coordinate how we interpretively structure information. A central way in which we coordinate our perspectives is the use of *frames*. Frames, on Camp's usage, are 'crystalised perspectives' (2020) which provide a unified way of interpreting information. Frames include words ('lexical frames', such as slurs and code words) and conventional metaphors (such as 'wars' on drugs, cancer and terror) of the kind

introduced above. These are conventional ‘ready to wear’ frames, but others are more customised, such as novel metaphors or the way events are framed by a narrative.

Frames are important interpretive resources because perspectives are epistemically indispensable. Shared frames, which allow us to coordinate our perspectives, are crucial to wider forms of coordination, underpinning shared social practices. In this thesis I am especially interested in the framing role of ‘schemas’. Schemas are malleable interpretive blueprints which guide how we interpret and incorporate information. We rely on schemas (or ‘scripts’) to reduce cognitive load and render the world intelligible (DiMaggio, 1997; Eickers, 2023; Schank & Ableson, 1977; Sewell, 1992). Social schemas guide how we expect others to act, both descriptively and normatively. In providing interpretive blueprints, schematic frames facilitate cognitive processing. When shared, via social scripts, conventional metaphors, etc, they thereby facilitate social coordination. In this thesis, I examine how our interpretive and social conventions interplay; specifically, how shared frames can produce interpretive distortions and how these can sustain unjust social practices.

In this thesis, I examine how distorting frames, and the flawed perspectives they produce, can operate to uphold harmful social practices. I examine the role of distorting frames in generating *hermeneutical injustice* (Fricker, 2007), in which marginalised agents are unable to render their experiences intelligible, and how we may attempt to overcome this. In the first three chapters I analyse the pernicious epistemic and communicative harms which can arise from such distorting resources. In the final two chapters, I then turn to amelioration, developing an account of how perspectives may be leveraged to correct these distortions.

I begin, in Chapter one, by examining how representations in media can shape our social norms. Feminists have long argued that the depictions of sexual refusal in pornography can obstruct the recognition of real-world sexual refusal, thereby operating to legitimise and facilitate sexual violence. However, these analyses have focussed on the contents of these depictions (i.e., the sequence of depicted events). In doing so they have neglected the role of *narrative framing* in prescribing a *perspective*. I examine how narratives can eroticise sexual refusal, prescribing a perspective on which one is disposed to notice and produce excuses for ignoring refusal. I argue that these depictions *exemplify* a shared schema on which refusal is central to seduction. Engaging with these narratives may thereby equip one with a perspective which obstructs recognition of sexual violence. I argue that this constitutes an overlooked form of ‘rape myth’ and discuss how a perspectival rape myth will resist attempts to ‘debunk’ false beliefs. This offers a case study in how shared representations may guide how we interpret the world.

In Chapter two, I turn more broadly to the way in which our shared interpretive resources may lead us to misunderstand the world, developing an analysis of these ‘mis-interpretive resources’. I begin by offering a brief account of misunderstanding, distinct from mere lack of understanding, as grasping an inapt interpretive structure. I then develop an account of mis-interpretive resources as interpretive frames which systematically enable us to grasp inapt interpretive structures, thereby producing misunderstanding. I relate these resources to Fricker’s notion of ‘hermeneutical injustice’, highlighting the important ways in which distorting resources may be more pernicious than lacking a resource altogether due to the mistaken sense of understanding it offers. I then highlight the *ideological* role these frames can play

when the distortions they produce operate to underwrite unjust social arrangements, contaminating the information they are deployed to interpret.

In Chapter three, I examine how these mis-interpretive resources may lead to an overlooked form of communicative disablement. Often, when we communicate, we seek to not only share information but also share and negotiate our perspective. We deploy vivid metaphors when recounting our day, relate personal experiences in the form of narrative. These contributions can be mis-interpreted when the perspective one sought to communicate is not grasped by the audience. I examine how speakers are wronged when they face systematic misinterpretation which *reframes* their testimony. As a central case study, I take the way in which disabled peoples' attempt to promote a 'mere difference' framing of disability are distorted and misinterpreted as an inspirational overcoming of disability. I argue that hegemonic frames – that is, ideological frames which are taken for granted as 'common sense' – will be prone to render attempts to reject those frames unintelligible. As such, those who seek to reject dominant mis-interpretive frames may find that their testimony is distorted in such a way as to 'backfire', entrenching the frame they sought to reject.

In Chapter four, I examine how the observations of the previous chapters complicate attempts to address, or 'ameliorate', hermeneutical injustice. Drawing an analogy with photographic representation, I examine how our resources can constrain *how* subjects are represented, in ways that reflect and sustain ideology. Words and phrases can acquire baggage from the social context in which they are used, producing *lexical frames*. Consequently, when we produce names for new categories, we are liable to import and replicate existing frames. This motivates caution when we attempt to ameliorate hermeneutical injustice by baptising a new category, since we

risk framing it in such a way as to reconcile it with the ideology that gave rise to the original injustice, thereby distorting it. I examine the increasingly expansive use of ‘emotional labour’ to describe non-physical forms of domestic labour as a cautionary tale.

Finally, in Chapter five, I consider how we may attempt to *reframe* issues distorted by ideology. In the prior chapters I develop an analysis of distorting ideological frames which emphasises their epistemic dimension; they mangle our evidence and produce concealed epistemic incompetence. They impose imaginative constraints which render counterspeech unintelligible and obscure the possibility of change. I highlight the crucially epistemic dimension of attempting to repair and revise these distorting frames. I present and reject an interpretation of reframing as a wholly pragmatic, or ‘marketing’ exercise, taking a recent analysis of disability activism as my case study. I argue that to make sense of this movement we must recognise the role of consciousness raising and protest as an educational tool. Subsequently, I consider the way in which language may be used as a tool to reframe, which has been similarly characterised as marketing or propaganda. I argue that recognising the role of misunderstanding in upholding ideology, and conversely the centrally epistemic task of ideology critique, highlights the pedagogical value of such strategies. I thereby pre-empt and reject common objections to this ‘exploitation’ of language.



# 1. Framing Seduction

## §1.1 Introduction

Ignoring sexual refusal is one of the most severe ways in which one person can wrong another. Nevertheless, it is common throughout media to see depictions of the following sort: one character rejects another's sexual advances but, when their refusal is ignored or overpowered, they seemingly surrender to passion. Consider, as an example, the following scene from the James Bond movie *Goldfinger* (Hamilton, 1964):

*Bond Scene:* James Bond and Pussy Galore are in a barn. Bond flirts with Galore but she rebuffs him. Twice, Galore tries to leave the barn, but Bond grabs Galore's arm and pulls her back. Galore breaks Bond's grip by throwing him to the floor and the two begin to fight. Bond climbs on top of Galore, pinning her down. Galore attempts to push Bond away with her hands around his neck. As Bond pushes forward to kiss her, Galore grimaces and twice turns away. After a moment, Galore relents in her struggle to stop Bond and holds him as he kisses her.

We are meant to conclude that Bond has not sexually assaulted Galore, he has *seduced* her. This scene is not (meant to be) horrifying and against her will, but playful and sexy. It is a paradigmatic example of what I term an *eroticised sexual refusal* narrative. Such narratives are pervasive.

In this Chapter, I develop a novel analysis of how eroticised sexual refusal narratives may obstruct recognition of real-world sexual violence. I argue that engaging with

these narratives can lead the viewer to adopt a *perspective*, a suite of interpretive interlinked dispositions, on seduction which disposes one to excuse ignoring sexual refusal. I contend that these dispositions to *notice and produce* excuses constitute an overlooked form of rape myth.

There has long been concern that depictions like *Bond Scene* may operate as propaganda for women's sexual subordination and promote 'rape myths' (Langton, 1993; Langton, 2017; MacKinnon, 1989, 1993; McGowan 2017; Mikkola, 2011).

However, these analyses have largely focussed on the scenario depicted, suggesting that depictions of insincere sexual refusal will lead viewers to 'export' the belief that sexual refusal is often insincere. On this analysis, one may export flawed beliefs about sexual refusal from these depictions in much the same way one might export flawed beliefs about historical dress from an ahistorical costume drama. This overlooks the extraordinary persuasive power of how narratives *frame* their contents.

Attending to the role of narrative framing reveals that these depictions may equip the viewer with flawed belief-forming dispositions, rather than false *beliefs*, which lead one to seek, notice and produce excuses for ignoring sexual refusal. These dispositions, in turn, constitute a pernicious, recalcitrant and implicit form of rape myth that has been overlooked to date.

The *narrative framing* (the way the scenario is depicted) of *Bond Scene* depicts the *narrative contents* (the scenario itself) as playful and flirtatious. *Bond Scene* thereby prescribes a *perspective* on which we interpret Bond as seducing Galore. On this

prescribed perspective one interprets Bond's advances as seducing Galore, as ultimately desired by her, and thus excuses Bond ignoring Galore's refusals.

Contrast this with the following depiction:

*Police Report:* Man and Woman are in a barn. Man flirts with Woman but she rebuffs him. Twice, Woman tries to leave the barn, but Man grabs Woman's arm and pulls her back. Woman breaks man's grip by throwing him to the floor and the two begin to fight. Man climbs on top of woman, pinning her down. Woman attempts to push Man away with her hands around his neck. As Man pushes forward to kiss Woman, she grimaces and twice turns away. After a moment, Woman relents in her struggle to stop him and holds Man as he kisses her.

This scene is horrifying, against Woman's will and neither playful nor sexy. On the perspective *Police Report* prescribes, we are led to conclude that Man has sexually assaulted Woman, he has not seduced her. Our attention is drawn to Woman's refusal of Man's advances, and we take these refusals at face value as evidence she does not want to have sex.

The relevant difference between *Bond Scene* and *Police Report* is not any difference between the narrative contents, but rather how they are framed by the narrative. All that has changed between the two vignettes is the title and replacing Bond and Galore's names. This modest change of framing directs us towards starkly diverging interpretations of the contents. In *Bond Scene* the interaction is presented as

flirtatious and ending with mutual desire, whereas the tone of *Police Report* is much more sinister. This illustrates the interpretive power of narrative framing.

Attending to the power of narrative framing to shape interpretation raises the possibility that what a viewer might harmfully export from a depiction like *Bond Scene* is not a false belief, but rather the perspective prescribed by the narrative framing. I here argue that eroticised refusal narratives prescribe a perspective on which overcoming sexual refusal is erotic and excusable. When engaging with these narratives, one takes on *a way of looking at* the depicted events as seduction. This requires excusing persistence in the face of sexual refusal and interpreting the subsequent sexual contact as not truly being against the refuser's will. These narratives present ignored sexual refusal as a paradigmatic feature of seduction. This way of interpreting sexual refusal may be exported and applied to new cases, disposing agents to interpret refused sexual contact as nevertheless wanted.

Engaging with eroticised refusal narratives may thereby equip the viewer with a perspective which operates to obstruct recognition of sexual violence. I propose that this perspective constitutes an overlooked form of rape myth. These *perspectival* rape myths are pernicious as they need not correspond to overt beliefs but regulate precisely the sorts of interpretive dispositions which guide our responses to cases of sexual violence. It is therefore essential to attend to the role of perspective in analysing the potential harms of these depictions.

This chapter proceeds as follows. In §1.2 I draw on work in aesthetics to present an account of narrative framing and argue that the narrative framing of *Bond Scene* prescribes a perspective which eroticises sexual refusal. In §1.3 I develop an analysis

of the eroticising perspective these narratives prescribe and how it operates to excuse conduct such as Bond's in *Bond Scene*. In §1.4 I turn to consider how these perspectives may be exported from our engagement with fiction into the real world: I contend that the narrative may *exemplify* a perspective, akin to an illustrative example. More specifically, I argue that eroticised refusal narratives are exemplars of a seduction script which eroticises overcoming sexual refusal. In §1.5, I examine how this perspective obstructs recognition of sexual violence and argue that it constitutes a pernicious and overlooked form of 'rape myth'. Finally, in §1.6 I present some upshots of this analysis, particularly with respect to its divergence from extant feminist analyses of pornography. I end in §1.7 with some concluding remarks.

## **§1.2 Narrative**

### *§1.2.1 Narrative Framing*

Feminist scholarship has long argued that depictions in which sexual refusal is ignored, seemingly permissibly, are harmful because they make viewers less likely to recognise and respect sexual refusal (Hornsby & Langton, 1998; Langton, 1993; Langton & West, 1999; Mikkola, 2011)<sup>1</sup>. In doing so, it is claimed, these depictions may make viewers less likely to recognise and more likely to commit sexual violence. Central to these analyses has been the way in which such depictions inhibit women's ability to *refuse* sexual advances; on the influential 'speech act' analysis (Austin, 1975) developed most influentially by Rae Langton and Jennifer Hornsby (Hornsby

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<sup>1</sup> While this literature has centred on pornographic depictions of ignored sexual refusal, the scope of my analysis includes narratives with this structure more broadly. I discuss the significance of this in §1.6.

& Langton, 1998; Langton, 1993; 2017). Pornographic depictions have been described as, *inter alia*, a kind of pavlovian *programming* (MacKinnon, 1993, p. 16; Scoccia, 1996), an authoritative *command* (Langton, 1993; McGowan, 2003), and a form of *propaganda* (McGlynn, 2016; Novaes, 2018; Sunstein, 1986).<sup>2</sup> However, these analyses have largely focussed on the events of the scenario depicted. For instance, the way in which being aroused while being shown images of subordinated women may condition certain responses or depictions of women enjoying subordination.

To focus merely on the narrative contents of the depiction neglects the important role of *narrative frame*. That is, existing analyses primarily examine *what* is depicted and not *how*. Yet work in aesthetics highlights that a central way in which narrative fiction may influence viewer's attitudes is via the narrative framing equipping the viewer with a new *perspective* on the subject matter (Camp, 2017; Eaton, 2003; Gaut, 1998; Goldie, 2012; Nussbaum, 1992). In these cases, one need not export the contents of the narrative, but rather a 'way of looking' at the contents which the narrative framing prescribes.<sup>3</sup> Export of this kind is not akin to exporting beliefs about historical dress from a costume drama, but instead gaining new insight from allegorical fiction (e.g., *Animal Farm*).

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<sup>2</sup> Extant literature has centrally concerned the way in which pornography may not only lead women's sexual refusal to be unrecognised but may (i) make it *impossible* to refuse (e.g., Langton, 1993) (ii) *constitute* the subordination of women (see Watson, 2010). These will not be my concern in this chapter, I shall only be examining the way in which such depictions may obstruct recognition of attempted refusal. However, in §1.6 I do discuss the significance of pornography versus more mainstream media for shaping social norms.

<sup>3</sup> Much of this work has concerned how fiction can serve as a kind of *moral education* but Goffin & Friend (2022) offer a compelling argument that if narrative has this influence, it can also serve to *miseducate* – and indeed may be more like to do so.

A narrative does not present us merely with a sequence of events but rather, as it were, a *version* of events. The contents of a narrative have a narrative ‘structure’ imposed upon them which frames them. The narrative shows how the events are related to one another, conveying which events are the most important or foundational; which events depend on or explain others; and so on. Fraser highlights this by contrasting the serial description of events in (1) an annal, listed by year<sup>4</sup>, with (2-3) two narrative descriptions of the same events (Fraser 2021, p. 4044):

- 1)
709. Hard winter. Duke Gottfried died.
710. Hard year and deficient in crops.
- 711.
712. Flood everywhere.
- 713
- 714.
- 715.
- 716.
- 717.
718. Charles devastated the Saxon with great destruction.
- 719.
720. Charles fought against the Saxons.
- 721.
722. Great crops.

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<sup>4</sup> This example is adapted from White (1980) and also discussed in Goldie (2012).

2) The years between 709 and 717 saw many hardships: there were floods, poor crops, and hard winters. In 718, the situation further deteriorated: the Saxons invaded. But the year after they invaded, Charles fought against them with great destruction. And after he won, there was a great harvest.

3) The century began with a hard winter and Duke Gotfried's death. Things soon became much worse: in 712, there was a terrible flood. Over the next ten years, Charles fought the Saxons several times, and was victorious at least once. But not until ten years after the flood did the land recover enough to produce great crops once again.

The two narratives construct sharply contrasting stories, both in comparison to each other and the unstructured record. This alters which events are salient and central and which fade into the background. In the mere serial record we are free to impose judgements of what is important and what is insignificant, but the narrative makes those judgements for us. Fraser writes: "subtle differences in how [narrative] testimony is presented can suggest that the encoded information should be mentally organised in different ways [...] the victory against the Saxons looms larger given the first narrative presentation; the flood given the second" (Fraser, 2021, p. 4044).

Likewise, the *Bond Scene* and *Police Report* narratives frame their contents in diverging ways. Here, the differences are modest in comparison to Fraser's example; the events are not reordered or redescribed, merely renamed. Yet even this modest alternation in language is sufficient to radically alter how we interpret the narrative contents. *Bond Scene* directs us to an interpretation of seduction, drawing our



attention to Galore holding Bond at the end as an indication of desire. *Police report* by contrast leads us to focus on Man's forceful persistence and Woman's resistance when she places her hands around his neck.

### §1.2.2 Narrative Engagement

To imaginatively engage with a narrative, one must take on the version of events the narrative prescribes<sup>5</sup>. Bond scene prescribes an interpretation of seduction: it *eroticises* Bond overcoming Galore's refusal. Anne Eaton(2003) insightfully distinguishes two ways in which a depiction may eroticise. She analyses Titian's *The Rape of Europa*, which depicts Europa being carried away on a bull who is Jupiter in disguise. Eaton differentiates two ways in which the painting eroticises this scene. The first relates to how we are to interpret "the events depicted": "the painting eroticizes Europa's rape by representing her as complicit and taking pleasure in the act" (p. 163). That is, we are directed to interpret *what* takes place as erotic for those involved. The second relates to our own response as viewers: "the painting calls upon us to have [erotic] feelings about this event [...] it presents Europa's sexual subordination in a way aimed to sexually arouse the viewer" (p. 166).<sup>6</sup> This second sense captures the *perspective* the depiction prescribes; that the audience *see* what is

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<sup>5</sup> It is to be emphasised that this is not a prediction that viewers will *necessarily* view the contents in this way; it is rather an observation of the *norms* of imaginative narrative engagement (see Currie, 1990; Walton, 1990)

<sup>6</sup> While Eaton emphasises arousal as the prescribed response, I consider the broader range of interpretive dispositions which the narrative prescribes: these include not only arousal but broader favourable affective responses (such as humour) as well as patterns of attention.

depicted as erotic. As Eaton notes, (2003, p. 166) 'prescription' need not presume claims of authorial intention (see also Gaut, 1998).<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, we can describe a narrative as eroticised both with respect to what is taken to have occurred (the overcome refusal is erotic for the refuser) and how we view these events (we take up a way of looking at these events as desirable and erotic). Of course, these dimensions interact; in taking up a favourable way of looking at these events, we produce an interpretation which excuses them. Nonetheless, the distinction between what is depicted and how remains fruitful.

*Bond Scene* is eroticised along both dimensions Eaton identifies. Firstly, Galore's submission to Bond is presented as giving into sincere desire, succumbing to his advances due to passion rather than fear. It is this first dimension that has dominated analyses of such depictions to date. Langton and West (1999), in their widely influential analysis of how eroticised refusal narratives in pornography may promote rape myths, is characteristic of this focus, centring on the interpretation of events viewers arrive at. Langton and West take a spread in pornographic magazine *Hustler*, titled 'Dirty Pool' as their central case: it depicts three men who ostensibly rape a waitress; this assault is depicted as erotic for the waitress. In their analysis of 'Dirty Pool' Langton and West write

It is not explicitly said in the story that the female waitress says 'no' when she really means 'yes'. [...] [However, o]ne needs presuppositions like these to

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, for analyses of the kind developed here, we may be particularly interested in perspectives which are *hegemonically* (i.e., unreflectively) reproduced which no author may have intended to manifest in the work.

make sense of the way in which the initially reluctant young waitress gives in to immediate ecstasy upon being gang raped. [...] In short, the story presupposes certain rape myths. (Langton & West, 1999, pp. 311-312)

The potential harm on this analysis is that viewers will come to believe that this depiction accurately represents the world. This analysis presents the puzzle of why viewers of such depictions might take them to be realistic depictions of the world, as is required for this kind of content export. As an attempt to answer this so-called ‘fiction objection’, the ambiguously-fictional status of pornography (McGlynn, 2021) and the potential for ‘background blurring’ at the boundaries of fiction (Currie, 1990; Langton & West, 1999) have been appealed to.

The way in which the story ‘presupposes’ rape myths is compared to the way a statement like “Even Jane could pass the test” presupposes that Jane is not a promising student. Likewise, to make sense of the depicted events one must presuppose rape myths (e.g., that the waitress wanted to be raped). Langton and West, drawing on Currie (1990), draw a parallel between the default accommodation of presuppositions in conversation and the presumed ‘background’ truth of fiction. For instance, without reason to think otherwise, we take the layout of Sherlock Holmes’ London to match that of real-world London. This can lead to error when one mistakes what is fictionally true in this background to what is true in the real world. These rape myths are thus exported in the way that one may gain false beliefs about historical events from ahistorical fiction (even if one knows the central narrative to be fictional). These myths are the backdrop against which fictions like *Dirty Pool* take place and may thereby lead one to form false beliefs about the world.

The above analysis concerns the first dimension Eaton identifies: in these depictions ignored refusal is erotic for the refuser. The corresponding background fact – that ignoring refusal is erotic for women – is what may be exported, such that what is true in the fiction is mistakenly taken to be true in the real world. My own focus here is instead on the second way in which narratives like *Bond Scene* eroticise refusal: it *prescribes a perspective* on the depicted events which eroticises them. I term this the *seduction* perspective. Imaginatively engaging with these depictions thus requires looking at Bond's actions towards Galore as desirable, excusable, and wanted. My own analysis allows us to side-step the fiction objection, which has been a preoccupation of scholarship to date, because exporting a perspective in this way does not rely on any confusion between fiction and the real world. One merely acquires a perspective from the fictional depiction, taking it to be an apt perspective *were* these events to occur, resulting in equivalent interpretations of overcome refusal as seduction being made more accessible in other, real contexts.

### **§1.3 Perspective**

I have argued that the narrative framing of *Bond Scene* prescribes a *perspective* on which we interpret Bond's actions as excusable and desirable. Generalising, eroticised refusal narratives feature sexual refusal, which is overcome, where this interaction is *framed* by the narrative as erotic. That is, the narrative framing prescribes a *perspective* on which this interaction is erotic and desirable; the viewer *sees* the interaction as erotic. In this section, I unpack the notion of perspective and develop an analysis of the perspective characteristically prescribed by eroticised refusal narratives.

### §1.3.1 Prescribed Perspective

Imaginatively engaging with a narrative requires adopting the perspective the narrative prescribes. To use a common visual metaphor, when imaginatively engaged, we *see* the events of the depiction the way the narrative presents them (Camp, 2017; Gaut, 1998; Gendler, 2000; Goldie, 2012; Nussbaum, 1992). Borrowing an example from Camp, the events of *Pride and Prejudice* may occur against the backdrop of the Napoleonic war, but the narrative is not *about* the Napoleonic war (Camp, 2017, p. 89). Correspondingly, while we might imagine much the same sequences of events organised into a different narrative which was about the war, this would create a distinct narrative. If we refuse or fail<sup>8</sup> to adopt the interpretation the narrative prescribes by treating *Pride and Prejudice* as being about the Napoleonic war, we are not properly imaginatively engaged with the work (Currie, 1990; Walton, 1990).

Elizabeth Camp has developed these widespread visual comparisons into a fruitful account of *perspective* (Camp, 2017; Camp, 2020) as open-ended interpretive dispositions to ‘notice, explain, and respond to situations in the world’. Building on Camp’s account of perspective, Fraser (2021) helpfully characterises perspective as a suite of interlocking dispositions, which I here adapt:<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Gendler (2000) on ‘imaginative resistance’.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser groups together what I have here distinguished as ‘inferential’ and ‘affective’ dispositions. I adapt this taxonomy because it will be fruitful to distinguish the viewer’s affective and evaluative response from specific exculpatory inferences.

*Attentional Dispositions* to notice (or fail to notice) some information, shaping what strikes one as salient.

*Inferential Dispositions* to draw certain inferences and adopt explanations.

*Evaluative and Affective Dispositions* to form certain evaluative and affective responses.

*Inquisitive Dispositions* to pursue certain lines of inquiry and find certain answers (un)satisfying.

The perspective we inhabit when we engage with fiction will thus determine what we are disposed to notice, how we think it matters, whether it requires explanation and at what point we close our inquiry. Together these interconnected dispositions constitute a holistic interpretive tool; when we adopt a perspective, this shapes how new information will be immediately received.

I contend that to imaginatively engage with eroticised refusal narratives, one must adopt a perspective on which one is disposed to interpret ignoring sexual refusal as excusable and erotic. Here, I illustrate this by analysing *Bond Scene*, considering these interpretive dispositions in turn.

The events of *Bond Scene* are presented favourably: specifically, Bond's advances are presented as playful and flirtatious, rather than sinister or traumatising. Various factors combine to construct this tone. Some are background familiarity on the part of the audience, such as the certainty that Bond is the hero and familiarity with the

role of 'Bond Girls'. *Bond Scene* in *Goldfinger* is accompanied by a playful string score. And, of course, there is the name "Pussy Galore" itself. One's cued *affective* and *evaluative* dispositions are correspondingly positive. One is disposed to view the interaction in a playful, flirtatious light.

Next, let us consider the viewers' *attentional* and *inferential* dispositions. From the seduction perspective which *Bond Scene* cues, one will be disposed to interpret Bond's advances as ultimately desired by Galore. One will be, correspondingly, disposed to notice signs that Galore desires Bond's advances. This has an interlinked attentional and inferential dimension: one is both disposed to notice possible signs and interpret them *as* signs of desire. For example, Galore makes noise as Bond pushes forward to kiss her; these could be interpreted as expressions of effort to sincerely push him away, but the narrative disposes the viewer to interpret them as expressing sexual arousal. One may, likewise, be disposed to infer from Galore's apparent arousal that Bond's force was excusable, i.e., one may be disposed to make *exculpating inferences*.

The disposition to make exculpating inferences of this sort is characteristic of the perspective *Bond Scene*, and eroticised refusal narratives more broadly, prescribe. The specific content of these inferences may be open to interpretation by the viewer (i.e., not a fixed narrative point from which one cannot depart without failing to be properly narratively engaged). Indeed, not only may the specific excuse be underdetermined by some narrative, but a specific excuse might not be produced at all; one might instead simply regard the interaction as clearly excusable. Part of the narrative framing in many of these depictions may be to direct us *away* from considering *why* this is permissible at all; it may be that the narrative directs us away

from precisely such lines of questioning. This is a key point at which my own account departs from analysis like that developed by Langton & West (1999), which emphasise the risk that some specific excuse might be exported. When viewing *Bond Scene*, one may not arrive at any particular excuse; instead, one takes on a disposition to regard this interaction *as excusable* and erotic. As a result of this, considering the open-ended disposition to excuse, rather than the acceptance of any specific excuse, offers greater insight.

These attentional and inferential dispositions give rise to corresponding inquisitive dispositions. In *Bond Scene*, on the prescribed perspective, Bond and Galore are engaged in a kind of ‘cat and mouse’ interaction which is resolved when Galore gives in. Galore’s ceased resistance thus gives us *narrative closure*, it “invites us to regard the narrative events as a sealed and complete whole” (Fraser, 2021, p. 4045). Carroll writes, “Closure then transpires when all of the questions that have been saliently posed by the narrative get answered” (2007, p.4).

The interpretive dispositions which constitute a perspective are deeply interconnected. For instance, priming certain emotions alters what we find salient about a situation and whether we are disposed to make positive or negative evaluations: what one interprets as a nervous gesture in one affective state might appear sinister in another (Camp, 2017). When viewing *Bond Scene* in *Goldfinger*, the playful musical score cues a positive affective response which can, in turn, lead us to perceive Galore’s struggle as revealing arousal. Together, these interconnected dispositions produce a holistic interpretation.



The narrative framing of *Bond Scene* thus prescribes a perspective on which Bond's overcoming of Galore's refusal is interpreted as excusable and wanted. It is characteristic of eroticised refusal narratives that they depict ignored sexual refusal as a seduction; they prescribe a perspective which *eroticises refusal*.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, on an assault perspective like that of *Police Report*, Galore's ceased resistance is neither so central nor so exculpatory. On this perspective, one may – interpreting Galore's initial resistance as earnest – be more disposed to interpret Galore's ceased resistance as mere submission to Bond's force, and therefore not exculpatory the preceding actions. We are left without narrative closure on this perspective, because our attentional and inquisitive dispositions have been directed towards different, unresolved, questions; Galore's submission only raises questions.

### §1.3.2 *Eroticised Refusal*

It is here worth clarifying the scope of the above analysis, in order to emphasise the scope of the critique developed here. Crucially, the target of criticism here is not that impermissible conduct is depicted favourably. The scope of such a critique would differ from the one developed here in two crucial ways. Firstly, a narrative may *trivialise* sexual violence in ways other than *eroticising* it. Care must be taken to distinguish eroticised refusal narratives from related tropes, some of which are especially common in depictions of sexual violence against men<sup>11</sup>. For instance, in

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<sup>10</sup> Note, I do not claim that all putative cases of ignored sexual refusal are cases of sexual violence. Consequently, my analysis is not restricted to claiming that only depictions of sexual violence as erotic are pernicious. I return to the significance of this point in §1.6.

<sup>11</sup> This is not to suggest that eroticized refusal narratives never feature male refusers. While the key case studies in this chapter feature male pursuers and female refusers, this trope needn't necessarily gender the roles in this way – see *Teenage Bounty Hunters* (2020) for an example of a woman

*Get Him to the Greek* (Stoller, 2010) a male character is penetrated without his consent by a female character. This is trivialised – the tone is comedic – but there is no doubt that the sexual contact is unwanted (indeed, this is the intended source of the humour). The prescribed perspective is a humorous one. By contrast, I am concerned with cases in which the audience is meant to conclude that this contact is (at least, eventually) wanted and take up an eroticising perspective; this does not include all trivialising depictions of sexual violence.

Secondly, it is not necessary for a narratives' contents to amount to sexual violence in order to constitute an eroticised refusal narrative. I do not claim that all putative cases of ignored sexual refusal are cases of sexual violence; consequently, my analysis is not restricted to claiming that only depictions of sexual violence as erotic are pernicious. That is, in some cases the contents of a narrative may be, on the prescribed interpretation, an instance of insincere (or 'token') refusal. I take the sincerity of Galore's refusal to be, at best, ambiguous but consider *Baby It's Cold Outside* (hereafter, BICO).<sup>12</sup> The song has generated considerable controversy in recent years; an excerpt from the lyrics reveals the relevant dynamic for my purposes:

“I simply must go (But, baby, it's cold outside)

The answer is no (But, baby, it's cold outside)

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pursuing a man. In this case, the man who refuses wants to refrain from sex for religious reasons, but his girlfriend persists in physical advances anyway. Subsequent scenes show the two apparently enjoying mutually desired sex on repeated occasions. Thanks to Lara Jost for this example.

<sup>12</sup> I here use the original lyrics by Frank Loesser as featured in *Neptune's Daughter* (Buzzell, 1949). Some covers alter the lyrics and different performances can cast the depicted events in a different light, including parodies which deliberately play into the more sinister reading of the lyrics, subverting the trope.

[...]

You've really been grand (I thrill when you touch my hand)

But don't you see? (How can you do this thing to me?)

There's bound to be talk tomorrow (Think of my lifelong sorrow)

At least there will be plenty implied (If you got pneumonia and died)”

(Loesser, 1949)

‘Wolf’, as the bracketed half of the duet was titled in the original lyrics, does not physically force himself on ‘Mouse’, the reluctant refuser. Rather he counters her reasons for leaving with reasons for staying. Mouse, likewise, is not urgent in her refusal. While she points to reasons she ought to leave, these are blended with Mouse apparently making excuses to stay longer: ‘but maybe just a cigarette more’. Within the depiction, these excuses, and Mouse’s instrumental reasons for declining, are cast as a flirtatious back-and-forth rather than a serious refusal.

I take it that, on the prescribed interpretation, Mouse does not sincerely refuse, and Wolf recognises this. Consequently, there is no violation of consent depicted here (unlike in *Bond Scene*, at least on one obvious interpretation). However, *BICO* is nonetheless an example of an eroticised refusal narrative. Mouse refuses Wolf’s advanced, even if insincerely, and he persists – this persistence successfully overcomes the original refusal. The overcoming of Mouse’s (apparent) refusal is framed as flirtatious and erotic. Thus, the scope of the argument mounted in this chapter is not limited to narratives in which the contents ought to be deemed sexual violence, but rather extends more broadly to narratives which depict the overcoming

of sexual refusal as erotic (even in cases where, contextually, the overcoming of refusal depicted is permissible).<sup>13</sup>

Perspectives are interpretively powerful. Flawed and distorting perspectives thus have the potential to be deeply damaging. The seduction perspective eroticised refusal narratives prescribe is, I suggest, deeply pernicious; if exported it will substantially obstruct agents' abilities to identify real-world sexual assault. In the next section, I examine how this perspective may be exported into the real world.

## **§1.4 Exemplification and Export**

The central concern with depictions like *Bond Scene* is how they can cause harm in the real world. I suggest that they may do so by *exemplifying* a perspective on which sexual refusal is something to be negotiated, something it is erotic to overcome (Elgin, 2009; 2016; 2017). On this analysis, these narratives are akin to an illustrative example, from which one gains a new perspective on seduction and sexual refusal.

### *§1.4.1 Narrative Exemplars*

It is widely recognised that narratives can influence how we think. Corresponding to the distinction between the narrative contents and the narrative framing we can

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<sup>13</sup> It ought to be emphasized, that such narratives are not limited to older media which reflects anachronistic norms. For instance, *Ratatouille* (Bird, 2007) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006) both feature examples of eroticized refusal, in which a female characters' resistance to a kiss gives way to desire, despite being produced in different eras for markedly different audiences than *Goldfinger*.

distinguish two different sorts of narrative export<sup>14</sup>. Firstly, one may export some *contents* of a narrative, wherein a viewer comes to believe the narrative *resembles* the world<sup>15</sup>. However, one may also export the *perspective* the narrative prescribes, exporting some way of thinking about the contents (regardless of whether one exports the contents themselves.) It is this latter sort of export I am concerned with.

Many in aesthetics have highlighted the power of fiction to equip us with new perspectives (Eaton, 2003; Camp, 2017; Currie, 1990; Gaut, 1998; Gendler, 2000). Nussbaum (1992) argues that one of our key reasons for engaging with fiction is to gain new ‘moral perspectives’. For instance, we may come to think differently about all-consuming obsession from reading *Moby Dick*. This is not akin to content export wherein we take the depiction to be realistic, as might be the case if we came to form beliefs about the nature of the whaling industry from the novel. Rather, the perspective that the narrative equips one with may be extracted from its specific content and applied to new targets (Camp, 2017). I therefore propose that it is the seduction perspective that depictions like *Bond Scene* prescribe, characterised by the disposition to excuse ignoring sexual refusal, which may be exported. If so, the exculpating dispositions described in the previous section would be deployed in the real world.

I here draw on Elgin’s account of how fictions may *exemplify* a way of thinking in a manner that equips the viewer to deploy it in other contexts. Exemplification, on

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<sup>14</sup> Note that I do not, in drawing this distinction, mean to suggest that the two are neatly divided or cannot co-occur.

<sup>15</sup> This ‘background blurring’ view is the line taken up in Langton & West’s (1993) analysis.

Elgin's account, is a kind of example which enables us to understand the target. For instance,

A sample problem worked out in a textbook exemplifies a reasoning strategy that students are supposed to learn. Each sample or example highlights some of its own properties, makes them manifest, draws attention to them. (Elgin, 2009, p. 322)

In this case, the sample textbook problem is an *exemplar*. By working through the steps of the model solution, we may *grasp* the reasoning strategy the exemplar is used to *exemplify*.

Analogously, a narrative may exemplify a perspective. In the case of the textbook solution, having acquired the technique the sample problem is used to illustrate one may deploy the technique to unseen problems. Just as the model solution illustrates the specific mode of reasoning by application to an example, the narrative takes some series of events (the narrative contents) and illustrates a perspective on these contents. Successful imaginative engagement with the narrative – such that one 'sees' the narrative contents' in the intended way – may equip one with a perspective that can be applied to new targets. In the case of *James Bond*, for instance, the franchise and titular character exemplify a particular ideal of masculinity. Bond is an *exemplar* of what masculinity is and what men should be:<sup>16</sup> intelligent, brave, resilient. Bond's conduct exemplifies traits (in rather extreme ways) which are

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<sup>16</sup> 'Should' here describes a widespread normative conception of ideal masculinity, rather than a claim about what our conception of masculinity should, in fact, be.

paradigmatic of a particular conception of masculinity. These narratives thereby exemplify a particular perspective on masculinity.<sup>17</sup>

The conditions of perspectival export do not require misunderstanding on the part of the viewer in the way content export does.<sup>18</sup> Correspondingly, one needn't think that viewers are mistaking depictions like *Bond Scene* for reality – a viewer needn't think that Galore's reactions to Bond's use of force is realistic – for them to be equipped with new ways of thinking about and interpreting sexual refusal. This is a crucial difference between my own analysis of perspectival export extant content-focussed analyses. On an account like Langton and West's, recall, viewers may be prone to form false beliefs due to taking the fiction to have a realistic 'background'. The fictional status, on that analysis, is thus of central importance. However, fictional status is not central to perspectival export. Viewers do not need to be confused in any way about the narrative's fictional status in order to export this perspective.

### §1.4.2 *Seduction Schema*

I contend that eroticised refusal narratives are exemplars of a pervasive *sexual script* on which the overcoming of refusal is central. Social schemas (and scripts) are a kind of malleable blueprint for navigating social contexts (Boutyline & Soter, 2021; DiMaggio, 1997; Schank & Abelson, 1977; Sewell, 1992). 'Schema' and 'script' are sometimes used interchangeably; in this thesis, I use 'schema' as a general term for

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<sup>17</sup> Note, to say that Bond exemplifies a particular conception of masculinity is not to say men are expected to closely mimic his actions, which are far-fetched and unrealistic. They are instead meant to manifest similar traits and values.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in at least some cases, non-realistic fictions might be *better* placed to equip us with access to a new perspective (Elgin, 2017).

these interpretive blueprints and 'script' to describe schemas for sequential interactions. Eickers characterises scripts as "a set of guidelines that specifies expectations about other's behaviour" which may be brought "together in integrative ways to make sense of what's going on and how to interact appropriately" (Eickers, 2023, p. 87). Sexual scripts guide behaviour in sexual contexts. Such scripts are both predictive, shaping one's expectations of others and helping to resolve coordination problems, and normative, setting standards for how agents ought to act.

Eroticised refusal narratives have a common underlying structure around which they are organised: sexual refusal, met with persistence, followed by the refuser's submission. Our familiarity with this standard sequence enables us to engage with the narrative. Just as we know that a story which starts 'once upon a time' will (typically) end with 'happy ever after', we know that given the right genre expectations, a sexual refusal will give way to desire. This sequence of events is a 'story schema'; a blueprint which guides how we interpret the narrative (Fraser, 2021, pp 4043-4045). Story schemas guide the mental organisation of events presented within a narrative. These story schemas facilitate the interpretation of a narrative and guide how its contents are mentally organised. Narratives which embed story schema are more readily understood and recalled (Fraser, 2021, pp. 4043; Mandler, 2014). These features are shared with other schemas. For instance, there is evidence when children are exposed to images of people performing activities that clash with the accepted gender schema, they are prone to misremember the gender of the person in the images (Bauer, 1993). Schemas (including scripts) thus



facilitate interpretation and, when shared,<sup>19</sup> will manifest in “intersubjective patterns of perception, thought and behaviour” (Haslanger, 2010, p.20).

I propose that the *story schema* of eroticised refusal narratives is also a *sexual script*; engaging with these narratives can embed this sexual script and its cognitive effects. *Bond Scene* is an exemplar of a seduction script on which resistance is not merely compatible with seduction but, rather, is a *paradigmatic feature* of seduction: the overcoming of sexual refusal is itself erotic. This script is the product of conceptualising seduction as *giving in to temptation* combined with gendered sexual roles of female passivity.<sup>20</sup> The idea that to be seduced is to surrender to temptation is apparent in many figurative uses of the term: one is *seduced* by a piece of cake if one cannot help but eat it. (By contrast, to say someone is seduced by the sensible merits of increased pension contributions sounds odd: seduction suggests giving into what one, perhaps impulsively, wants). Thus, one is seduced when one *gives in* to sexual desire.

This conception of seduction, as giving in to temptation, interfaces with a deeply pervasive set of social scripts and norms on which men initiate and pursue sex while women merely respond. Women are thus positioned as gatekeepers of sex, the domain of their agency restricted to whether they grant or deny sexual access (Gavey, 2018; LaPlante et al., 2010). These asymmetric roles produce two different

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<sup>19</sup> Schemas need not be shared – for instance, one’s ‘self-schema’ which guides how one interprets one’s own experiences and identity – but in this thesis I am primarily concerned with shared, social schemas and will simply use ‘schema’ as a shorthand for this category.

<sup>20</sup> My discussion to pertains to a specific (pervasive) conception of ‘seduction’; I leave open the possibility of being a pluralist about seduction.

(gendered) seduction scenarios. If male sexuality is understood in terms of pursuit, then to be unable to resist sexual temptation is to be unable to *resist pursuing* (e.g., Odysseus wrecking his boats on the rocks when seduced by the sirens). By contrast, if female sexuality is understood as gatekeeping sex, then to be seduced is to *cease resisting*. Thus, for a woman to be seduced, is to be unable to sustain resistance.<sup>21</sup>

This seduction script is, centrally, the erotic overcoming of sexual refusal, turning a ‘no’ into a ‘yes’. Of course, this may not be genuine persuasion. Notice that the idea of ‘token refusal’<sup>22</sup> in which one *feigns* resistance is itself a ‘playing out’ of this script, as in the case of *BICO*, itself presupposes that pursuit is erotic. The result is that overcoming refusal is *eroticised*: it is not merely compatible with seduction, but a core feature of seduction scripts (Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Ryan, 2011).

Scripts thus correspond to perspectives. While one may attempt to algorithmically mimic a script, ‘mastery’ of the script means one will be guided by the script, to expect conformity with it, respond negatively to departures and so on. Schemas are, paradigmatically, automatic and unreflective. On the seduction perspective which corresponds to this seduction script, resistance which gives way to submission makes accessible the inference that the refuser has given into desire. Initial refusal is part of the script, so raises no saliently unanswered questions nor prompts a negative response. These intertwined norms of female passivity and chastity “rationalise

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<sup>21</sup> There is sometimes a more sinister conception of seduction as a broader overcoming of resistance. I here consider cases in which ceased resistance is due to desire winning out since (a) I take the sinister upshots of understanding seduction as *any* overcoming of refusal to be more straightforward to identify (b) I take it that giving into desire is the more prototypical case and – crucially – the one exemplified by the depictions under discussion.

<sup>22</sup> See Bourke (2015) for a detailed historical analysis of this stereotype.

force” (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 175). Compare customs of etiquette in which offers of second servings of food are expected to be initially declined: one learns that initial refusal is not a reliable signal. Consequently, persistence in the face of that resistance is not viewed as sinister or meaningfully unwanted, but normalised. When this perspective is deployed, sexual refusal – perhaps even sincere sexual refusal – is not *diagnostic* of sexual violence (Camp, 2017, p. 80; Tversky, 1977). These narratives correspondingly exemplify a perspective which disposes one to interpret persistence in the face of sexual refusal as desired and, therefore, excusable.

Let us return to *Bond Scene*, which I contend is an exemplar of this script. Bond is irresistible to women in this sense, as illustrated by his interaction with Galore. Galore has many pragmatic reasons to refuse him and ostensibly attempts to do so. Yet, on the prescribed interpretation, in the face of Bond’s physical persistence and the kiss he forces on her, she is unable to sustain her resistance. Engaged viewers are to interpret Galore as unable to resist Bond, giving in to her desire for him. It is in this respect that *Bond Scene* exemplifies seduction, and in this way, it eroticises refusal. That Galore initially attempts to resist Bond is not a caveat to his seductive powers but *testament to them*. To seduce someone is to be irresistible to them; it is an erotic victory proportional to the resistance overcome. Overcoming refusal is a core erotic dimension to this game of chase.

Eroticised refusal narratives in general, as outlined in §1.3, correspond to this seduction script of the erotic overcoming of refusal. In eroticised refusal narratives the refuser's eventual surrender is depicted as 'giving in to desire' and the prescribed perspective casts these events as erotic. Eroticised refusal narratives thereby exemplify the corresponding seduction perspective.

When this seduction perspective is deployed in cases of ignored refusal, they simply ‘look like’ seduction. Indeed, there is evidence that social schemas and scripts may influence our literal perception (see Munton, 2019a) such that refusal might quite literally *look like* coy feigned resistance, though I will not pursue this suggestion here. From the seduction perspective resistance is to be expected; the seduction perspective is characterised by attentional and inquisitive dispositions on which refusal *raises no questions*.<sup>23</sup> The dispositions of this perspective include noticing and producing excuses for persistence, interpreting the refused advance as desired, inferring that partial or ceased resistance reveals desire and so on. Submission in the face of persistence is interpreted as giving in to desire: “dominance plus submission is force plus consent. This equals sex, not rape.” (MacKinnon 1991, p. 172).

Consequently, this submission offers *closure*; applied to such events, this pernicious perspective leaves us with no lingering questions. In the next section I explore how it obstructs recognition of sexual violence and propose it constitutes an overlooked form of rape myth.

## **§1.5 Perspectival Rape myths**

I argued in the previous section that eroticised refusal narratives *exemplify* the seduction perspective which may enable its export. I here argue that the exemplified perspective disposes one to interpret sexual violence as seduction, constituting a pernicious form of *perspectival* rape myth.

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<sup>23</sup> Relatedly, see Begby (2021) on evidential pre-emption.

The crux of the problem with exporting this seduction perspective is that the events of eroticised refusal narratives resemble many instances of sexual violence and deploying this perspective will dispose one to misinterpret them as seduction. Many sexual assaults occur in 'romantic' contexts (e.g., following a date) and it is common for victims of these attacks to either freeze, not physically resisting, or else initially resist and then stop (Koss, 2011). The overlap between cases of sexual violence and the events of these depictions is therefore considerable, constituting a range of cases which might be seen as seduction or rape, but which ought to be recognised as the latter. Empirical research has found that common features of 'seduction scripts' include initial reluctance, persuasion, and regret (Littleton, 2001; Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Ryan, 2011). It has been suggested within social psychology that this may obstruct recognition of sexual violence and, indeed, 'scaffold' rape (Gavey, 2018). I contend that the seduction perspective corresponding to such scripts obstructs recognition of sexual violence.

Compounding the problem of the similarity between instances of sexual violence and the script for seduction is their comparative lack of resemblance to the dominant stereotypical script for rape. The 'real' or 'blitz' rape script is a case in which the (typically female) victim is assaulted by a stranger at night, outside the home, and resists but is overpowered with force (Littleton & Dodd, 2016; Ryan, 2011). Cases of so-called 'date rape', therefore – occurring in a romantic context, perpetrated by an assailant known to the attacker – may be closer to the seduction script than the 'real' rape script. Likewise, many victims of sexual violence do not resist with utmost physical force; they either freeze or initially resist but then cease (Koss, 2011). The seduction perspective makes accessible a standard way of interpreting such cases, on which a lack of resistance is interpreted as desire.

To see how this perspective obstructs recognition of sexual violence, consider the case described in *Police Report*. Suppose these events occur after a date and are non-consensual. The narrative framing of *Bond Scene* prescribes a perspective on which one interprets Bond's persistence as a case of seduction and, crucially, one is disposed to interpret Galore's eventual submission as desire for sex. If this perspective is applied to the case of *Police Report*, it will be miscategorised as seduction and misinterpreted as not being against Woman's will. The perspective exemplified by eroticised refusal narratives thus operates to obstruct recognition of rape. The proximity of the exemplar(s) to instances of sexual violence operates to infringe on the cases which would be aptly categorised as rape, the interpretation of seduction eclipsing that of rape. This perspective thereby truncates the cases recognised as sexual violence.

I contend that this perspective constitutes a neglected *perspectival* form of 'rape myth'. Rape myths are standardly characterised as "false or stereotypical beliefs about rape which often excuse and/or legitimise sexual violence" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Paradigmatic examples of rape myths include:

'Many women have an unconscious desire to be raped.'

'Women often lie about being raped.'

'If a husband forces his wife to have sex it isn't rape.'

'If someone doesn't resist then they have consented.'

Rape myths are deeply pernicious. In empirical research, 'rape myth acceptance' has been found to be widespread and to predict a range of harmful outcomes (Hänel, 2020). It has, unsurprisingly, been found to predict proclivity to perpetrate sexual

violence (Bohner et al., 2005; Malamuth, 1981). Police officers who accept rape myths about the frequency of false accusations – research indicates many do – are more likely to not pursue cases (Dellinger Page, 2011; Schwarz 2010). Acceptance amongst jury members decreases the likelihood of conviction (Burrowes, 2013). Further, among those who have had experiences which meet the legal definition of rape, acceptance of rape myths which pertain to cases like their experiences reduces the likelihood they will categorise those experiences as rape (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004).

I contend that the seduction perspective constitutes a form of rape myth because it operates to fulfil their characteristic function(s). The contours along which the perspective obstructs recognitions of sexual violence reflect what Jenkins categorises as ‘consent myths’: “Rape myths that obscure what counts as consensual sex and what counts as rape” such as ‘Non-consensual sex always involves overwhelming physical force’ (Jenkins 2021, p. 40). The exculpatory inferences which the seduction perspective disposes one to, such as inferring that because someone stopped resisting, they desired sex, mirror these paradigmatic myths. The seduction perspective thus fulfils the characteristic function of rape myths; excusing and legitimising rape. As such, the seduction perspective ought to be categorised as a perspectival form of rape myth.

Perspectival rape myths differ from the way rape myths are often conceptualised, in important ways. Much of the emphasis in discussions of rape myths is doxastic; the widely used definition of “false and stereotypical beliefs” (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994) is characteristic of this approach. Rape myth acceptance here is understood as belief in specific propositions which excuse and legitimise sexual violence. While

empirical investigations of rape myth acceptance have explored more subtle mechanisms (Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Payne et al., 1999; Ryan, 2011), this doxastic emphasis remains pervasive in wider discourse. It is particularly apparent in education resources which seek to ‘debunk’ rape myths with ‘facts’ such as statistics (e.g., about the rarity of false accusations) and assertions such as “submission is not consent”.<sup>24</sup>

Ryan (2011) highlights that there are two ways in which we may understand the ‘myth’ of rape myths. In the first sense, a myth is a (pervasive) false belief. This sense is brought to mind by misconceptions about, for instance, the prevalence of false accusations or the likelihood that someone who is assaulted will necessarily fight back. These are specific false, or stereotypical, *beliefs* about the world. Emphasis to date has primarily centred on rape myths as mythic in this first sense. In the second sense, however, we have the idea of “myth as a story that is embedded in history, religion, and culture and that guides human behaviour and gives it meaning. [...] Myths can provide prototypical stories that guide behaviour” (Ryan, 2011, p. 774).

Ryan’s used of myth here resembles Lindemann’s notion of ‘master narratives’ which are “the socially shared stories that everybody knows” (2020, p. 287). These master narratives “depict how we are supposed to behave in specific settings” (Lindemann,

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<sup>24</sup> For examples, see <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/myths-vs-realities/> and <https://prevent.richmond.edu/prevention/education/rape-myths.html>



2020, p. 288) – i.e., they are scripts of the kind introduced above. They form a central element of what is sometimes termed the ‘social imaginary’:<sup>25</sup>

A repository of images and scripts that become collectively shared. This symbolic repository provides the representational background against which people tend to share their thoughts and listen to each other in a culture.

(Medina, 2011, p. 33)

Perspectival rape myths are myths in this latter sense. The difference between doxastic and perspectival rape myths is important because a flawed perspective operates to obstruct the recognition of sexual violence in ways that differ from false beliefs.

It is familiar that one’s patterns of judgement may reveal implicit dispositions which one does not consciously, or overtly, endorse.<sup>26</sup> Such divergences can produce gaps between what one, if asked, would say a term picks out and the way in which it is deployed. Consider describing someone’s voice as ‘shrill’. If we were to ask the speaker for the meaning of the term, this might not be characterised as a gendered term. Yet if we turn to examine the contexts in which the term is deployed – who is described as ‘shrill’ – this might reveal covert cues for the term and lead us to discover that at the operative level, the term is indeed gendered.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> I take Medina’s use of ‘social imaginary’ to be the same as what has elsewhere been called the -cultural, as opposed to conversational - ‘common ground’ (Langton, 2012; Haslanger, 2010) and ‘cultural technē’ (Haslanger, 2017; 2020a; 2020b).

<sup>26</sup> For an account of implicit bias and its relationships to social schemas (Soon, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> See Haslanger’s (2005) distinction between ‘manifest’ and ‘operative’ concepts.

Jenkins (2017) highlights that agents may be acquainted with the concept of ‘rape’ without correctly deploying it under all circumstances. It is not uncommon for there to be a gap between the extension of a concept one possesses and the cases in which one deploys it – for instance, I possess the concepts of both ‘cormorant’ and ‘shag’ but when looking at an individual bird I often mistake shags for cormorants (Engelhardt, 2019; Putnam, 1973). In the case of ‘rape’, one may possess the concept yet fail to apply it. The potential for this ‘gap’ between concept possession and application is made stark in the following statement, which was submitted in support of Brock Turner at his infamous 3-month sentencing for sexual assaulting Chanel Miller. Turner’s friend, Leslie Rasmussen, writes that Turner assaulting Miller behind a dumpster while she was unconscious and intoxicated

is completely different from a woman getting kidnapped and raped as she is walking to her car in a parking lot. That is a rapist. These [boys like Turner] are not rapists. These are idiot boys and girls having too much to drink and not being aware of their surroundings and having clouded judgment. (Paiella 2016)

Rasmussen possess the concept of ‘rape’ and ‘rapist’ yet insists that ‘rapist’ is not aptly applied to Turner - because he is not like the perpetrator in the stereotypical blitz rape script. She even goes as far as to make the seemingly paradoxical claim that ‘rape on campus isn’t always because people are rapists’, bizarrely divorcing the extension of ‘rapist’ from ‘person who commits rape’.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Falbo (2022) for discussion.

Perspectival rape myths are one way in which such gaps can emerge, leading agents to fail to categorise as rape interactions which plainly violate consent. The seduction perspective itself is not a particular excuse, but a malleable disposition to notice and produce excuses. When deployed, one is disposed to excuse ignoring consent, notice explanations as to why *this* particular case isn't rape. The nature of perspectival rape myths is therefore importantly different from doxastic myths, in ways that make the above attempts to 'debunk' unlikely to be effective.

## **§1.6 Upshots and Interventions**

Perspectives are powerful interpretive tools; perspectival rape myths are thus pernicious. Moreover, many of the contexts with which rape myths are concerned are ones in which perspectives are crucial. Notably, both individuals' interpretations of their own experiences (such as claiming or rejecting victim/survivor identity) and juror deliberation have been characterised as a process of narrative construction (Hastie, 1993). In light of this, the seduction perspective eroticised refusal narratives exemplify ought to be recognised as a form of *perspectival rape myth* and the distinctive nature of perspectival rape myths must be considered.

We can imagine an agent who, on reflection, rejects that utmost resistance is necessary for rape. Yet, if they are generally disposed to interpret cases in which there is not utmost resistance as seduction, the cases they recognise as rape will resemble the extension of someone who holds the outright belief that without utmost resistance sexual contact cannot constitute rape. Such an agent may honestly assert that they do not think that in *all* or *most* cases where there is not utmost resistance

the refused sexual contact is not rape. Yet, when presented with specific cases, they will interpret *this particular* lack of resistance as revealing consent. Such an agent does not (overtly) *believe* these rape myths since they reject these myths when characterised as general statements<sup>29</sup>. However, they will still be disposed to interpret specific cases in ways that broadly reflect this belief. Consequently, to inform such an agent that “It’s really common for people who experience rape [...] to find they can’t move or speak” is unlikely to sway such an agent in the way it might someone who merely held a specific false belief.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore crucial to examine how the seduction perspective may operate as a perspectival rape myth in these contexts, as this will require distinctive interventions.

Attending to the potential for eroticised refusal narratives to promote perspectival rape myths thus has important consequences for attempting to mitigate these harms. One consequence is that it undermines the importance of a narrative's fictional status, which has been a preoccupation of educational policy as well as the philosophical literature. In the philosophical literature, the emphasis on content export had led to a doxastic focus on the risk that viewers may gain false beliefs by mistaking fiction for reality. This focus on ambiguous fictional status is also prominent in discussions of education interventions which aim to mitigate the influence of (harmful) pornography (see McGlynn 2021; 2022). The prominent view here is that pornography can be a kind of ‘miseducation’. Many educational

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<sup>29</sup> Depending on one’s account of belief, one may claim that if an agent’s behaviour reflects such an attitude, then the agent does in fact hold this belief. I shall not take a stand on this dispute here, since the sense of ‘belief’ revealed by such ‘debunking’ attempts rely on an overt conception of belief which the agent, by stipulation, does not hold.

<sup>30</sup> <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/myths-vs-realities/>

interventions seek to mitigate the potentially damaging effects of pornography by emphasising its fictional, or more broadly unrealistic, status.

McGlynn (2021; 2022) raises the worry that emphasising that pornography is ‘not real’ will not fully address its influence, because there is a sense in which what much pornography depicts *is* real – in the case of pornographic films, for instance, the actors are engaged in unsimulated sex acts even if there are other fictional elements. The category of eroticised refusal narrative I have put forward here clearly includes many much more straightforwardly fictional examples. However, I contend that, even in these cases, emphasising their fictional status is unlikely to be fully successful if, as argued here, part of what such depictions do is promote *perspectival* myths. As noted, if one learns from narratives like *Bond Scene* the way one learns from allegories, then pointing to a lack of realism will not necessarily mitigate perspectival export. I simply do not need to believe *1984* is ‘realistic’ for it to shape my perspective on government authority. While these interventions may be valuable, they are ill-suited to challenging perspectival export<sup>31</sup>.

To this point, I have developed an analysis of how eroticised refusal narratives may promote harmful attitudes which is not limited to depictions of sexual violence or pornographic materials. One may still think that pornographic examples will be *especially* concerning. Even if this mechanism does not rely on ambiguity about realism, it has been argued that the erotic properties of pornography may exacerbate its harmful effects. That is, the fact that audiences typically masturbate while

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<sup>31</sup> If this analysis is correct, interventions should target perspective and sexual scripts. One possibility would be to explore using ‘narrative counter speech’ to do so (Lepoutre, 2022). I will return to the issue of how frames may be resisted in the final chapter.

engaging with pornographic materials makes its capacity to influence audiences' attitudes more acute.<sup>32</sup> I take this to be an empirical claim and won't attempt to reject it here. However, I do wish to highlight an alternative consideration on which ostensibly more harmless media may be *better* positioned to enact the specific harms I have put forward in this analysis.

I have suggested that these depictions may serve as exemplars for a harmful kind of seduction script; that is, these narratives may perpetuate and entrench *norms*. In light of this, the *public* nature of mainstream depictions of eroticised refusal narratives, even if ostensibly less extreme, may make them more powerful in this regard. Social conventions, including sexual scripts, rely on a shared common ground; we adopt them in part out of expectations that others will do the same. At present, pornography is primarily *privately* consumed; even if I know, or suspect, that most people consume pornography I possess minimal information about *what* they are watching.<sup>33</sup> However, mainstream media, such as *Bond* films, are consumed publicly. When I watch them, I can gain information about what *others* think men are and should be, I can gain beliefs about what *others* consider erotic. In this regard, less extreme but more mainstream depictions of eroticised refusal may be able have a greater influence over our shared social schema and scripts.

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<sup>32</sup> Eaton (2003) refers to arousal specifically in her account of eroticization.

<sup>33</sup> Though, it is worth noting, that much of the early discussion took place with a comparatively more public consumption of pornography via movie theatres etc. The emergence of video rentals and subsequently the availability of internet pornography has changed the nature of this terrain considerably (Kleinhans, 2006).

The analysis of eroticised refusal depictions developed here began by proposing that we shift our attention from the currently dominant focus on narrative contents towards the role of narrative framing. In doing so we shift our attention from specific beliefs to the broader mechanisms which influence the sorts of beliefs we are disposed to form. This, in turn, reveals how obstacles to the recognition of rape may emerge at the level of open-ended interpretative dispositions which reveal systematic cues for withholding categorisations of rape. Attending to the role of perspective is, thus, essential for a complete analysis of the potential harms of these depictions and for developing interventions to mitigate these harms.

## **§1.7 Conclusion**

Eroticised refusal narratives are pervasive and intuitively concerning. Many have argued that these narratives promote harmful attitudes to sexual violence and normalise ignoring sexual refusal. Here, I have developed a novel account of how they may do so. I have argued that their narrative framing prescribes a perspective which disposes one to notice and produce excuses for ignoring sexual refusal. This analysis diverges from the focus of much work to date, which has centred on the events depicted (i.e., the narrative contents), examining the power of narrative to equip us with new perspectives.

The narrative framing of *Bond Scene* directs us to interpret the narrative contents positively, as a playful and (eventually) mutually desired encounter. The prescribed perspective *eroticises* the overcoming of Galore's apparent resistance. We are directed to make exculpatory inferences which excuse Bond's persistence, and

interpret Galore's ceased resistance as desire, resolving the scene's tension.

Eroticised refusal narratives more broadly depict sexual refusal as something which is negotiable, which it is permissible to ignore, and which is erotic to overcome. I have argued that these narratives are *exemplars* of a seduction script on which overcoming refusal is central. They thereby exemplify a perspective which eroticises refusal.

The perspective eroticised refusal narratives prescribe thereby obstructs recognition of sexual violence. Many instances of sexual violence resemble these narrative contents. A disposition to deploy this perspective when interpreting sexual encounters is, thus, a disposition to miscategorise, and wrongly excuse, sexual violence. I have argued that this perspective should, therefore, be categorised as a form of rape myth. On this proposal, one does not come away with a specific excuse for certain cases, but a disposition to excuse. Agents who hold these dispositions may reject overt rape myths, yet systematically fail to recognise the cases in question. Attempting to dismantle these obstacles therefore demands a different strategy to tackling flawed beliefs. Common 'debunking' strategies will be of limited use if this mechanism is at work.

In summary, I have developed a novel analysis of how these narratives may obstruct recognition of sexual violence. In doing so I have offered an account of an overlooked form of rape myths. The preceding analysis thus extends a long-standing feminist debate with consequences for educational interventions. By attending to the power of narratives to prescribe perspectives, I hope to have provided valuable insight into the nature of these obstacles which opens avenues for future research.



## 2. Mis-Interpretive Resources

### §2.1 Introduction

Our interpretive resources enable us to make sense of, and communicate about, our shared world. When these interpretive resources are flawed, this impedes our ability to understand. These resources may be flawed not only in lacking what is required to render some target intelligible; they may also include resources which distort the world, producing misunderstanding. That is, they contain resources which offer the *sense* of apparent understanding while, in fact, distorting what they are used to interpret. In this chapter, I examine the pernicious effects of interpretive resources which systematically produce misunderstanding: *mis-interpretive resources*.<sup>34</sup> I highlight the role of these resources in sustaining pernicious ignorance and perpetuating unjust social practices.

Consider the following case of a flawed interpretive resource. Suppose we have a dictionary for translating a language which lists what each word in the target language means in English. The entries are largely accurate, but a fraction of terms in the target language don't appear in the dictionary at all, while some others have entries but are mistranslated. Such a dictionary is flawed and will fail to fully equip us with the ability to competently translate. However, the terms which lack translation and those which are included but mistranslated are importantly different kinds of flaws. For entries which merely lack any translation, this error should be

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<sup>34</sup> In this chapter, 'misinterpretation' and 'misunderstanding' are used interchangeably.

discernible when the missing phrase is encountered. By contrast, with a false entry we can seemingly translate the term with no apparent issues; the false translation mistakenly appears to give us the required resource. Moreover, the errors contained in these mistranslations will propagate when we use the dictionary. The mistaken translation may thus be a more damaging error than lacking an entry.

Analogously to the dictionary example, it is important to identify the ways in which distorting interpretive resources differ from mere absence of fruitful resources. This chapter concerns the way in which our shared interpretive resources – such as words, concepts, and schemas – may produce misunderstanding. I contrast *mere lack* of understanding, in which we lack apparent intelligibility, with cases of more pernicious, substantive *misunderstanding*, where one has a mistaken ‘sense’ of understanding. Mis-interpretive resources are those which, akin to the mistranslated dictionary entries, provide a mistaken sense of understanding. The harms of these mis-interpretive resources extend beyond the *lack* of an adequate interpretive resource. They positively distort what they are used to interpret while offering a false sense of successful understanding.

There is an extensive and growing literature concerning how inadequate interpretive resources may constitute and sustain injustice. Specifically, *hermeneutical injustice* occurs when marginalised agents are unable to render their experiences ‘communicatively intelligible’ due to exclusion from the joint determination of our hermeneutic (i.e. interpretive) resources (Fricker, 2007). To date, the extensive scholarship on hermeneutical injustice has primarily had a ‘negative’ focus – that is,

it has centred on absences<sup>35</sup> – along two dimensions. Firstly, when discussing the adequacy of our interpretive resources, attention has primarily centred on ‘gaps’ (or ‘lacunae’) where resources ought to be. This description conflates the two sorts of errors illustrated by the dictionary case above: we may lack an accurate translation because we lack any translation, or we may lack an accurate translation due to the *presence* of a flawed one. Secondly, even where the presence of flawed resources is considered (Falbo, 2022; Dular, 2023), the resulting epistemic harms have been primarily characterised as the *inability* to render experience communicatively intelligible; *obstructing* understanding.

This negative approach captures only part of the picture, neglecting the pernicious effects of flawed interpretive resources which produce misunderstanding. I attend to this oversight, offering an analysis of mis-interpretive resources which identifies harms which go beyond those of lacunae. Firstly, because misunderstanding ‘feels like’ understanding, mis-interpretive resources result in *concealed incompetence* which, I argue, perpetuates hermeneutical injustice. Secondly, deploying mis-interpretive resources will propagate errors which can render otherwise-valuable evidence misleading. I term this *epistemic contamination* and highlight its ideological role, that is, its role in sustaining unjust social practices. Mis-interpretive resources may thus produce harms beyond the epistemic domain. Possessing a distorting resource may thereby be more damaging than lacking a resource altogether.

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<sup>35</sup> Following (Falbo, 2022) I use ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ to distinguish a focus limited to absences from attention to the presence of flawed resources, as in the sense of ‘negative space’. These terms should not be understood as evaluative.

I begin, in §2.2, by sketching an account of misunderstanding, as ‘grasping’ an inapt interpretive structure, which is distinct from merely failing to understand. I then, in §2.3, offer an account of mis-interpretive resources as those which enable one to grasp inapt interpretive structures, thereby producing misunderstanding. In §2.4 I highlight the role of mis-interpretive resources in hermeneutical injustice by analysing the paradigmatic case of ‘sexual harassment’. I argue that the concealed incompetence which mis-interpretive resources give rise to is central to the perpetuation of hermeneutical injustice. Finally, in §2.5, I show that *ideological* mis-interpretive resources can *contaminate* otherwise-valuable epistemic resources in ways that sustain unjust social practices. In §2.6 I end with some brief concluding remarks.

## **§2.2 Misunderstanding**

I am here interested in how *access* to flawed resources may *produce* misunderstanding. Successful understanding is both epistemically and practically valuable.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, misunderstanding is both epistemically and practically damaging. In this section, I differentiate mere lack of understanding, in which one lacks any way of making sense of some phenomenon, from misunderstanding, where one has a *mistaken sense* of successful understanding. I begin here by offering an account of misunderstanding, differentiating it from mere lack of understanding. To do so, let us first consider the nature of understanding.

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<sup>36</sup> It has been argued that understanding is the primary bearer of epistemic value and ought to be the central subject of epistemology (Eglin 2017; Gardiner 2012).

### §2.2.1 Understanding

Understanding is often characterised by (favourable) contrast with mere knowledge of disparate facts: “we would surely rather understand than merely know” (Pritchard 2010, p. 74). Understanding is centrally about how things relate to one another. Kvanvig writes that:

What is distinctive about understanding has to do with the way in which an individual combines pieces of information into a unified body. [...] The grasping of relations between items of information is central to the nature of understanding. (2003, p. 197)

Similarly, Gardiner compares the distinction between mere propositional knowledge and understanding to the difference between reading a book and accepting each claim as true versus “actively grasping how the arguments in the book hang together” (2012, p 171). Understanding is here characterised as ‘grasping’ how disparate pieces of information ‘fit together’ into a coherent whole (see also Grimm 2012; Riggs 2003). What emerges from such descriptions is that understanding is *structural*; while one can know a range of facts, to understand them is about how one sees them relating to each other (see Zagzebski (2019) and Streven (2013) for explicitly structural accounts of understanding.)

We may therefore, with minimal controversy, roughly summarise understanding as *grasping* how things *fit together*. I here offer some brief remarks on these two aspects, in order to sketch out the kind of error I am here concerned with. Firstly, ‘fitting together’: what is the structure that one ‘grasps’ when one understands?

When we (attempt to) render some information intelligible we organise it along various dimensions. I term this an *interpretive structure*, which is a way of organising a body information<sup>37</sup> in the following interconnected ways:

(1) Relationships of explanation and dependence

Relationships of explanation and dependence are central to understanding and underwrite the ability to offer explanations, make predictions and engage in counterfactual reasoning.

(2) Salience

A salience structure over a body of information determines what is prominent to the agent. Prominence here concerns cognitive accessibility; elements which are salient require less cognitive effort to access (indeed, one may be unable to direct attention away from particularly salient objects).

(3) Importance and Evaluation

Within a body of information, what is deemed to be important and how it is evaluated; a judgement of which pieces of information matter and how.

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<sup>37</sup> Throughout this chapter, my use of 'body of information' is not factive, but rather describes the information an agent takes themselves to possess (i.e., it includes false beliefs the agent holds).

#### (4) Inquiry

What questions are under discussion and how the body of information is deemed to answer them. This will guide when the agent opens and closes inquiry.

These dimensions are closely intertwined with each exerting influence on the others. Which explanatory factors are central and which relationships of dependence matter is subject to which factors are salient and which questions we are seeking to answer. Which questions are raised will turn, in part, on what is salient and importantly unexplained.

What is it to *grasp* such an interpretive structure? Grasping is characterised both in terms of phenomenal experience and ability: *seeing* and/or *knowing how* pieces of information relate to each other. While there is a dispute over which of these is constitutive or primary, I here adopt both as typical features of successful grasping. Firstly, the phenomenal aspect. Grasping is frequently contrasted with merely accepting the content of some claim by appeal to perceptual metaphors, as the term ‘grasp’ itself suggests, particularly visual metaphors (Belkoniene, 2023). Secondly, when one grasps some interpretation or explanation one typically has certain abilities. Hills (2016) offers an influential account of grasping in terms of abilities, on which to grasp some explanation is to have it ‘under one’s cognitive control’: the ability to offer an explanation in one’s own words, make predictions and draw conclusions (for other abilities-based accounts see (De Regt 2009; Grimm, 2011, 2014)). It may be argued that some abilities accounts are overly demanding (e.g., Kelp, 2015). However, as I do not advance any specific analysis of understanding

here, beyond highlighting recognised characteristic features, I remain neutral on these disputes.

Grasping is distinguished from mere belief as a greater cognitive achievement (corresponding to the distinction between knowledge and understanding). A student who grasps an illustrative proof in a textbook doesn't merely believe that each step works but *sees* how they work together and has the ability to deploy the same method to new problems<sup>38</sup>. Grasping an interpretive structure enables an agent to reason counterfactually, offer explanations and make predictions – the characteristic abilities of understanding. When one grasps an interpretive structure one 'knows one's way around' both in having a sense of orientation and in the ability to navigate the given interpretation.

It is worth pausing here to clarify my use of 'grasping' in order to pre-empt a potential confusion. One might object to my unification of the phenomenal sense of grasping with an abilities account like Hill's in the following way. There is a sense in which grasping might not offer a sense of understanding if one 'grasps' an explanation but does not take it to be accurate. For instance, one might understand a conspiracy theory 'from the inside' so to speak – able to identify the predictions it would produce and explain them in one's own words – while taking it to be radically false. In such a case, the worry goes, we would not expect these abilities to produce the corresponding sense of 'seeing' how things fit together. However, this concern

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<sup>38</sup> For this reason, grasping is taken to be qualitatively different to belief, such that no additional belief will mean that one grasps (though see Sliwa (2017) for a competing view). An additional step in an explanation may *trigger* a gestalt shift or the acquisition of an ability, but there is no additional piece of information such as accepting it amounts to grasping.



rests on a confusion about the sense of grasping under discussion. While there is a sense in which the agent in this example grasps the conspiracy theory, the object of their understanding is the theory itself – they do not take the theory to accurately represent the world. Indeed, they may in fact have a sense of how things ‘fit together’, but it is how the pieces of the theory – rather than the world itself – relate to one another. Such an agent will be able to offer the explanations the theory will produce but will not be disposed to actually interpret information they encounter in the world. As I shall use the term, to grasp an interpretive structure is to grasp it *as* an apt representation of the world and orient oneself accordingly.<sup>39</sup>

### §2.2.3 *Misunderstanding*

Grasping an interpretive structure offers the subjective sense of understanding a body of information: one ‘sees’ how the pieces fit together, one can make predictions and offer explanations. However, it is widely recognised that the sense of understanding can come apart from successful understanding (Trout, 2002; 2005). The same body of information may be organised in different – and crucially, better or worse – ways. For example, given the same sequence of events two individuals may differ on causal explanations between them and on which they take to be centrally important. Although the same information may be reasonably interpreted in different ways, and the way we interpretively structure a body of information will be subject to our goals, it is plainly possible to misinterpret evidence. Understanding must therefore require grasping an *apt* interpretive structure. I use ‘apt’ rather than

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<sup>39</sup> Note that, since I intend to speak of cases in which the interpretation one grasps is erroneous, I take the object of grasping to be a representation of the world (i.e., the specific interpretive structure) rather than relations in the world itself (see Baumberger et. al., 2016, p. 13; Grimm 2011).

‘accurate’ here since the latter invites a more factive reading, while some dimensions of interpretive structures – such as salience – are not obviously truth evaluable.

From this, we can say that one *lacks* understanding when one fails to grasp an apt interpretive structure. We may then distinguish *mere lack* of understanding, in which one grasps no interpretive structure and thus has no sense of how things fit together, from *misunderstanding* as grasping an *inapt* interpretive structure. While some bodies of information may be legitimately structured in diverging ways, these interpretive structures are epistemically evaluable. Note that I here take both aptness and grasping (and therefore, understanding) to be gradable notions.

An interpretive structure may be inapt in various ways. One obvious way in which we may misunderstand is by reversing causal relationships or getting counterfactuals wrong. Consider a simple scenario: I accidentally knock a glass off my desk, and it shatters. What *explains* the breaking of the glass is, presumably, my knocking it over. It would be an error to attribute the breaking of the glass to, say, the window being left open if this played no causal role in the breakage. It is not counterfactually true that had the window been shut the glass would not have broken (likewise if I interpret it as a karmic punishment for failing to call my mother). However, other errors may be more complex, concerning which facts *matter* and *how*. Suppose I attribute the glass breaking to gravity. This is a different kind of error, since gravity plainly does have a causal role, and there is thus a dependence relationship, but this is nonetheless a bad explanation under normal conditions (McGrath, 2005). Gravity is part of why the glass broke but it is not an explanation of why this glass broke in this instance (likewise, the invention of the wheel is a bad explanation of a car crash).

The above would be an error in the identifying and offering explanations. Identifying explanatory and causal relationships interfaces judgements of (ab)normality and salience relative to our inquiry. Here, explanation interacts with salience; normal conditions fade into the background while abnormalities are prominent and offer more relevant explanation. Attributions of explanatory significance are also shaped by judgements of importance and evaluation – including, according to recent empirical evidence, normative evaluation (Icard, et. Al, 2017).<sup>40</sup> If my office mate expresses frustration, I might attempt to defend myself by claiming that the glass was unusually fragile - had it been more robust it wouldn't have broken. One response would be to deny this fragility, rejecting the counterfactual. However, my office mate might instead insist that I was blameworthy careless, and that this is the relevant explanatory factor. (One might deny that such normative judgements have a proper place in judgements of *cause* but there is a growing body of evidence that they do, in practice, play a role in such attributions.)

Finally, the value of these explanations interrelates with the structure of our inquiry. Information which is salient because it is importantly abnormal raises questions, while identifying explanations produces answers to those questions. Which explanations suffice is subject to which questions we think are important to answer. Opening and closing inquiry, alongside explanation, is subject to epistemic norms. We may thus epistemically evaluate interpretive structures (regardless of whether we take truth, knowledge, or understanding to be the primary bearer of epistemic value).

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<sup>40</sup> Icard, Kominsky, & Knobe (2017) found that, for example, when there are multiple causal factors contributing to a negative outcome, participants attributed greater causal significance to those which were deemed to violate norms.

We may also evaluate the instrumental epistemic merit of an interpretive structure with respect to whether it is conducive to epistemic goals. The interpretive structure plays a central epistemic role, shaping which lines of inquiry we are disposed to pursue, what explanations we will accept, the inferences we draw etc. The inquisitive dimension of the structure, in particular, will guide how the body of information is likely to be expanded (e.g., which lines of inquiry we take up in order to answer what we take to be important, unanswered questions). We may therefore consider both whether an interpretive structure gets things ‘right’ along the above structural dimensions and whether it is conducive to further epistemic goals (e.g., does it make salient fruitful lines of inquiry, are the inferences it disposes one to truth preserving etc). Notice that, while in what follows I shall be concerned with the relationship between our interpretive resources and injustice, the evaluation described here is firmly epistemic.

In summary, one understands when one *grasps* an *apt* interpretive structure. One fails to understand if one fails to grasp an apt interpretive structure. One may *merely lack* understanding if one fails to grasp any such structure (such as the earlier examples of individuals with knowledge of mere disparate facts) in which case one would also lack a sense of understanding. In contrast, one substantively *misunderstands* if one grasps an inapt interpretive structure. When one grasps such a structure one has the sense of ‘seeing for oneself’ how things ‘fit together’ – but one has not fit them together in the right way. One has only gained *merely apparent* understanding. Misunderstanding is, therefore, a distinct, and more substantive, epistemic failure than a mere lack of understanding.

## §2.3 Mis-Interpretive Resources

In the previous section I offered an account of misunderstanding as grasping an inapt interpretive structure. In this section, I consider how our shared interpretive resources may produce misunderstanding. I term resources which systematically have this effect *mis-interpretive resources*. In order to do so, I here consider the relationship between our interpretive frames and the interpretive structures we are enabled to grasp.

Grasping an interpretive structure is a matter of one's cognitive and affective responses to information. We have various ways of collectively exchanging and negotiating interpretive structures, such that we can coordinate on what matters and how. In particular, shared interpretive resources guide how we interpretively structure information, enabling coordination (which, in turn, underwrites social coordination).<sup>41</sup> I here use 'interpretive resources' to include not only linguistic and conceptual resources, but also metaphors, social scripts, and broader hermeneutical resources.

The previous chapter examined how the way information was represented could prescribe a particular interpretation; specifically, the way in which narratives *frame* their contents, prescribing a particular *perspective*. A perspective, recall, is an open-ended suite of interpretive dispositions which guide how one interprets the information one encounters. The narrative framing 'bakes in' an interpretive

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<sup>41</sup> For instance, the sexual scripts discussed in the previous chapter offer shared interpretive resources which, in turn, enable us to coordinate (as well as serving to regulate) our behaviour.

structure by prescribing a corresponding perspective such that an engaged viewer will ‘see’ the contents in this way. This distinction between *what* is depicted and *how* it is framed can be extended to distinguish two roles our interpretive resources can play.

Firstly, our interpretive resources play a *taxonomic* role, picking out categories and drawing distinctions. Haslanger (2020a; 2020b) terms these divisions in logical space their informational content. Secondly, our interpretive resources “marshal and organize our capacities for attention, categorization, interpretation, memory, language, inference, affect, and the like” (2020b, p. 238). We may say that in this second role our resources *frame* these contents. To use a familiar example, Water and H<sub>2</sub>O may draw the same distinction in logical space (let us suppose) but may *frame* their subject matter differently.

‘Frame’ here describes a way of representing some target, cuing a perspective which shapes how those who inhabit the perspective will interpret information (Camp, 2020; Lakoff, 2014). Narrative frames are elaborate and specific, prescribing a perspective which produces a specific interpretation of the narrative contents. Novel metaphors allow us to communicate idiosyncratic perspectives. Other frames, however, are more conventional and multi-purpose; our shared interpretive resources include such frames. Returning to the previous chapter, eroticised refusal narratives are exemplars of a ‘sexual script’ for seduction – a schema for navigating and interpreting sexual encounters. This schema is a frame which guides how we interpret sexual interactions: one is disposed to interpret refused sexual advances as wanted, ignoring refusal as excusable, etc. While some frames are specific and idiosyncratic (e.g., narrative frames, novel metaphors) others are more conventional

and shared (e.g., social schemas and scripts, conventional metaphors, concepts). Shared frames are powerful tools for wider social coordination of expectations and behaviour.

Interpretive frames enable agents to grasp interpretive structures. Grimm (2012) offers the example of an individual who knows the relative sizes of the earth and sun but comes to *grasp* this relation when it is illustrated by an apple seed and basketball. Frames equip us with attentional, inquisitive, evaluative and inferential dispositions which shape how we interpretively structure information. These frames scaffold interpretation, guiding how information is interpretively structured.

As an example of a shared frame, I take the widespread use of ‘Illness as Warfare’ metaphors; for example, ‘the war on cancer’, ‘the body is invaded’, ‘battling illness’, ‘medics on the front line’. Metaphorical frames enable us to grasp a particular interpretive structure (Camp, 2006; Fraser, 2018). The metaphorical framing of treating illness as warfare offers a holistic way of interpreting a range of related targets and is a powerful interpretive scaffold. We can think of this metaphor as a kind of ‘blueprint’ for how we interpretively structure information. The interpretive structures ‘Illness as Warfare’ metaphors enable us to grasp relates illness, medicine, medical practitioners and so on under a holistically unified interpretive structure.

Frames are central to our shared interpretive resources with which we coordinate our interpretations of the world. Just as interpretive structures can be epistemically evaluated, as discussed in the previous section, some frames will be better than others. Some may enable us to grasp in-apt interpretive structures. In doing so, they will produce misunderstanding. The merit of a frame will often be mixed, its value

subject to the context in which it is deployed. For instance, the merits (and potential harms) of the ‘Illness as Warfare’ metaphor are contested. The aptness of the structures which these metaphors enable one to grasp may be contested (particularly for those with terminal diagnoses) (Byrne, Ellershaw, Holcombe, & Salmon, 2002). Kate Granger, writing after receiving a terminal diagnosis, captures the core of such critiques:

When I do die, I will have defied the prognosis for my type of cancer and achieved a great deal with my life. I do not want to feel a failure about something beyond my control. I refuse to believe my death will be because I didn't battle hard enough. (Granger, 2014)

Such metaphors may contribute to the stigma surrounding choosing palliative care over life-extending treatment, by associating it with ‘surrender’ and failure to ‘fight’. Correspondingly, one may grasp an inaccurate explanatory relationship between a patient’s chances of survival and how ‘bravely’ they ‘battled’, when a patient’s determination has little impact on their chances of survival. However, in other contexts this metaphor offers a fruitful resource enabling patients to articulate their experiences and views of the merits of such language are contested. The ‘net value’ of a given frame is thus complex.

Nonetheless, some frames will *systematically* enable one to grasp inapt interpretive structures. I characterise as ‘mis-interpretive’ those resources which systematically dispose us to misunderstand. I take as an example the practice of using sexual scripts to frame the process of fertilisation. The scripts in question were identified in the previous chapter; they cast men as the active parties in pursuit of sexual access, while



women are largely passive, merely resisting or accepting this pursuit. This sexual script is an example of what Lindemann-Nelson terms ‘master narratives’ (Lindemann, 2009; Lindemann, 2015); a kind of stock script which is common knowledge. She writes that “because master narratives depict people behaving in certain ways that allow us to categorize them, these stories serve as hermeneutic resources we draw on to make sense of ourselves and other people” (2015, p. 80).<sup>42</sup> These scripts are an example of a shared interpretive frame.

I argued in the previous section this frame can be pernicious when interpreting sexual interactions, obstructing recognition of sexual violence. This script has also been deployed to (mis)represent the process of fertilisation in mammals (Martin 1996). For example, the widespread representation of the sperm in a competitive *race* to the ovum, which is merely the passive target, and use of terms like ‘penetration’ to describe the moment of fertilisation – well after the idea that sperm entered the ovum by force was empirically rejected (Martin 1996, p. 490). The process of fertilisation is an interaction between activity involving (at a minimum) the sperm, uterine tract and ovum. Sperms’ motility under only their own force is extremely limited; they do not ‘swim to’ the fallopian tubes but are rather guided there. Further, their own journey crucially involves coordinated (rather than individualistic, competitive) movement.

Simplified abstractions are fruitful in science, so it is not a strong rejection of the pursuit frame for fertilisation that it fails to capture *some* features of the process. However, the criticism is stronger: this frame is deployed not because it fruitfully

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<sup>42</sup> Note, on the terminology adopted here, I retain ‘narrative’ to describe representations of specific events and use ‘schema’ and ‘scripts’ to describe these kinds of more malleable resources.

represents the target domain, but rather has been imported because of preconceptions about gendered reproduction. In her work on the epistemic value of idealisation and other fictions, Elgin proposes that for some idealisation to be ‘true enough’ is for its departure from truth to be *negligible*. Crucially, this does not mean that the departure from truth is small, necessarily, as many valuable scientific idealisations are not even approximately true. Rather, it means that the departure *may be neglected* for our purposes; it will not derail our inquiry to neglect this departure (or, in many cases, it will aid our inquiry to do so).

The gendered framing of fertilisation not only simplifies but *distorts* what it represents; this departure from truth is, I contend, non-negligible. To talk of the sperm, ovum or uterus in terms of agency is already a departure from literal truth, but it may be a fruitful one – to speak *only* of the agency of the sperm, however, omits crucial features of the process described. The activity of the ovum and uterine tract are *explanatorily central* even if the process is anthropomorphised; fertilisation, or lack thereof, depends only very partially on the sperm’s activity (which is not best understood in competitive individualistic terms). To take the most important questions as relating to sperms’ activity will reveal only part of the process and is a flawed approach to inquiring about the overall process of fertilisation: the inquisitive structure produced by this frame is thus flawed. It does not serve the ends of our inquiry. Finally, these distortions are enmeshed with an interpretive structure on which the sperms’ activity is cast as salient and important, while the role of the uterine tract and ovum pushed into the background.

The use of adversarial sexual scripts of gendered pursuit as a frame for scientific inquiry into fertilisation is thus an example of a *mis-interpretive resource*. This is a

case in which the problem is not (only) the lack of a fruitful frame, but the use of a distorting one, which produces an inapt interpretive structure.

In summary, our shared interpretive frames enable us to grasp interpretive structures and thereby enable understanding and misunderstanding. While the merit of a particular scaffold may be mixed, and contextually determined, some will be systematically distorting. Mis-interpretive resources are those frames which are systematically distorting, producing misunderstanding.

## **§2.4 Concealed Epistemic Incompetence**

I contend that attending to mis-interpretive resources is necessary for a full account of *hermeneutical injustice*. I here illustrate the insights the above account offers for our understanding of hermeneutical injustice by considering the paradigmatic example of ‘sexual harassment’.<sup>43</sup> As noted, when one misunderstands, one doesn’t just fail to get things right but substantially gets them wrong. Just as understating is a greater achievement than mere knowledge, the harms of misunderstanding extend beyond those of merely lacking understanding. In particular, due to the way in which misunderstanding conceals epistemic incompetence, mis-interpretive resources play a central role in perpetuating hermeneutical injustice.

### *§2.4.1 Hermeneutical Injustice*

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<sup>43</sup> What I am proposing here is an expansion of extant accounts, to include the role of misunderstanding, not a challenge or alternative to previous accounts.

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when our shared interpretive resources are inadequate. Specifically, on Fricker's canonical characterisation, hermeneutical injustice occurs when agents are unable to render socially significant experiences intelligible to themselves, or others, due to 'hermeneutical marginalisation' i.e., exclusion from the shared determination of interpretive resources (Fricker, 2007).

Fricker (2007) describes the case of Carmita Woods as recounted in Brownmiller (1999). Woods was the target of repeated sexual advances and unwanted touching from her boss, prior to the term 'sexual harassment' being coined. She subsequently resigned. Woods lacked a shared interpretive resource with which to render her experience intelligible to herself and others, which prevented her from communicating why she was forced to leave her job. In addition to the primary (epistemic) harm of being unable to render this experience intelligible, Woods faced the secondary harm of being unable to claim unemployment support because there was not a formally recognised reason for leaving her job. Fricker describes the original injustice as a "lacuna where the name of a distinctive experience should be" (Fricker, 2007, p. 151). The problem, as described, is that there is some target for which we lack a label.

Understanding, including failures to obtain and share understanding, are central to hermeneutical injustice. Tellingly, historical accounts of the development of the term 'sexual harassment' describe an 'aha' moment when the specific phrase was landed upon, after considering others (Brownmiller, 1999, p 281). Such 'aha' moments are characteristic of obtaining understanding. Discussions of hermeneutical injustice to date have primarily focussed on how the *lack* of interpretive resources may *fail* enable us to understand (Falbo, 2022). This focus, however, elides the important

distinction between merely lacking understanding, being unable to make sense of some information, and more substantive misunderstanding in which one grasps a flawed interpretation but takes oneself to have understood. Falbo (2022) highlights that the ‘lacuna’ framework, on which hermeneutical injustice is characterised as a lack of some required resource, is pervasive. Fricker’s own negative analysis is apparent in her characterisation of sexual harassment as “a story in which about how extant collective hermeneutical resources can have a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be” (2007, pp. 150–51).

In the previous section, I distinguished between two roles our interpretive resources may play: they may offer us categories with which to draw distinctions, serving a taxonomic role, and they may offer frames which structure interpretation. This may be extended to distinguish two ways in which we may evaluate the adequacy of our interpretive resources. Firstly, we may appraise their *taxonomic adequacy*. To say that, as in the case of sexual harassment, there was a target with a *missing name* is to say that our shared resources were inadequate in this first sense. There was a category which lacked a name; we needed to introduce a new distinction, carve out a new category in logical space. This genre of evaluation needn’t be limited to the lacuna framework, as we may more broadly consider which distinctions we draw and how targets are grouped into categories. For instance, we might think that ‘Girl Boss’ is flawed in this regard because it picks out a gendered category that ought not be divided by gender.

However, attending to the interpretive role of frames, noticing that our interpretive resources guide not only *what* we are able to think and talk about but *how* we are disposed to interpret it, broadens the scope of the ‘adequacy’ of our resources. For

instance, we might claim that in addition to being an inapt category, the use of ‘girl’ in *Girl Boss* is an infantilising frame: it is a mis-interpretive resource. Given the powerful interpretive role of frames, examining adequacy of our interpretive resources must include examining the interpretive structures our shared frames scaffold. It is essential that when we appraise our interpretive resources, we consider how they orient us towards the world. In this regard we may consider both negative failures, i.e. lacunas, where we are impeded by the *lack* of a fruitful shared frame and the potential for distorting shared frames to produce misunderstanding. I contend that mis-interpretive resources are central to the perpetuation of hermeneutical injustice.

The role of mis-interpretive resources is apparent in Fricker’s original introduction of hermeneutical injustice. She discusses historical homophobic conceptions of ‘homosexual’ as an example of hermeneutical injustice (2007, pp. 164-169). Here the problem is plainly *not* that we have the total lack of a name, but rather that the extant resource carries a distorting social meaning. In her discussion of Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* (1983), she highlights various stereotypical schemas of ‘the homosexual’ – as sick, as a vampire – which render White’s attraction to men initially inarticulate to him. This is an example of hermeneutical injustice which is not the produce of a *missing name* but rather a distorting shared frame.

Just as marginalised agents may be excluded from the determination of the informational content (Haslanger, 2020a; 2020b) of our interpretive resources (denied a say in where distinctions are drawn, identifying important categories) they may also be excluded from shaping our shared frames which orient us towards the world. The hermeneutical inequality Fricker highlights, in which marginalised

groups are denied equal determination of our interpretive resources, does not only preclude them from contributing to *what* we have names for but also *how* we conventionally represent those targets.

Mis-interpretive resources may lead to misunderstanding socially significant experiences, potentially in ways that obscure and perpetuate injustice. I illustrate this by returning to the case of ‘sexual harassment’. To simply describe Wood’s experience as the result of a ‘missing name’ omits a crucial dimension of the case. Firstly, experiences like Woods were not entirely unrecognised within society but, in the absence of ‘sexual harassment’, other terms were deployed. These include ‘chasing around the desk’ and ‘flirting’ (Beeby, 2011; Maitra, 2018). These terms did not mitigate the hermeneutical injustice faced by Woods and others; they were instead a facet of it. They distorted the cases of sexual harassment they were used to describe.

To describe the problem as a *missing name* is insufficient, in that it is both *negative* and *taxonomic*. Fricker does acknowledge these contemporary terms, which are examples of what she characterises as ‘ill-fitting meanings’.<sup>44</sup> However, these are

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<sup>44</sup> Fraser develops of an expanded inferentialist model of what it is for a concept to be ill-fitting which allows us to better capture these aspects:

“a concept C is ill-fitting for an agent A where C is embedded in an inferential network which either (i) includes inferences whose being either socially licensed or cognitively accessible is strongly contrary to A’s interests or (ii) fails to include inferences whose being both socially licensed and cognitively accessible is strongly in A’s interests.” (Fraser, 2018, p. 736)

This gradable notion of fittingness can capture both the inadequacy of lacking the requisite inferences but also encoding harmful inferences.

once again primarily analysed negatively; in the *absence* of the required ‘missing name’, marginalised agents “find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on to render them intelligible” (2007, 148). This description is not mistaken *per se*, but it is a limited one which omits a central aspect of the harm of these terms. These resources lead to misunderstanding the phenomenon in ways that distorted and justified it. In actuality, such resources did not merely *fail* to adequately illuminate the experience, but *positively obstructed* understanding and perpetuated justifications of the behaviour (e.g., as ‘just flirting’). These ‘ill-fitting’ resources were thus *mis-interpretive*.

A trivialising frame like ‘workplace flirting’ disposes agents to misunderstandings on which the behaviour is trivial, not a serious wrong. This places inappropriate explanatory centrality on the intentions of the perpetrator, such that provided the perpetrator conceptualised it as harmless fun the treatment should not be evaluated as a serious moral wrong. Correspondingly, they enable these agents to grasp interpretive structures on which inferences that the victim ought to have a sense of humour about such treatment are salient and accessible. These mis-interpretive resources thus distort the nature of sexual harassment, obstructing apt interpretation, and enabling individuals to grasp interpretive structures which encode inappropriate explanatory relationships, evaluative judgements, and salience structures. While part of the problem of these terms may have been taxonomic (e.g. in how they grouped unrelated behaviour together) it is central to understanding their harm that as *frames* they distorted their targets.



## §2.4.2 *Maintaining Ignorance*

The distorting effects of mis-interpretive resources can, moreover, perpetuate hermeneutical injustice. Recall the dictionary analogy, in which some terms lack any translated entry while others are mistranslated. In the cases of a mere lack, in which the terms have no entry, the error would be more easily discernible. If we encounter the un-translated term; it is transparent that there is some target we cannot understand. By contrast, with a false entry we can seemingly translate the term with no apparent issues; the false translation mistakenly appears to give us the required resource. That is, the mistaken translation produces *concealed incompetence*. We are incompetent to translate both the untranslated and mis-translated terms but, in the latter case, the incompetence is concealed.<sup>45</sup>

I contend that mis-interpretive resources can perpetuate hermeneutical injustice due to concealed incompetence. A crucial problem with mis-interpretive resources, and misunderstanding more broadly, is that misunderstanding ‘feels like’ understanding. Dotson terms this *inaccurate intelligibility* (2011, p. 245). Often, when we fail to understand something, it is apparent to us that we cannot render it intelligible. In such cases, while the inability to render some target intelligible is an epistemic constraint, it is one which can – if the individual realises there is something to be made intelligible at all – be apparent to the agent. Nguyen (2021) terms the experience of clarity that goes with (apparent) understanding an ‘inquiry terminating

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<sup>45</sup> Of course, it would be too strong to claim that it would be *impossible* to detect this error (for instance, the produced sentences might not make sense, or we may consult another resource). The point is rather that the inadequacy is concealed in the mistranslation case in a way it is not in the missing entry case.

heuristic' (see also Trout, 2002) and highlights that a false sense of clarity can thus be pernicious.

This apparent clarity may not only lead one to prematurely close inquiry, but direct one's attention such that one never opens inquiry at all. As such, being armed with mis-interpretive resources, akin to the flawed dictionary, does not only mean an agent is epistemically incompetent with respect to certain subject matters. It also means that this incompetence is likely to be concealed; no inadequacy is apparent and the agent does not take themselves to have any unanswered questions. This concealed incompetence is probable to sustain further harms, since it is not apparent that there is any inadequacy in our resources. Grasping an interpretive structure gives a sense of *closure*. One will not work to correct one's understanding because it is not apparent there is any such correction to perform. Grasping an interpretive structure offers the subjective sense of cognitive achievement that goes with understanding. That is, a satisfaction that is characteristic of a *sense of understanding*, also goes with misunderstanding.

This concealment captures how hermeneutical injustice is obscured and thereby maintained. "Hermeneutical inequality is inevitably hard to detect" writes Fricker (2007, p. 152). We can explain how this characteristic feature of hermeneutical injustice, in which the very inadequacy of the inadequate resources is itself concealed, is maintained when we attend to the way in which mis-interpretive resources offer a mistaken sense of epistemic achievement. This is an example of the powerful role of ignorance and how it is maintained, which has been argued to be central to both hermeneutical injustice and systems of oppression more widely (Beeby, 2011; Mason, 2011; Mills, 2007; Pohlhaus, 2012). These ignorance-first

analyses offer a 'positive' account of ignorance as something which is maintained and shapes social arrangements, rather than the mere absence of knowledge. Mills, in his influential account of 'white ignorance', contrasts the mere absence of belief (or holding false beliefs) from more robust dispositions to remain ignorant (Mills, 2007, p. 17). This ignorance is recalcitrant and persistent: it "fights back" (Mills, 2007, p.13). The result of white ignorance is that "whites will in general be unable to understand the world *they themselves have made*" (Mills, 1997, p. 18, emphasis added). This ignorance is maintained by, and in turn maintains, racial domination in the form of white supremacy. Following Dotson (2011), I here use the term 'pernicious ignorance' to refer to harmful, systematic ignorance more broadly.

There are various factors which may sustain ignorance. One is for the target to be altogether concealed from the dominant group, such that any unintelligibility would have no chance to be made apparent. If personal stories of experiencing sexual harassment are never shared, one never has the need to attempt to make them intelligible. Access to mis-interpretive resources is another way in which inadequacies in our interpretive resources may be concealed *even where* the relevant target is readily apparent. In such cases, the relevantly unintelligible experience may be 'hiding in plain sight' so to speak; its unintelligibility for those for whom it is a socially significant experience is made all the more robust by its *apparent* intelligibility. The misleading sense of closure offered by mis-interpretive resources can thus produce a kind of inertia. This is an ignorance-preserving mechanism. Just as the mistaken dictionary entry conceals the lack of accurate translation, experiences of sexual harassment need not be unheard of to be unintelligible; they can simply be explained away. Access to a frame like 'chasing round the desk' or 'workplace flirting' offers a mistaken sense of understanding which renders the

unintelligibility of sexual harassment more robust. This perpetuates hermeneutical injustice.

## **§2.5 Epistemic Contamination & Ideology**

I now turn to consider the second key harm of mis-interpretive resources; *epistemic contamination*. That is, the way in which mis-interpretive resources distort otherwise-valuable epistemic resources. I argue that the harms of these distortions may extend beyond the epistemic domain, specifically in the case of *ideological* mis-interpretive resources which contaminate evidence in ways that sustain unjust social practices.

### *§2.5.1 Epistemic Contamination*

Return to the translation dictionary analogy. This dictionary contains errors in its translations. We can describe this in *static* terms, so to speak, characterising the error in terms of false belief (namely, that the translations are accurate; that, for each mis-translated term, word  $w$  means  $m$ ). However, the more significant problem here is *dynamic*. The dictionary does not merely equip us with a set of beliefs about the language, it is a *tool* for interpreting communication in that language. If, when presented with new sentences in the target language, we use this dictionary to translate them we will gain new false beliefs. Similarly, student in an exam who makes a minor error in an equation early on in a problem. Left unchecked, this initial error will proliferate downstream through subsequent steps. Error in these kinds of epistemic tools *contaminates* the accurate information these tools are used to process.

Mis-interpretive resources are analogous tools and may likewise *contaminate* the information they structure. Interpretive frames equip agents with ways of organising information about the world. Where these frames are distorted, they can ‘project’ these distortions onto the information they are used to interpret. It is familiar that technical and statistical truths may be used in misleading ways. Consider the case of toothpaste advertising which professes to be ‘recommended by 9 out of 10 dentists’. In such cases, descriptively true information is presented in a misleading way.

Where a mis-interpretive resource is deployed, accurate information is interpreted in such a way as to render it misleading, producing misunderstanding. Here, the problem is not with how information is presented (as in the advertising case) but how it is interpreted. I term this phenomenon *epistemic contamination*: valuable epistemic resources are rendered epistemically damaging due to the ways in which they are misunderstood. This process of contamination can have both epistemically and socially pernicious effects.

Recall the case of how gendered sexual scripts are deployed to interpret fertilisation. The process of fertilisation is framed by gendered sexual scripts of male pursuit, producing a misrepresentation of the process. The problem in this case is, in part, that a body of evidence is being structured by a distorting frame. However, there are dynamic and robust issues with this misinterpretation such that they can reproduce in the face of new information. When emerging research pointed to the inadequacies of the asymmetric frame of fertilisation as pursuit, this was subsumed by the frame it challenged:

The new research, far from escaping the stereotypical representations of egg and sperm, simply *replicates* elements of textbook gender imagery in a different form. (Martin, 1996, p. 492, emphasis mine)

Thus, the flawed frame is not only used to interpret original body of evidence. Subsequently, new information – including, crucially, information which ought to lead us to *reject* this gendered script as a frame for fertilisation – is also reconciled with, and thus distorted by, this scaffold. Thus, valuable additional evidence, which ought to challenge the gendered interpretation, is itself interpreted in light of these flawed scripts. Here we see the resilience of the distorting resource; as it is used to interpret new evidence, the new evidence is reconciled in ways that distort it. This is an example of epistemic contamination which operates to neutralise would-be counterevidence.

Such frames are thus, to varying degrees, resistant to counterevidence. Note that this general process – that our present assumptions shape our perception of new information – is familiar and unremarkable. My claim is not that this process of replication is novel or distinctive. Rather, I mean to show that this familiar process of replication is especially concerning with respect to the kind of mis-interpretive resources highlighted here. These distorting frames will project their distortions in ways that contaminate would-be corrective evidence. In the social and political domain, there is substantial evidence that we are disposed to engage in ‘motivated reasoning: one interprets evidence in ways the support ones’ prior self-conception and political affiliations (Kahan, 2015; Kunda, 1990; McKenna, 2023). While various factors might be at play (see Levy, 2021), frames offer insight into one potential mechanism: how we incorporate new information is subject to how it is framed by

what we already accept. As a *mechanism* this is, in itself, plausibly inevitable. However, when we are disposed to deploy distorting frames, the consequences of this interpretive guide can be severe.

### §2.5.2 *Ideological Frames*

Where the mis-interpretive resources in operation arise from unjust social arrangements, this process of epistemic contamination can be especially pernicious. As noted above, shared frames like social scripts enable us to coordinate our interpretive structures and epistemic practices and, *in turn*, these underwrite broader forms of social coordination. As such, flawed frames not only have epistemic costs but can have negative social consequence too. In such cases, distorting frames which arise from unjust social arrangements may not only sustain the misinterpretations these social arrangements give rise to – these misinterpretations may serve to perpetuate their originating unjust arrangements. Falbo highlights that flawed resources in such cases can be ‘productive’, “they can serve to sustain, normalize, and justify oppressive social practices and unjust social arrangements” (2022, p. 348).

The consequences of mis-interpretive resources extend beyond the epistemic domain in cases where this contamination operates to uphold unjust social practices. In light of their function<sup>46</sup> preserving unjust social practices, such frames may be described as *ideological* on a ‘functionalist’ view of ideology (Haslanger, 2017). Ideology, on this usage, describes (i) systems of social meaning (ii) which are distorting and which

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<sup>46</sup> Function and design talk should be understood roughly etiologically here; the conditions for their persistence, without presupposing any specific individual or collective intention.

(iii) in virtue of this distortion serve to sustain (unjust) social practices (see Haslanger, 2017; Jaeggi, 2008; Sankaran, 2020; Shelby, 2014; Stanley, 2015). Note that on this view, ideology is flawed practically, in upholding injustice, *and epistemically* via distortion. Shelby describes ideological beliefs as those which “*misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations*” (Shelby, 2014, 66, italics original). Ideological mis-interpretive resources are those which bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations via their distortions.

As an example of ideological mis-interpretive resources, take Patricia Hill Collin’s notion of *controlling images*. Collin’s highlights a range of *controlling images* for black women, such as ‘mammie’ and ‘jezebel’ which act as ‘normative yardsticks’. These racialised frames operate to “make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be *natural, normal, and inevitable* parts of everyday life” (Collins, 1990, pp. 76-77, emphasis mine). The contaminating effects of mis-interpretive resources can serve a powerful ideological function. Mis-interpretive resources which *naturalise* social arrangements, those which scaffold interpretive structures on which supposedly natural facts are seen as salient and explanatorily central, obscure the contingency of (unjust) social arrangements in ways that sustain them.

The adversarial sexual script used to frame fertilisation operates in a similar way. Martin (1996) points out that in the case of representing reproduction in ways that reflect sexual scripts does not only misrepresent the process of fertilisation. This distortion is also ‘reversed’ such that, once we have adopted a hunter-hunted script for describing fertilisation, this may be turned back to *naturalise* the original script:



the imagery keeps alive some of the hoariest old stereotypes [...]. That these stereotypes are now being written in at the level of the cell constitutes a powerful move to make this seem so natural as to be beyond alteration. (Martin, 1996, p. 500).

If we adopt this way of interpreting reproduction, then this distorting script appears to be so natural as to occur at the cellular level. This appears to place the social norms of male pursuit which organise many of our sexual practices beyond question or change – this is simply, at the most basic, immutable, biological level how sex works. This process of naturalisation is epistemically and socially pernicious. If one grasps an interpretation of sexual norms in which these are merely manifestations of immutable natural facts, then one does not ask whether these *should* be our norms. One fails to recognise that things could be otherwise.

Consider the property of *being a tiger* and *being striped*. The former is widely taken to be a natural kind. Suppose your child, in the big cat section of a zoo, points to a tiger and asks why that big cat is striped. You might reasonably tell them that it is striped *because it is a tiger*, introducing them to the kind. This response doesn't suppose there is no further way of explaining the stripes (it is a tool for concealment in long grass, etc.). However, it is a legitimate answer under some contexts: the animal is striped *because* it is a tiger; to be striped is a *natural* property of a tiger. Now, consider the relationship between *being a woman* and *being a caregiver*. To naturalise these properties would be to respond the same way; those people are caregivers *because they are women*. However, the belief 'women are nurturing' (or 'women are more nurturing than men') is a paradigmatic example of an ideological

belief. It is not a *natural* fact; it does not reflect women's gendered essence. However, due to socialisation it may nonetheless be *descriptively* true.

### §2.5.3 Social knowledge

The epistemic standing of certain demographic generalisations is complex. On one hand, many of these generalisations seem to promote pernicious stereotypes. On the other, to the extent that these statements reflect dominant ideology they are often made descriptively true by our social practices. This latter point is especially clear when these generalisations do not take the form of generics, which are recognised to have generally 'slippery' truth conditions (Lemeire, 2023; Leslie, 2007; 2008; Sterken, 2015), but instead precise and accurate statistical claims, e.g., 'boys are twice as likely as girls to be in the top 5 percent of maths performance' (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2010). On one hand, this claim seems to support sexist prejudice, but on the other it is an accurate report of our evidence.

One response has been to cede that such claims are in good epistemic standing but insist that they are morally flawed and as such ought not be believed (e.g., Basu, 2019a; 2019b). However, others have rejected that the thin descriptive accuracy of these generalisations alone establishes their epistemic value; they argue that such generalisations (even if descriptively accurate) are nonetheless *both* epistemically and morally flawed (see Puddifoot, 2017). Munton (2019b; 2023) identifies the *epistemic* flaw in believing demographic generalisations as the loss of modal knowledge. It may be a true belief about social reality, but an agent who holds it may lose out on valuable modal knowledge. Namely, that this state of affairs is *contingent*: one knows how things are but fails to know that they could be otherwise.

This is, crucially, an *epistemic* critique of such beliefs, not a merely ethical one. Munton describes the flaw of these generalisations as “a small part of a network of representations which provide additional implicit, sometimes explanatory, content” (2019b, p. 233). It is this *wider network* within which the belief is incorporated which determines its epistemic standing.

Accurate evidence about the way the world is may thus be epistemically pernicious subject to the way it is incorporated to an agent’s broader interpretation of the world. Mis-interpretive resources guide how new information is incorporated and may thus render (accurate) evidence epistemically damaging by contaminating it in this way. When evidence of demographic differences which are the produce of unjust social structures is interpreted with a *naturalising* frame its modal profile is distorted. Even if the agent gains a belief which is justified in isolation, this belief produces (or perpetuates) misunderstanding. The way in which, for instance, gendered differences in care labour depend on socialisation is not grasped. Gendered differences are instead seen to be deeply explanatory in themselves, to the neglect of more central factors. That these differences would not occur or be so pronounced under different social arrangements is not recognised.

Suppose two mathematics students see a full ranking of their cohorts’ marks and see that the top performers are mostly men. One of these students is aware that female students tend to receive less support and encouragement from instructors and express less confidence in their own abilities. The other is disposed to see men and women as having relevant deep differences, viewing men to be much more disposed to abstract mathematical reasoning. In this case both students form a justified belief that men out-perform women in the top percentile of the course – indeed, that have

the same justification. Yet, their *interpretation* of this information will differ; the student who naturalises gender differences will interpret this difference in performance as inevitable, failing to notice the differences in instruction and socialisation that produce it. These are epistemic errors which are characteristic of misunderstanding; one fails to make accurate counterfactual predictions and identifies erroneous relationships of dependence and explanation.

Naturalisation works in tandem with *normalisation*. By ‘normal’ here I mean what is taken for granted within a given context; what is normal is taken to not require explanation.<sup>47</sup> This is distinct from other common uses of ‘normal’. Firstly, something that be *statistically* normal, occurring in the majority of cases. Claims about statistical normality are empirical and thinly descriptive. Secondly, something can be normal in a *prescriptive* sense; on this sense, to describe something as normal is to categorise it as a kind of ideal (which may, or may not, also be statistically normal). Sometimes these two sorts of normality can become conflated with undesirable consequences, as when putatively descriptive claims about statistical normality smuggle in prescriptive claims (see Haslanger, 2010). I here use normality in a third sense, which is neither merely statistical nor prescriptive. This is normality in terms of what is default or does not require explanation. This is not the same as statistical normality because there are incredibly unlikely occurrences which

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<sup>47</sup> Martin Smith, for example, takes normality to require less explanation; something is normal inversely to the degree to which it requires explanation (Smith 2017; 2021). A given piece of evidence provides *normic support* for some claim to the degree that the evidence being misleading would require explanation (for further discussion see of the epistemology of normality see (Di Bello 2020; Littlejohn & Dutant 2020).

nonetheless require no special explanation, such as winning the lottery (Smith, 2017). However, it is a claim about how things *are* rather than how they should be.

As such, when I write about frames which ‘normalise’ some state of affairs this is distinct from ‘normalisation’ in the sense of something being within a set of social norms, as it is sometimes used. For instance, sexual violence – especially sexual violence which resembles the previously discussed ‘blitz script’, that is, perpetrated by a stranger outside the home – is not ‘normalised’ in the sense of being conventional or socially endorsed. However, ‘victim-blaming’ narratives, which entreat women to avoid the environments where such violence is expected to take place do normalise this violence in the sense of taking it for granted. If the only response to this kind of sexual violence discussed is for the victims’ behaviour to change, then the perpetrators behaviour is *taken for granted*. Once again, important alternatives are pushed into the background, and unnecessary harm is cast as an inevitability.

Moreover, where mis-interpretive resources naturalise and normalise injustice, leading agents to interpret contingent social arrangements as inevitable, they can *perpetuate* the injustice they obscure. Women are not nurturing in the way that tigers are striped; women are nurturing because they are socialised to be so. The belief that women are nurturing misrepresents reality when one interprets what is a contingent social feature as a natural one. It is *ideological* because this misrepresentation sustains this socialisation. ‘Women are nurturing’ is taken to describe a natural fact and *because of this* it sustains the socialisation which produces the original observation. In these cases, ideological mis-interpretive resources cannibalise evidence of injustice into a rationale for that injustice. In the

case of the two students interpreting gendered differences in mathematics performance, if one interprets women's weaker performance as reflecting natural differences, then there is no reason (and perhaps no possibility) of intervening. Assuming such differences were indeed the product of receiving less engagement from instructors because those instructors *also* held a naturalised view of gender on which women were simply less adept at advanced mathematics, this misinterpretation of women's weaker performances serves to perpetuate the treatment that produces that observation. The ways in which mis-interpretive resources may distort reality are thus central to analysing their role in injustice.

## **§2.6 Conclusion**

I have here analysed how our interpretive resources may lead us to misunderstand the world in pernicious ways. I began from the observation that in addition to merely lacking understanding, we may *misunderstand*. I characterised misunderstanding as grasping an inapt interpretive structure. One misunderstands when one grasps a flawed way of organising information, getting wrong relationships of explanation and dependence, paying attention to irrelevant factors while neglecting central ones, and so on. I have argued that the harms of resources which produce misunderstanding extend beyond merely lacking understanding, in ways that are both epistemically and socially damaging. I highlighted, in particular, the way in which these mis-interpretive resources (i) conceal epistemic incompetence and (ii) contaminate other epistemic resources. These two harms lead to negative consequences in the epistemic domain and beyond.

Attending to the role of misunderstanding and the resources which enable it is central to a full account of hermeneutical injustice. I have shown that we are better able to capture the case of ‘sexual harassment’ when we recognise that the original injustice was, in part, the result of dominant mis-interpretive resources. These resources did not only fail to illuminate experiences of injustice but were also positively distorting. When one grasps an interpretive structure, one feels like one understands, and the epistemic incompetence they produce is thus concealed. This reveals a way in which the unintelligibility of marginalised agents socially significant experiences may be maintained. When we have *apparent* understanding of some target this will obscure our failure to successfully understand.

I have further argued that these mis-interpretive resources may sustain pernicious epistemic harms which may uphold unjust social practices. Mis-interpretive resources may *epistemically contaminate* our other resources, by producing distorted interpretations of accurate information. In such cases, these distortions will prove robust as would-be counterevidence is distorted by the frame it ought to challenge. Further, these mis-interpretive resources serve a powerful ideological function when their distortions sustain unjust social practices. Ideological frames include those which *naturalise* and *normalise* oppression by transforming evidence of socially contingent injustice into a rationale for that very unjust arrangement. Doing so not only makes these misunderstanding resilient in the face of (would-be) counterevidence but is also central to sustaining unjust social practices.

By examining the nature of misunderstanding and offering an account of how flawed interpretive resources may sustain it, this chapter captures more complex and

insidious ways in which we may misinterpret the world and the harms which may result.



### 3. Testimonial Distortion and Hermeneutical Backfire

#### §3.1 Introduction

In 1980, under the pseudonym 'Linda Lovelace', Linda Marchiano published a memoir titled *Ordeal* (2005). In it, she recounts the domestic and sexual abuse she experienced during the production of *Deep Throat* and other pornographic films. Upon publication, *Ordeal* was widely categorised and advertised as pornography. Langton offers the following example from a catalogue of adult materials:

No. 427 ORDEAL: an autobiography by Linda Lovelace. With M. McGrady. The star of Deep Throat tells the shocking story of her enslavement in the pornographic underworld, a nightmarish ordeal of savage violence and unspeakable perversion, of thrill seeking celebrities and sadistic criminals. For Sale to Adults Over 21 Only. (quoted in Langton, 1993, p. 321).

Marchiano's attempt to share her own experiences were thereby *reframed* and reinterpreted as erotic narratives; "what was written in protest of the pornographic industry is itself sold as pornography" (Maitra, 2004, p.192). Her own testimony framed these experiences as horrifying and traumatic, but this reinterpretation meant that her attempts to talk about the process of producing pornography *became* pornography.

How our communicative contributions are interpreted is not entirely within our control; sometimes our assertions are treated like suggestions, or an amusing

anecdote elicits sympathetic responses. Facing systematic misinterpretation due to prejudice is a form of injustice (Bianchi, 2021; Kukla, 2014; Peet, 2017; Nowak, 2023). Marchiano was wronged in various ways, but central among them is the specific wrong of having her testimony reframed and misinterpreted. This chapter analyses the nature such *wrongful misinterpretation*. *Ordeal* is an instance of *narrative testimony* (Fraser, 2021) in which Marchiano shared her own ‘version of events’. Her narrative framed the events recounted in a particular way, prescribing a *perspective* on the events described. To then categorise this testimony as pornography *reframed it*, altering the perspective and thereby distorting what Marchiano communicated. We can identify this wrongful distortion of Marchiano’s perspective as both the product of unjust interpretive resources and, plausibly, prejudice towards Linda herself as a speaker in light of her previous sex work. In this chapter I analyse this underexplored form of epistemic and communicative injustice.

An important form of communication involves sharing and negotiating ways of looking at the world via *perspectival communication*. For instance, suppose you ask what my day was like, and I respond with a rich and evocative narrative of the unrelenting disasters of the day. In doing so, I offer various pieces of information about my day; the sequence of events that occurred, how I evaluate the day.

However, beyond this, I also communicate a *perspective* on that information. In Chapter one I presented an account of how narratives frame their contents in such a way as to prescribe a perspective; imaginative engagement requires taking up this perspective and interpreting the recounted events correspondingly. While the focus in that chapter was on how perspectives may be exported from the specific fictional contents, we also make use of tools like narrative in everyday communication to convey interpretations. Our communicative practices extend beyond merely sharing

information; we also share and contest which questions are worth answering, which answers suffice, what parts of our shared body of information matter. That is, we coordinate on how to *interpretively structure* information in the sense introduced in the Chapter two. Perspectival communication has an interpretive structure ‘baked in’: it *frames* these events in a way that shapes which are salient, which are cast as important, their emotional valence etc. This prescribes a perspective, which the hearer must adopt to fully understand what is communicated.

Perspectival communication is widespread and, moreover, is central to our collective epistemic practices. It enables us to coordinate our interpretations which, in turn, enables us to coordinate our expectations and behaviour. Like other forms of communication, perspectival communication can be frustrated. In some cases, this may be incidental but in others it can reflect wider injustice. Suppose, for instance, that you hold the prejudicial stereotype that women are melodramatic and, consequently, when I relate the story of my disastrous day you judge that I am probably wildly exaggerating the importance of the events I describe. In this chapter I consider how perspectival communication may be wrongfully frustrated, constituting an unjust communicative disablement<sup>48</sup>. I specifically examine cases in which perspectival communication is *distorted* (as in the case of Marchiano’s memoir) such that the audience grasps a different interpretive structure than the one the speaker attempted to convey.

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<sup>48</sup> I here use the language of ‘communicative disablement’ to describe how agents may be precluded from communicating successfully. Berenstain (2020, p. 746) criticizes the use of terms like ‘cognitive disablement’ as ‘ableist metaphors’, however, I reject this characterization. The use of ‘disablement’ here is not metaphorical – as it is when terms like ‘blind’ are used to describe ignorance (Tremain, 2017; Medina, 2013) – but is a literal description of an *imposed* inability.

It is plausible in Marchiano's case that this was a form of deliberate retaliation; that is, it was recognised that her memoir was intended to recount traumatic experiences, but it was nonetheless reframed as pornographic<sup>49</sup>. However, in some cases perspectival communication is wholly misinterpreted, such that the speaker's intended framing is unrecognised. I am especially interested in these cases of misinterpretation, wherein the speaker's perspective is not simply rejected but unintelligible to the audience. To illustrate, contrast the case in which I recognise your attempt to tell a humorous anecdote but judge the contents ought to be regarded as traumatic and one in which I *fail to recognise* that you weren't yourself framing the events as traumatic. In the previous chapter, I introduced the idea of *mis-interpretive resources*, which systematically produce misunderstanding, and highlighted their role in sustaining injustice. I here turn to explore how the distorting effects of mis-interpretive resources extend to communication, resulting in mis-interpreting speakers. I highlight that perspectival communication will be central to resisting these resources and offer an analysis of the specific barriers to intelligibility such communication faces. I examine the way in which marginalised people's testimony relating to their own experience of marginalisation, may be misinterpreted in such a way as to reconcile them with the ideology they were intending to resist.

As a case study, I consider exchanges between disabled legal scholar and disability activist Harriet McBryde Johnson and ethicist Peter Singer. McBryde Johnson's contributions centrally concerned the communication of her positive interpretation

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<sup>49</sup> Langton (1993) and Maitra (2004) both suggest that in at least some cases there was a genuine misinterpretation of Marchiano.

of her experiences of disability. This was not merely rejected but *misunderstood* due to the way it clashed with the dominant view of disability. I contend that in this case a dominant (ideological) mis-interpretive frame has distorted the communicated interpretation by reconciling it with this mis-interpretive frame. This is a particularly pernicious communicative disablement because not only are marginalised agents unable to successfully communicate their perspective, but their attempts to do so may also backfire and entrench the dominant ideology. I suggest that attempts to communicate perspectives which challenge dominant distorting frames are systematically vulnerable to this backfiring form of communicative disablement since they necessarily *clash* with the dominant perspective. This constitutes a pernicious obstacle to attempts to critique dominant mis-interpretive resources.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I begin in §3.2 by presenting an account of perspectival communication, highlighting the conditions for successful interpretation. In §3.3 I then examine how attempts to communicate may be frustrated and, in particular, how they may be misinterpreted. In §3.4 I introduce two competing ways of framing disability and argue the dominant conception of disability is an ideological mis-interpretive resource. In §3.5 I examine the exchange between McBryde Johnson and Singer and argue it was a case of misinterpretation resulting from these two conflicting frames. I then, in §3.6, argue that McBryde Johnson was wrongly mis-interpreted and that this is a form of miscommunication that attempts to reject dominant hegemonic frames are especially vulnerable to. In §3.7 I locate this misinterpretation within the broader framework of hermeneutical injustice and then, in §3.8, I offer some concluding remarks.

## §3.2 Perspectival Communication

### §3.2.1 *Communicating a Perspective*

Perspectival communication is widespread in our everyday communicative practices; many of our communicative contributions aim to get our audience to see the world the way we do. When we communicate, we frequently exchange more than bare unstructured information; we also share and negotiate ways of interpreting that information. In doing so we negotiate and coordinate on how we are to interpret our shared body of information. Put another way, we don't just exchange and debate facts, but also our perspective(s) on them. We can alter which facts are salient, how they are evaluated, the topic of discussion, and so on. Some contributions cue a *perspective*. Recall that a perspective describes an overall 'way of looking', at the information under discussion, e.g., via metaphorical descriptions, the narrative recounting of an historical event, or the use of certain 'thick' terms.

In Chapter one, I presented an account of imaginative engagement with narrative fiction: to engage with narratives one must take up the perspective prescribed by the way the narrative *frames* the contents, adopting an open-ended set of interpretative dispositions. These dispositions shape ones' *attention, inquiry, inferences, evaluative judgements* and *affective responses*. This analysis is here extended to communication. Some communicative contributions include similar *frames*: they 'bake in' an interpretive structure, and audiences must inhabit the communicated perspective in order to fully understand the speaker's contribution.

Perspectival communication is intended to shape not only the hearers' beliefs but also how the information shared is *interpretively structured*. Recall from the previous chapter that an interpretive structure is a way of organising information according to which parts are important, what explanatory relationships hold, which parts are salient, evaluative and affective valence, and so on. As explored in the first chapter, tools like narrative can prescribe a particular perspective on a body of information by how they frame their contents. Perspectives dispose agents to interpretively structure information in particular ways. Framing an anecdote as a traumatic experience versus a humorous story interpretively structures the same content in different ways. The two perspectives cued by these frames differ in affective and evaluative valence, the questions they will cast as central, which events are most salient, and so on thus producing diverging interpretive structures of the same events.

Perspectival communication can take many forms, but narrative testimony offers an especially rich and common example. I here draw on Fraser's (2021) recent insightful analysis of narrative testimony, which identifies key points of divergence between the communication of perspective and the simple assertions of information. When we offer narrative testimony, we communicate "a structured discourse of interlocking claims" (Fraser, 2021, p. 2). Various communicative tools may frame or 'colour' contents in this way, however, narratives offer an especially intricate and complex tool for doing so. Fraser distinguishes narrative testimony, in which the testimony offered is structured into a narrative, from 'simple' testimony of the kind that is typically discussed within epistemology. Examples of simple testimony are the stock cases which are focussed on in much of the literature, for instance, I tell you that *Proxima Centauri* is 4.2 light years away and (assuming I know this, and you believe

me, in the absence of defeaters etc.)<sup>50</sup> you thereby come to know. Narrative testimony, by contrast, frames its contents and, in doing so, prescribes a perspective which the audience must take up in order to fully understand what is said.

Consider the following exchange:

“What was it like to grow up in such a small rural place?”

“Well, it’s a bit of a bubble. It’s so small that everyone is in each other’s business – a lot of curtain twitching, you know? When I was young it was really nice to be somewhere so safe and scenic, but I couldn’t deal with how claustrophobic it was when I got older. I had to move away.”

The answer here communicates the speaker’s experience of growing up in a particular place. It is not a mere assertion of a string of facts about the place itself – we can imagine an alternate answer which, instead, attempted to describe the place by simply listing its population and other thinly descriptive facts. Nor does the speaker *merely assert* their own evaluation of the place (for example, “I disliked how small it was”). Rather, they share a richer account of their experience, which includes these thinner assertions but also conveys their perspective. The way in which this testimony frames the information presented prescribes a specific perspective.

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<sup>50</sup> I’ll here remain neutral on the success conditions for gaining knowledge from testimony, see Lackey (2006) for an overview.



In order to engage with this testimony – that is, to render it *intelligible* – the hearer must adopt this perspective. The speaker thus communicates both information and how it is to be interpreted. The small size of the community is framed negatively, as feeling claustrophobic, rather than supportive. This is conveyed by the use of evocative metaphors (‘a bubble’, ‘curtain twitchers’) and narrative. The testimony thus ‘bakes-in’ an interpretation of its informational content.

The central characteristic of perspectival communication, in contrast with the simple testimony, is the genre of *coordination* it aims at. As Fraser writes,

When I accept simple testimony, I remain largely responsible for the way in which the accepted content is integrated into my overall system of beliefs. To accept a narrative on your say-so is, by contrast to accept an already-structured bundle of information. To embed content in a narrative is to colour its affective valence and ongoing inferential profile. (Fraser, 2021, p. 2)

The conditions for fully successful communication thus differ between simple and narrative testimony. In the case of ‘simple testimony’, roughly, if I assert a proposition, which I know, and you come to believe it on my say-so then my testimony has succeeded. We have coordinated on the facts – Fraser terms this ‘opinional coordination’ – and I have shared my knowledge with you. In this case, the *significance* of what I have told you is up to you. Perspectival communication aims at a richer form of coordination: “agents co-ordinate on a perspective when they share a way of looking at the world. This cannot be reduced to opinional co-ordination” (Fraser, 2021, p. 4).

In linguistics, a distinction is drawn between the *content* of the common ground (Stalnaker, 2002) within a conversation and its *structure* (Chafe, 1976). Krifka (2008) differentiates between the contribution of content of the common ground and ‘common ground management’. In the language developed in the previous chapters, we can describe how the information in the common ground – the information taken to be common knowledge between conversational participants, on which they opinionally coordinate – is interpretively structured. This structure includes which questions are ‘under discussion’ (Benz & Jasinskaja, 2017; Roberts 1996), which pieces of information are salient and/or ‘at issue’ (Stanley, 2015, pp. 130-137) etc. When participants are perspectively coordinated they structure this information in (broadly) the same way.

In the course of conversation, in addition to contributing contents to the common ground, we can negotiate this interpretive structure. In some cases, these contributions can be narrow and piecemeal. For instance, mentioning a fact about a common acquaintance not only introduces it into the common ground (if unchallenged) but may also make it salient. When we communicate perspectives, however, we contribute holistic, open-ended ways of interpreting bodies of information. If the fact about our acquaintance is presented as a *telling detail* (Camp, 2007) the audience is invited to view this acquaintance in a particular way in light of this information. That is, the telling detail is a *frame*. The fact is not only added to what is taken to be true about the person, but also guides how the wider body of information is interpreted. It adds not only contents to the common ground but shapes how our shared body of information is interpretively structured by cuing a particular perspective.

### §3.2.2 *Interpreting Perspectival Communication*

Recall from the previous chapter an interpretive structure is not something that is merely believed or accepted. It is instead something that is *grasped*. Understanding is a matter of actually organising mental information in the relevant way<sup>51</sup>. A key aspect of perspectival communication is that for it to be successful the audience must actually *inhabit* the communicated perspective; they must *see* things for themselves in the relevant way and *grasp* the communicated interpretive structure. As Camp writes, on interpreting slurs and other pejoratives,

getting a perspective, even temporarily, requires actually structuring one's thoughts in the relevant structure, so that those thoughts hang together in an intuitive whole, with some properties sticking out and others receding; and so that one has an intuitive ability to 'go on the same way' in assimilating and explaining new information. (Camp, 2013, p. 336)

Successfully interpreting perspectival communication entails inhabiting the relevant perspective. Consequently, what is required of the audience for fully successful communication is more than belief in the information communication. However, the perspective we inhabit is not wholly within our voluntary control; for example, some find themselves simply *unable* to see the eroticised refusal narratives of Chapter one as anything other than sinister.

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<sup>51</sup> This is not to deny that sometimes there can be information asserted which relates to how information is structured. I can assert that certain element of a body of information are the most important, or that some explanatory relationship holds. Nonetheless, as highlighted in the previous chapter, understanding is not a matter of simply believing additional claims.

(Attempted) perspectival communication will not always result in perspectival coordination. I may be disposed to believe others' testimony and (under the right conditions) entitled to accept it, but hearing some assertion will not *necessarily* lead me to believe its contents. Analogously, exposure to perspectival testimony will not necessarily lead the audience to inhabit the communicative perspective. Rather, the claim is that for perspectival communication to be fully successful, the audience must take up the communicated perspective: inhabiting a perspective is to perspectival communication what accepting an assertion is to simple testimony. Moreover, inhabiting a perspective, while not wholly under our voluntary control, does not entail that one also *accepts* that perspective. Inhabiting a perspective involves taking up the relevant interpretive dispositions such that one looks at the world in the prescribed way. However, one may do so and still judge the perspective inapt; one may grasp some communicated interpretation but view it as mistaken: recall the example of a person who fully grasps a conspiracy theory and can 'try on' the perspective of a believer but does not take this theory to aptly represent the world. None of the above is to say that attempting to communicate a perspective will necessarily lead to one's audience taking up that perspective. My interest in this chapter is precisely the failure to do so.

Before proceeding, it is worth addressing a potential objection. One might be concerned by the above description on the basis that 'seeing things for oneself' is, quite famously, not the sort of thing that can be communicated (Jackson, 1986). Additionally, those sympathetic to even weak standpoint epistemology (Anderson, 1995; Collins, 1990; Harding, 2001; Toole 2021; 2022) are likely to be wary of the idea that members of the oppressing group can gain knowledge of *what it's like* to be

oppressed along this axis simply from testimony of the oppressed. There are two things worth clarifying in response to this worry. The first is that it ought to be noted that the language of perception here is figurative and describes the sense of grasping an interpretation, rather than obtaining a new perceptual experience.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, while I am interested in testimony about personal experiences in this chapter, the talk of ‘perspective’ here does not mean the specific experience of an individual. Camp (2017) highlights that when talking of the perspective a fictional narrative prescribes, these need not be that of any specific character in a story. In Chapter one, when discussing the perspective prescribed by eroticised refusal narratives this perspective was not the imagined experience of one of the characters but rather picked out a holistic way of ‘looking at’ and interpreting the events. Similarly, suppose you ask a historian about the fall of the Roman Empire: their response is likely to take the form of narrative testimony in recounting a specific version of the events (rather than a mere list of occurrences) (Zagzebski, 2019). This narrative prescribes a perspective and communicates a particular interpretation, but this is not the perspective of a particular agent.

The second important clarification, however, relates to when perspectival communication does relate to an individual’s perspective on their own experiences. I do not contest that some phenomenal knowledge (for instance, what it’s like to see colour) cannot be transmitted by communication. There is no testimony we can give to Mary that will equate to actually seeing red. Plausibly, there is also no testimony that can offer knowledge of *what it’s like* to be part of a particular oppressed group to

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<sup>52</sup> Though one’s prior experiences may well shape which perspectives one is able to inhabit. Thanks to Petronella Randell for emphasizing this point. I will return to the relative ease of inhabiting different perspectives in §3.6.

a non-member. Nonetheless, there is a distinct sense in which we regularly share what some experience is like. We communicate our ‘point of view’ (Faulkner, 2022), we exchange perspectives. Indeed, I take this to be central to what I communicate when I offer narrative testimony about how my day went. I cannot, in doing so, give you experiential knowledge of my experiences. However, I do offer something more than simply testimony which asserts the quality of my day or the sequence of events that occurred. I share my perspective on my day and, if you take up this perspective, you may gain a degree of *understanding* (beyond the bare knowledge understanding is typically contrasted with) of how my day went – you can, *figuratively*, ‘see for yourself’ how the events fit together.

Perspectival coordination is a crucial and central aspect of our broader epistemic and communicative practices (and, beyond this, wider social coordination). Supposing we share a body of information, the perspective we take up will shape what we think matters, which inferences we are disposed to draw, questions to ask, and so on. Agents who adopt different interpretive structures of the same information may only achieve a kind of “brittle” opinion coordination as they “are likely to expand their opinion sets in different directions, and so become opinionally uncoordinated” (Fraser, 2021, p. 11). Conversely,

the way in which information is structured does not completely determine, but does influence how that information will tend to be extended and retained.

Perspectival co-ordination can be thought of as a way to encourage long term opinion convergence: agents who structure information in the same ways are far more likely to remember the same things, and to draw the same

inferences, than those who structure the same information differently.

(Fraser, 2021, p. 23).

Agents who coordinate on a perspective, coordinate on how the information in the common ground is interpretively – that is, attentionally, inquisitively, evaluatively, and explanatorily – structured. Perspectival communication is a tool for negotiating this.

### **§3.3 Obstacles to Perspectival Communication**

Perspectival communication is widespread and plays a central role in our wider epistemic and social practices. I here consider how one’s attempt to perspectivally communicate may be contested and obstructed.

#### **§3.3.1 Disputing ‘The Point’**

In order to examine how one may be wronged by being unable to communicate one’s perspective, I here consider how one may be prevented from communicating one’s perspective.

Our epistemic practices, and especially testimonial practices, are deeply social (Craig, 1991; Fricker, 1998; 2007; Goldman, 1999; 2019). Much of what we know, we know because we exchange information with others and rely on their knowledge. However, exchanging disparate pieces of information via simple testimony is only a small dimension of our wider social epistemic practices. Hookway notes that “Participating [in discussion, inquiry, deliberation, and so on] is not just a matter of exchanging

information: it involves asking questions, floating ideas, considering alternative possibilities, and so on” (2010, p. 155). These broader epistemic activities centrally involve exchanging and negotiating perspectives and interpretive structures. That is, we not only pool and coordinate on *information* but also *how to interpret it*. Correspondingly, perspectival communication is central to our epistemic practices. In doing so we collectively determine what is important, what questions we need to answer, how to make sense of the world etc.

Contesting how shared information is interpretively structured by offering different perspectives is a frequent feature of our communicative exchanges. Disagreements about ‘the point’ are a frequent example.<sup>53</sup> Consider the following case of Guy and Sarah. Sarah complains to Guy that their boss made a sexist comment in a meeting that day, but Guy interprets her reaction as overblown due to Sarah’s perceived emotional volatility. If Sarah were asked what had happened, their Boss’s sexist comment would be central to her explanation whereas Guy would describe the central occurrence as Sarah ‘freaking out’. They interpretively structure the same sequence of events in conflicting ways. Suppose they have the following exchange:

Guy: “Do you think he intended for that comment to seem rude or sexist?”

Sarah: “That isn’t *the point!*”

This phrase is characteristic of contesting how a body of information should be interpretively structured. Guy’s question here challenges the perspective, and corresponding interpretation, that Sarah has attempted to communicate. Asking

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<sup>53</sup> I take this to be an example of ‘common ground management’ (Krifka, 2008).



about their boss's intentions has several effects which challenge Sarah's originally communicated perspective and the interpretive structure it produces. First, in asking this question Guy raises the *salience* of the possibility that their boss did not have these intentions. Something which was in the background on Sarah's original telling is brought to prominence, challenging her interpretation. Further, asking this question suggests (and arguably makes it the case)<sup>54</sup> that the answer is relevant. By asking this question Guy alters, or at least challenges, the questions under discussion; their Boss's mental states were omitted as irrelevant on Sarah's original telling but Guy's question changes this. Sarah rejects that this question and its answer are relevant, defending the originally communicated interpretation.

Notice that Sarah's response here doesn't deny the (now salient) possibility that their boss may have harboured no ill intentions, the objection is that it is *irrelevant*. It may be the case that she thinks her boss was indeed self-aware but – because this is irrelevant – it would be an error to answer. It is notoriously difficult to attempt to push back on questions with pernicious presuppositions or implications by engaging with them, as denying the implied answer can entrench the question (Cepollaro et. Al., 2023). Lepoutre (2021; 2023) and Fraser (2023) discuss the challenges of resisting an assertion like "Immigrants are parasites". Part of the harm of this assertion lies in the questions it brings under discussion and the associations it makes salient. Denying the assertion entrenches these effects, sustaining this salience and entertaining the question that should not be open to discussion. This dynamic may give Sarah reason to dismiss Guy's question even if she thinks his

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<sup>54</sup> It is not crucial for my purposes precisely how the 'scoreboard' updates when one's audience resists accommodating one's presuppositions (see Simons (2003) for discussion).

implied answer is wrong. However, it is also easy to imagine a case in which Sarah *does* think it is entirely possible that he had no ill intentions, such that she and Guy don't differ on the first-order facts but on how they matter.

This is not to say that in such a case we would be unable to identify *any* specific belief on which they differ – indeed, one of the reasons perspectival coordination matters is that it underpins convergence of beliefs. The point is rather that the *core* of their dispute relates to perspective and how broadly the same facts are interpreted: Guy's question reflects a perspective on which their boss's intentions are central to explaining and evaluating what occurred. From Sarah's perspective, whether he intended to be sexist or not is peripheral to the fact that his remark was sexist. For Guy, whether Sarah was wronged *depends on* their boss's mental states while for Sarah it does not. Relatedly, for Guy, Sarah's emotional volatility is the central explanation for her response. This is a difference in how facts are interpretively structured.

My central concern is with ways in which one's communicated perspective may be *unintelligible* - that is, cases in which the audience fails to inhabit the communicated perspective and thus does not grasp the interpretation the speaker attempted to share. There are other kinds of communicative disablement one may face which are not my focus here. One form of obstacle I note here in order to set aside, is to be prevented from even *attempting* to communicate a perspective because one cannot grasp the interpretive structure oneself. This is one sort of case hermeneutical injustice centrally concerns, finding one's socially significant experiences unintelligible *to oneself*. However, I shall set this aside as I am interested in specifically communicative frustrations where the would-be speaker has gained

(some degree of) understanding of their experiences and attempts to share it. A similar case is one in which the speaker understands but withholds their testimony due to the consequences of speaking: *testimonial smothering* (Dotson, 2011).

However, I here specifically consider the way in which communicative contributions which (attempt to) communicate a perspective but, in some way, fail. Specifically, where participants in a conversation fail to converge on how shared information is interpretively structured.

### §3.3.2 *Rejection & Unintelligibility*

Perhaps the most obvious way one's attempted communication may be frustrated is by *rejection*. For instance, in the case of attempting to communicate the experience of growing up in a small rural place, suppose the hearer insists the speaker has not appreciated the value of living in such a scenic place and the importance of tight-knit communities. This challenges how competently they have interpreted their experience; the hearer may have successfully grasped the perspective but judges the speaker an unreliable narrator. Similarly, Guy judges Sarah to have unreasonably overreacted in her interpretation of their Boss' remark, recognising her communicated perspective but rejecting it. In doing so the hearer questions and rejects the aptness of the communicated interpretation. In other cases, hearers may question the *sincerity* of a communicated perspective. For instance, you may be suspicious that I have deliberately omitted relevant information in order to give a misleading impression (though, note that whether omitted information is 'relevant' is itself subject to the deployed perspective).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The saying 'there are two sides to every story' is invoked to prompt caution about accepting certain kinds of narrative testimony.

I take it that rejection has the clearest analogue to disbelief, though it is not quite accurate to say in such cases that one is ‘disbelieved’. Perspectives are open-ended dispositions to form certain beliefs rather than beliefs in themselves and the interpretive structures they produce are ways of organising information and include dimensions that are not truth-apt (such as salience). The distinction between belief and grasping notwithstanding, however, the rejection of a perspective is broadly equivalent to doubting simple testimony: what one says is understood but rejected.<sup>56</sup>

Arguably, in cases of rejection, one’s *communicative act* succeeds because one’s communicated perspective is grasped. I may successfully make an assertion if I am recognised as intending to do so, even if that assertion isn’t believed (Austin, 1975; Langton & Hornsby, 1998). However, even if this is a communicative success, the speaker’s overall intentions are nonetheless frustrated.<sup>57</sup> Rejection is clearly an obstacle to successfully *sharing* one’s perspective by altering the way the common ground is interpretively structured, just as disbelief prevents me from successfully sharing what I know.

However, other forms of communicative failure do not closely resemble disbelief, as one’s contribution may instead be *unintelligible*. Kukla’s account of *discursive injustice* (2014) and Peet’s account of *interpretive injustice* (2017) have both highlighted that, in addition to disbelief, one may be wrongfully misinterpreted. The

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<sup>56</sup> Of course, rejection of a perspective may often (or, arguably, always) also involve a disagreement over some proposition or evaluative claim in addition to rejection of a perspective.

<sup>57</sup> In Austinian terms, the speaker’s *perlocutionary* intentions are frustrated even if their *illocutionary* act succeeds (Austin 1975).

above sort of rejection, like disbelief, typically supposes that one's contribution can be understood. However, this is not always the case. In the case of assertion, one might mistakenly (and prejudicially) be taken to simply be wondering whether something is the case. In this chapter I am not analysing cases in which the kind of communicative act is misrecognised<sup>58</sup>, however, a broadly similar point holds for perspectival communication.

I am interested in cases where one's audience fails to grasp the perspective one seeks to communicate and whether we are able to inhabit a perspective is not wholly under our voluntary control. Since 'entertaining' a perspectival contribution requires *inhabiting* the prescribed perspective, if one's audience fails or refuses to do this then one's communication is frustrated. In these cases, one's attempt to contribute to collective interpretive practices is precluded *before* it is even appraised. One's interpretation is not deemed inapt because it is not grasped at all. In these cases, perspectival communication is *unintelligible*.<sup>59</sup>

We may draw a further distinction between types of unintelligibility. Recall the distinction drawn in the previous chapter between 'mere' lack of understanding and the more substantive kind of *misunderstanding*. In the former one fails to grasp any interpretive structure at all. This describes cases in which the audience cannot make

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<sup>58</sup> Note, however, that we might judge both sorts of misinterpretation to occur if you do not recognise that I am attempting to communicate a perspective at all.

<sup>59</sup> There is of course a basic sense in which the speaker in these cases is *partially* intelligible; the audience is not wholly unable to parse the content of what is said. However, as I am concerned here with what is required for interpreting perspectival communication, I use the term 'wholly unintelligible' to differentiate cases in which no interpretive structure is grasped from cases of 'misinterpretation' in which a different interpretive structure is grasped (reflecting the distinction between mere lack of understanding and misunderstanding in the previous chapter).

any subjective sense of the perspective communicated; for instance, it might be that, from the audience's perspective, the contribution was confusingly irrelevant.

Suppose the question asker in the earlier example, about what a rural upbringing is like, presupposed that growing up in a rural place was idyllic. They were simply curious for further detail. The question-asker may then find the answer confusing or to focus on irrelevant facts. In this case, the hearer *merely lacks* understanding of what is said; it is wholly unintelligible. In the case of *misunderstanding* by contrast, one grasps (and accepts) the wrong interpretive structure. Suppose, for instance, the audience interprets the childhood described as quaint and the community as tight-knit and does not recognise that this clashes with what the speaker attempted to communicate. In this case, what is said is not wholly unintelligible but instead *inaccurately intelligible* (Dotson, 2011; 2019). It is misinterpreted. The perspective and interpretive structure the speaker attempted to communicate is thereby *distorted*.

One may be misinterpreted in this way even if the *contents* of one's testimony are accepted. Return to narrative testimony: we can, as explored in the first chapter, distinguish between the *contents* of some narrative – roughly, the scenario described – and the way they are *framed* by the narrative. The same scenario, and more broadly the same body of information, may be interpretively structured in different ways (e.g., differing narrative retellings of the end of the Roman empire which cast distinct but agreed-to-have-occurred facts as explanatorily central). To have the information one communicates, but not one's perspective on it, gain uptake can be especially galling when one is testifying about one's own experience: one is able to tell others what has happened, but not determine the interpretation or significance of their own experiences.

Of course, a speaker is not always wronged when their perspectival communication fails to gain uptake, in much the same way one is not always wronged when disbelieved. Sometimes we have good reason to doubt someone's testimony and some narrators are indeed unreliable. In other cases, it is an incidental failure on the part of the audience; the hearer in the exchange about rural upbringings is plausibly not manifesting a wider social prejudice. Nonetheless, it is widely recognised that when disbelief is a systematic product of prejudice towards the speaker's identity the individual is wronged. Correspondingly, when obstacles to perspectival communication are systemic and enmeshed in broader injustice, one can be wronged<sup>60</sup>. Marginalised agent's attempts to communicate their perspective on their own experience and reject mis-interpretive resources is, I contend, especially vulnerable to wrongful misinterpretation.

### **§3.4 Disability & Difference**

When marginalised speakers attempt to communicate their perspective on their own experiences of marginalisation, this attempt can be obstructed in multiple simultaneous ways. They may find that prejudice towards their marginalised identities and the nature of their communication both obstruct uptake. This kind of communicative disablement thereby sits at the nexus of multiple potential wrongs. In this section, I consider the way in which these may be mutually supporting,

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<sup>60</sup> My goal here is to examine the way in which one might be wronged by these communicative obstacles, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter to establish the precise *extension* of cases which constitute injustice. I proceed by considering exemplars which I take to clearly constitute wrongful cases.

distorting marginalised agents' perspectival communication about their experiences. I specifically examine how the kinds of mis-interpretive resources examined in the previous chapter can obstruct perspectival communication.

Above, I distinguished between having one's perspective rejected versus being misinterpreted. I will here specifically consider barriers to intelligibility which lead to misinterpretation. I examine how speakers may be wronged when they attempt to engage in perspectival communication and have their perspective misinterpreted. As a central case study, I aim to analyse how disabled people's attempt to communicate their perspective on disability can become distorted due to being interpreted via a mis-interpretive frame. As such, I shall first put forward a summary of two competing views of disability which produce this communicative breakdown: the *bad-difference* view and the *mere-difference* view (Barnes, 2016).

A core aspect of the project of disability activism through the last several decades has been to challenge the dominant perspective on disability.<sup>61</sup> The dominant conception of disability is often termed the 'medical model', but this may be deceptive as it is better understood as a cluster of views that share characteristic features rather than a single model (Shakespeare, 2006, pp. 15-19). The medical model, broadly, *naturalises* and *individualises* disability. That is, disability is a property of the individual's body to be mitigated and treated by medical interventions. Disability is a biological dysfunction (Koon, 2022) or a negative departure from 'normal species functioning' (Daniels, 1985). These are *bad-difference views* in Barnes' terminology (2016, p. 54): to be disabled is to be worse-off in some significant, non-socially

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<sup>61</sup> By 'dominant perspective' I mean the perspective corresponding to the shared common ground in some social context.



contingent way. The bad-difference view of disability is not simply that disabled people tend to have bad lives.<sup>62</sup> Rather it is that to be disabled is to be *essentially* worse off in some way; for an analysis of how the different ways bad-difference view might be spelled out, see (Barnes, 2016, pp. 59-69; Crawley, 2022).

This dominant bad-difference view of disability is, in Barnes' terms, as a *natural tragedy*. She summarises this conception as follows.

Disability is tragedy. Disability is loss. Disability is misfortune. [...] we *develop narratives* for disability to accommodate the fact that many disabled people seem to thrive. *We tell the story* of the tragic overcomer—the plucky little cripple who beat the odds despite the personal tragedy of disability. We tell the story of the inspirational disabled person— the courageous cripple who persevered through so many hardships, and whose bravery we admire because of it. (Barnes, 2016, p. 169)

This is to be contrasted with what she terms a *mere* difference view, on which disabilities are a kind of difference akin to other forms of diversity but not something that makes one *inherently* worse-off – rather, much of the suffering and marginalisation of disabled people is the product of social arrangements which oppress them.

While this certainly corresponds to beliefs about disability, I take the mention of 'narratives' and 'stories' here to be suggestive. I take the dispute between bad- and

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<sup>62</sup> Though, disabled activists have also pointed out that non-disabled peoples' prediction of disabled peoples' quality of life are systematically more negative than disabled peoples' self reported well-being (see Barnes, 2016, pp. 119-121).

mere-difference views of disability to centrally concern a contested *perspective* on disability. Barnes is identifying shared frames which correspond to a dominant perspective on disability (with obvious ‘downstream’ effects for our beliefs). By ‘dominant’ here I mean both that it is the frame for disability in the common ground – those who do not deploy it nonetheless recognise it as the conventional view – and that it is the primary guide for institutional practices (e.g., healthcare, social policy, philosophical theorising, etc). The bad-difference view is, supposedly, common sense and obviously true. On this frame, disability is *inherently* negative and is a natural property of the individual. (Physical) disability is a property of one’s body and how it negatively departs from the norm – this is in tension with the emphasis within disability activism and scholarship on at least the *interaction* between the property of one’s body and one’s socially constructed environment. These two views are *frames* which correspond to perspectives that cannot be simultaneously inhabited.

I contend that the naturalistic bad-difference view of disability is an *ideological mis-interpretive resource*. That is, it is a frame that will systematically produce misunderstanding in ways that uphold unjust social practices (specifically, the oppression of disabled people). Wholly naturalistic conceptions of disability are widely rejected. In addition to social constructionist accounts of disability, contemporary defenders of ‘realist’ accounts of disability also acknowledge the interaction between one’s body and one’s social environment (Shakespeare, 2013). The extent to which some physical condition (or ‘impairment’) is disabling (at least in part) is dependent on one’s environment. Whatever the constitutive features of disability, to persistently cast the physical properties of a disabled person’s body as explanatorily central will lead to misinterpretation – and, moreover, naturalising

disability will serve to obscure the contingent nature of many harms disabled people face.

Consider the following case. Suppose we have an agent who deploys the dominant frame for disability as natural and inherently negative. They encounter a wheelchair user who is frustrated by their inability to navigate their city. This complaint relates to the lack of accessible infrastructure – but the hearer’s interpretation will be distorted by their negative naturalising schema. The naturalising bad-difference frame for disability will dispose one to grasp inapt interpretive structures which reverse directions of explanation and lead to the loss of *modal knowledge* (Munton 2019b; 2023). That is, one will fail to recognise the relevant ways in which this situation is contingent, hence, the audience will misunderstand.

The hearer will be disposed to hold fixed the social arrangements that marginalised the disabled speaker, focussing on the modal stability of the speaker’s physical condition (it is not a social fact that the wheelchair user requires a wheelchair), and ignore the more relevant counterfactual that the lack of infrastructure is social, contingent, and unfair. The wrong features are cast as central and important counterfactuals fade into the background. It was highlighted in the previous chapter that mis-interpretive resources can be *contaminating* due to their distortions; they can render valuable evidence mis-leading due to the distorting effects of interpretation. This point extends to evidence provided by others. Though the wheelchair-user’s complaints are accurate and informative as presented, the way in which the agent mentally incorporates this information will distort it. It will confirm their view of disability as a tragic feature of the body. Thus, accurate information which, in fact, clashes with the misrepresentation of disability will itself be

*contaminated* by the frame used to interpretively structure it. When this perspective is combined with evidence of happy flourishing disabled people, it casts these facts as in opposition. Their happiness is thus cast as *despite* their disability, an act of inspirational perseverance (the ‘tragic overcomer’).

The dominant frame for disability testimony here is, therefore, an *ideological misinterpretive* resource. Specifically, the bad-difference view holds that disability is a natural property of the individual which normally has bad consequences: this will systematically lead to misinterpretation which functions to uphold unjust social practices. I take this frame to be a controlling image in Collin’s sense which makes ablest infrastructure “appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 1990, pp. 76-77). This frame is ideological; it leads us to misinterpret the world in ways that sustain harmful social practices (e.g., the exclusion of disabled people).

### **§3.5 Distorting Misinterpretation**

The following case offers an example of wrongful misinterpretation arising from a clash between mere- and bad-difference views of disability. Harriet McBryde Johnson was a disabled legal scholar and disability rights activist. She had a series of exchanges with philosopher Peter Singer, both public and private, in which she sought to contest his negative views of disability (McBryde Johnson, 2003). Singer holds the view that being disabled makes one worse off (in ways that are not analogous to being socially made worse off due to marginalisation e.g., race or sexual orientation); what Barnes terms a ‘bad difference’ view of disability (2016). Singer

had argued disabled infants, including those with conditions like McBryde Johnson's, could permissibly be killed if it meant the parents could conceive a second, non-disabled child (1979). McBryde Johnson wrote about these debates in an article titled *Unspeakable Conversations*. On Singer's bad-difference view of disability, she wrote:

Are we "worse off"? I don't think so. Not in any meaningful sense. There are too many variables. For those of us with congenital conditions, disability shapes all we are. Those disabled later in life adapt. We take constraints that no one would choose and build rich and satisfying lives within them. We enjoy pleasures other people enjoy, and pleasures peculiarly our own. We have something the world needs. (McBryde Johnson, 2003)

McBryde Johnson not only denies Singer's view, on which disabled people are inherently worse off, but casts disability as a *valuable* form of diversity – she advances a mere difference view. I contend that this dispute centrally concerned competing perspectives on disability, not only empirical beliefs, and that McBryde Johnson attempted to communicate her perspective to Singer. McBryde's attempt to communicate her perspective was frustrated. This is exemplified by her subsequent obituary in the New York Times, which Singer was commissioned to author, and which was titled 'Happy Nevertheless'<sup>63</sup> (Singer, 2008). As Barnes writes,

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<sup>63</sup> The title itself may have been chosen by an editor and not Singer himself; in any case, both are in the position of the dominant audience and Singer has never publicly disavowed the title. I will describe Singer as the audience who misinterprets her for convenience.

McBryde went to great lengths—including her famous essay in the same paper that published the obituary—during her life to explain that she was not happy, *nevertheless*. She was just happy, like so many others. (Barnes, 2016, p. 138, emphasis original)

McBryde Johnson's testimony was misinterpreted, undermining what she attempted to communicate. McBryde Johnson was, I contend, *unjustly* misinterpreted by Singer. I argue that her speech attempted to reject an ideological mis-interpretive resource but was distorted by that same resource.

I do not think the disagreement was apparent to the authors of the title of the obituary. I take it that the obituary was not overtly intended to challenge McBryde Johnson's perspective; her perspective was not deemed implausible, it was *unrecognised*. The content of the obituary, which largely reproduces a portion of *Unspeakable Conversations* simply in Singer's words, does not include a rejection (or specific identification of) the mere-difference view. In addition, when it is recognised that the title undermines McBryde Johnson's claims it would be an extraordinarily hostile choice to make knowingly in an obituary. While not impossible, I suggest this makes misinterpretation more likely. As such, I proceed with the assumption that the title is the result of the misinterpretation highlighted previously. The representation of McBryde Johnson as 'happy nevertheless' was taken to reflect her life, not intentionally rebuke her testimony.

McBryde Johnson was, I contend, wronged by this misinterpretation and central to this wrong is a *distortion* of the perspective she attempted to communicate. Singer and McBryde Johnson differed not only in their beliefs about disability but also their

*perspectives* on it. Certainly, we can explain some of their differences as contesting the facts about disability and well-being and, correspondingly, the communicative obstacles as one of disbelief. However, this is only part of the story. This misinterpretation, I suggest, arose from a *perspectival clash*. Singer holds a negative, bad-difference view of disability which McBryde Johnson attempted to challenge with a mere-difference view. Their perspectives therefore *clashed*, which led to misinterpretation. Perspectives ‘clash’ where they cannot be simultaneously inhabited<sup>64</sup>. Falbo offers the example of the frames of ‘Golden Boy’ and ‘Rapist’. If one’s perspective on an individual is that of a Golden Boy (innocent, privileged, promising) while one’s frame for rapist is a monstrous other, the former may prevent one from ‘seeing’ the individual as a rapist, even if there is reason to do so (see also Tilton, 2022). One may grant it isn’t impossible or contradictory for someone with the characteristic properties of a Golden Boy to be a rapist – but *seeing* a person as a Golden Boy and *as* a rapist can’t be done simultaneously, it requires a kind of gestalt shift (Cf. Camp, 2019). When the speaker and audiences’ perspectives clash this can be an obstacle to communication.

McBryde Johnson’s communication here centrally concerned perspective because it was the dominant perspective she aimed to reject<sup>65</sup>. She and Singer differed in their perspectives on disability and, reflecting this, the article itself and the exchanges with Singer described centrally feature perspectival communication. McBryde made clear use of perspectival communication, particularly narrative testimony. In her account

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<sup>64</sup> This is not to say that can’t be ‘swapped between’.

<sup>65</sup> It been argued that one aspect of the communicative difficulty was, roughly, McBryde Johnson’s emphasis on personal narrative in contrast to Singer’s on abstract argument and thought experiment (Hopwood, 2016).

of her exchanges with Singer in the New York Times, she introduces her account as *telling a story*. When Singer puts forward a thought experiment about a disabled child, intended to motivate his own negative view of disability, McBryde Johnson responds by telling him about her experiences as a disabled child.

Pressing me to admit a negative correlation between disability and happiness, Singer presents a situation: imagine a disabled child on the beach, watching the other children play.

It's right out of the telethon. I expected something more sophisticated from a professional thinker. I respond: "As a little girl playing on the beach, I was already aware that some people felt sorry for me, that I wasn't frolicking with the same level of frenzy as other children. This annoyed me, and still does." I take the time to write a detailed description of how I, in fact, had fun playing on the beach, without the need of standing, walking or running. (McBryde Johnson, 2003)

When replying to Singer's thought experiment McBryde Johnson responds with perspectival communication. It was her perspective on her own experiences she attempted to convey, by means of a narrative. McBryde Johnson does something more here than were she to simply say "I had fun as a disabled child at the beach". She attempts to share her perspective on her own experiences on disability, one which clashes with the dominant negative frame Singer deploys. In doing so she does not simply try to convince him of the claim that her life was happy, but to get him to think about disability differently; her happiness was not overcoming a tragic state, she was *simply happy*. Her testimony aimed to get him to not only *believe* that she



had a fulfilling life but also *understand* that disability was not a natural tragedy, and that her fulfilling life was not an act of inspirational overcoming.

In summary, the bad-difference view is an interpretive frame which produces a particular perspective on disability. It is one which McBryde Johnson sought to challenge via personal narrative testimony; this testimony was not simply 'disbelieved' or rejected. It was *distorted*. This communicative disablement is a manifestation of distorting mis-interpretive resources. McBryde Johnson was unintelligible, in part *due to* the fact she was attempting to challenging dominant, flawed, interpretive resources. This misinterpretation inverted the perspective she had advanced, casting her happiness as *despite* her disability rather than simply a feature of her life. This frustrated her attempt to challenge the dominant ideological misinterpretation of disability via the distortion by that same ideological frame.

I contend that the title 'happy nevertheless' was inapt because it manifests the perspective of bad-difference McBryde Johnson was attempting to reject. She attempted to challenge not only Singer's *beliefs* about disability but also his *perspective*. The title reflected the perspective on disability McBryde Johnson argued against, disability as an inherent tragedy. A disabled person could not simply flourish, they could only *overcome*. The title *frames* McBryde Johnson in a particular way: as the tragic but inspirational overcomer. As Barnes' identifies, this mischaracterisation of McBryde Johnson was a product of dominant 'narratives' (or, in my terminology, frames) for disability. In this case, that of the 'tragic overcomer'. McBryde Johnson attempted to communicate a perspective which clashes with this dominant perspective, one in which disability is a form of diversity akin to other types of diversity. She attempted to communicate her perspective on her own

experiences. This rejects the dominant perspective – and this clash precluded being fully understood. Singer failed to grasp the perspective McBryde Johnson attempted to communicate. In this case a dominant mis-interpretive resource has distorted the communicated perspective in such a way that it is reconciled with this mis-interpretive frame.

Attempting to challenge flawed interpretive resources requires engaging in this kind of perspectival negotiation. I argue that the kind of speech required to challenge mis-interpretive resources is especially vulnerable to the above kind of distortion, because it will necessarily clash with the dominant perspective.

### **§3.6 Resisting Mis-Interpretive Frames**

#### *§3.6.1 Misinterpretation and Unintelligibility*

The communicative disablement McBryde Johnson faced was the product of flawed, distorting interpretive resources. The dominant schema for disability was mis-interpretive in ways that rendered perspectives like McBryde Johnson's *unintelligible*. Her assertion of mere difference was transformed, by this distorting schema, into one of inspirational overcoming. The misinterpretation she faced was thus a manifestation of this injustice. I here relate unjust misinterpretation to hermeneutical injustice. I argue that, because attempts to resist mis-interpretive frames require a kind of perspectival clash, they are especially vulnerable to the kind of distorting misinterpretation McBryde Johnson was subject to. This is a mechanism by which hermeneutical injustice is sustained.

Hermeneutical Injustice includes both cases in which, due to hermeneutical marginalisation, the agent themselves cannot interpret their experience and that in which they – and perhaps their community (Cf Goetze, 2018) – may understand their experience but cannot communicate this experience to the dominant group. In the previous chapter I argued that this need not be the product of a gap or ‘lacuna’ in our resources; it can arise from the presence of mis-interpretive resources which lead to misunderstanding marginalised agents’ experiences. The misinterpretation McBryde Johnson faced when attempting to challenge the bad-difference view of disability is one such case: she was unable to render her positive experience of disability intelligible to the dominant audience. This is a hermeneutical injustice because the communicative unintelligibility McBryde Johnson faced was not merely incidental; it was a product of the unjust exclusion of disabled people from the joint determination of our interpretive resources (i.e., hermeneutical marginalisation).

What McBryde Johnson attempted to do is challenge mis-interpretive resources. Such speech faces a problem however: to be fully intelligible it is necessary for the audience to take up the counter-perspective. However, they are disposed to deploy the dominant perspective which will preclude intelligibility. It is hard for the kind of speech *required* to challenge dominant mis-interpretive resources to be intelligible under the very conditions which necessitate it. McBryde Johnson attempted to communicate a perspective which clashes with the dominant perspective in order to reject it; this clash precluded being fully understood. This is important because attempts to criticise dominant mis-interpretive resources must necessarily attempt to challenge a widely held perspective.

The kind of communicative obstacle McBryde Johnson faced, therefore, is one liable to arise in general when marginalised agents attempt to challenge their hermeneutical marginalisation. In the case of McBryde Johnson, I have argued her perspective wasn't simply rejected but unrecognised. The audience was not able to even identify what she attempted to communicate because it clashed with their perspective. Worse, the resulting misinterpretation embeds the perspective it was intended to challenge. This is a way in which mis-interpretive resources enable the dominant privileged groups to maintain their own *pernicious ignorance* (Dotson, 2011).

Attempting to challenge and resist mis-interpretive frames are, I propose, especially likely to face communicative barriers, particularly barriers to intelligibility due to perspectival clash. In broader communication it is certainly possible to challenge and revise perspectives; they are not all resilient in the face of challenge in all contexts. Consider a fictional narrative in which evidence that the narrator is unreliable is revealed at the very end; in such cases the perspective we had taken up when reading the story may be radically altered at the end. Similarly, consider alternately entertaining differing narratives of the same historical events. However, I suggest that widespread hegemonic (i.e., common sense, unquestioned) frames are likely to be more resilient.

How easily a perspective can be inhabited varies. Some discussion of perspective emphasises its *irresistibility*; that mere exposure to a metaphor, for instance, can lead to one seeing the target in the communicated way (Camp, 2006; Fraser, 2018) and when inhabited one 'sees' things for oneself. This point sometimes suggests the powerful appeal of perspectival testimony, but it cuts both ways. On one hand, the

power of perspectival communication here is that to interpret what is said is to see the world a certain way; this gives metaphors a particular force and richness. However, conversely, to interpret what is said *requires* inhabiting the communicated perspective – and some perspectives can be inaccessible.

An extreme case is on display in examples of ‘imaginative resistance’ in which readers find themselves unable (or unwilling) to imaginatively engage with a narrative (Gendler, 2000; 2006; Gender & Liao, 2015). For instance, many who encounter the eroticised refusal narratives examined in the previous chapter find themselves unable to inhabit the prescribed perspective and ‘see’ the interaction as one of seduction (even if they recognised that this is the narrative’s prescription). The degree to which some perspective is accessible is gradable; in cases of imaginative resistance the perspective is wholly inaccessible even when clearly prescribed. This is a limit case of imaginative inaccessibility. As such, analyses of imaginative resistance offer insights into the way hegemonic frames might obstruct interpretation.

### §3.6.2 *Imaginative Constraints*

Interpretation is socially mediated. There is empirical evidence, discussed by Peet (2017, p. 3428), that utterance interpretation (both semantic processing and triggered associations) can be shaped by perceptions of the social role of the speaker. I propose that ideology and social convention may likewise encroach on the ability to inhabit perspectives which clash with hegemonic frames, thus obstructing the interpretation of perspectival counterspeech.

The ability to inhabit a perspective is mediated by various factors and there has been much discussion about what makes some kinds of imaginative engagement so difficult. One factor that has been identified is the nature of what the audience is asked to imagine, with it suggested that fictions which alter *moral* truths are especially inaccessible (Walton, 1994). More broadly, it has been suggested that agents face difficulties when asked to imagine different higher-order facts without indication that the lower-order facts on which they depend have changed (Stear, 2015; Weatherston, 2004).

Others point to factors which go beyond *what* the audience is asked to imagine. Camp (2017, p. 92) points out that while fictions which depart from our moral norms may trigger resistance in the form of the dry vignettes used for empirical research, imaginative engagement may be enabled by a skilfully crafted narrative (see also Kieran, 2010). That is, the qualities of the particular narrative frame can render a perspective more accessible. Finally, the role of genre (Nanay, 2010) and social norms (Clavel-Vazquez, 2018) as factors in imaginative resistance have been highlighted. Regarding the latter, Clavel-Vazquez (2018) argues that the asymmetry between representations of male and female ‘rough heroes’ – grievously morally flawed characters the audience is directed to root for (Eaton, 2012) – is due to the additional transgression of gender norms in the case of ‘rough heroines’. The effect of genre and social norms on imaginative resistance points to the role of interpretive conventions in the accessibility of a perspective.

The above considerations suggest that hegemonic frames are likely to be especially hard to shed. Firstly, hegemonic frames are, by definition, deeply familiar and taken for granted. Social schemas are by nature familiar and automatic. Compounding this,

they are deeply embedded in our wider ways of thinking about and navigating the world; their function is to maintain social coordination and norms. This familiarity makes these perspectives more accessible.<sup>66</sup>

Conversely, perspectives which clash with hegemonic perspectives, which require shedding the hegemonic perspective in order to be interpreted, will be inaccessible. Secondly, where hegemonic frames distort *evaluative* and *dependence* relationships, for instance, via naturalising injustice, this is an especially demanding imaginative task. Finally, the evidence that imaginative access is mediated by interpretive conventions points to the intrusion of social convention into the ability to access transgressive perspectives. The perspective embedded in dominant social schema are, therefore, likely to be especially hard to shed.

Hegemonic frames are, by definition, so taken for granted as to go unnoticed (Cf. Haslanger, 2010; Silbey, 1998). Since challenges to dominant hermeneutical resources necessarily clash with the dominant perspective, the extent to which the dominant perspective is irresistible is, conversely, the extent to which the marginalised speaker's perspective is inaccessible. The result is that the marginalised speaker is unintelligible, because rendering perspectival communication intelligible requires inhabiting the communicated perspective. Moreover, this is likely to be compounded by other communicative obstacles faced by marginalised speakers, such as an unwillingness to expend the effort to understand the speaker, an increased disposition to judge that they are not making sense, and so on. These factors mean

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<sup>66</sup> There is empirical evidence that more conventional metaphors are interpreted more quickly (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005), for instance, as discussed previously, and associations are strengthened through repetition.

that interpreting counter speech which clashes with hegemonic frames faces substantial obstacles to intelligibility – *before* it can even be appraised for uptake.

Let's return to the miscommunication between Singer and McBryde Johnson. The bad difference view of disability is an *evaluative* frame and shapes how an agent interprets relationships of *dependence and explanation*. It is widely taken for granted, thus highly *familiar*, and deeply embedded in our social *conventions*. Each of these contribute to the comparative accessibility of the bad-difference frame and the correlatively inaccessibility of the mere-difference frame. Moreover, the bad difference frame makes available the 'narrative' (i.e. schema) of the 'inspirational overcomer', as Barnes highlights. So the audience has easily at hand, a way of making sense of claims of mere-difference which does not require shedding the bad-difference frame. The bad difference frame thereby *contaminates* McBryde Johnson's testimony, assimilating it. The result is an inaccurate sense of understanding what is communicated which embeds the perspective McBryde Johnson intended to challenge.

McBryde Johnson faced distorting misinterpretation; this is an example of a way in which attempts to resist flawed interpretive resources can *backfire*. In the previous chapter I offered an analysis of ideological mis-interpretive resources; interpretive resources which are distorting, producing misunderstanding, in ways that reflect and sustain unjust social practices. One consequence is that marginalised agents' ideology-critiquing testimony may be distorted in ways that transform it to *support* the ideology. Lindemann, in her work on harmful 'master stories', has highlighted various ways that attempts to highlight these damaging ideological frames may be 'neutralised' (Lindemann, 2020). These include 'playing devil's advocate', changing



the subject, and centring oneself. In these cases, one challenges and derails the speaker. I suggest that an important way in which attempts to challenge dominant ideological schemas maybe neutralised is via the kind of misinterpretation highlighted above. In the case I am analysing, the criticism not only fails to have its intended effect but *backfires* when it is reinterpreted via the ideology it was intended to challenge.

McBryde Johnson's testimony was distorted in such a way as to apparently *support* the perspective it was intended to challenge. In such cases, the contents of what the speaker asserts (e.g., that she has a good life, that she was happy as a child playing on the beach) may be believed. However, their significance becomes distorted, entrenching the dominant perspective. Narratives of disability pride become distorted to form representations of the tragic overcomer are an example of misinterpretation which entrenches the perspective the communication was intended to reject. Marginalised speakers may thereby find their speech backfires, appearing to support the dominant perspective they intended to reject due to how the two have been reconciled.

### **§3.7 Misinterpretation and Injustice**

I will end by locating testimonial distortion within the broader epistemic injustice framework. Epistemic injustice wrongs marginalised agents in a distinctively epistemic way; they are wronged in their capacities as epistemic agents. Barnes describes the above case as one in which McBryde Johnson isn't *believed* and regards this as a "classic example of *testimonial injustice*" (Barnes, 2016, p.138). However,

the 'classic' account of testimonial injustice fails to capture all of what went wrong here. On Fricker's canonical account, testimonial injustice occurs when one receives deflated credibility due to prejudice against one's identity. In these cases, the agents' assertions are dismissed as the result of identity prejudice (Fricker, 2007, pp. 9-29). Reflecting the wider focus on simple testimony in accounts of testimony, this has largely addressed the rejection (specifically, disbelief) of simple testimony. Testimonial injustice is thus, primarily, characterised as the prejudicial failure to accept assertions when one ought. Barnes characterises the obituary as *disbelief* of McBryde Johnson's claims due to prejudice towards disabled people. Barnes highlights that disabled people are frequently unfairly doubted in their claims about their own wellbeing, dismissed as having mere 'adaptive preferences' (e.g., Harman, 2009). This is acutely unfair; the experience of disability is taken to render one unreliable in matters of disability.

To stop here, however, would leave us with only a partial account of what occurred in this case. To be sure, McBryde Johnson makes assertions about disability, about her own welfare etc. However, she also uses tools like narrative testimony to communicate her perspective. As perspective is not credibility-apt, it is not quite right to describe this as a deflation of credibility. Of course, if one's perspective is dismissed as inapt on the basis that it clashes with dominant intuitions about disability and, crucially, because disabled people are regarded as unreliable testifiers on matters of disability, there is still something in the vicinity of testimonial injustice occurring. Rejecting an interpretation because one takes it to be flawed is broadly analogous to disbelief. However, in cases of unintelligibility and misinterpretation

credibility offers a less helpful analogue since appraising a perspective requires inhabiting it.<sup>67</sup>

There is a broader parallel with testimonial injustice in that victims of testimonial injustice are wronged by being excluded from our shared epistemic practice of knowledge exchange. However, the practice one is excluded from when one is unable to communicate one's perspective – either due to rejection or unintelligibility – are wider than pooling knowledge. One is rejected from the shared practices of interpretation by negotiating and sharing perspectives. This can be captured under Hookway's definition of *contributory injustice*. Hookway highlights that “Participating [in discussion, inquiry, deliberation, and so on] is not just a matter of exchanging information: it involves asking questions, floating ideas, considering alternative possibilities, and so on” (155). Prejudicial exclusion from these wider practices constitutes participatory injustice (of which testimonial injustice can be understood as a sub-type).

The contributory injustice McBryde Johnson faced was the frustration of an attempt to challenge, and thereby, contribute to, these hermeneutical resources. This testimonial distortion was thus *both a product and an instantiation of* hermeneutical marginalisation. The communicative barriers McBryde Johnson faced here were thus multiple and reinforcing; the hermeneutical injustice she faced perpetuates itself via this kind of mis-interpretive testimonial distortion. This communicative disablement is likely to be faced by attempts to challenge

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<sup>67</sup> See Peet (2017) for discussion of how misinterpretation may interact with prejudicial credibility judgements.

hermeneutical injustice more broadly, by virtue of the kind of communication required to do so.

In such cases, marginalised agents are able to contribute information about their experiences (that is in the contents of their narratives) but are excluded from the jointly determining significance of those experiences. This was the situation both Marchiano and McBryde Johnson faced. In such cases, one can be permitted to contribute information but not guide how it is structured. The negotiation of interpretation can be seen to ‘set the epistemic agenda’ so to speak, deciding what matters and how. If one’s contributions are confined within the dominant perspective, able only to contribute information *deemed to matter* from that perspective, one’s epistemic agency is severely constrained. This can be seen as an example of what Pohlhaus (2014) calls ‘epistemic othering’ – one’s subjectivity is ‘truncated’ by the dominant group’s agenda.

This obstacle, whereby attempts to challenge dominant misinterpretations are themselves mis-interpreted in ways that undermine the intended challenge, can also constrain the ability of hermeneutically marginalised agents to perspectively communicate in broader ways. Firstly, where this risk of counter-productive distortion is apparent, they may withhold their speech to avoid this. This is what Kristie Dotson (2011) terms *testimonial smothering* in which marginalised agents avoid offering testimony when it is rendered ‘unsafe’ by the audiences’ pernicious epistemic incompetence. Marginalised speakers may also find themselves contradicting (or find themselves being perceived to contradict) the dominant interpretations in ways that fail to adequately address the underlying distortion.

When resisting distorting frames, one seeks to change what we are paying attention to, which questions we are asking, etc. This requires a perspective shift.

In cases of hermeneutical backfire, one faces a kind of self-sustaining hermeneutical marginalisation. Our shared interpretive resources are distorting, and this is, in part, due to the exclusion of marginalised groups from the determination of these resources. Challenging these resources requires perspectival communication – but the required perspectival ‘clash’ can render one’s contribution unintelligible. Subsequent unintelligibility is a manifestation of hermeneutical marginalisation which frustrates the attempt to identify the problem. This is a mechanism by which the distorting perspectives which sustain injustice may be preserved, in turn perpetuating injustice.

To be prevented from contributions to the hermeneutical resources for interpreting one’s own marginalisation is a severe form of disempowerment because this collective perspectival coordination is central to wider forms of social coordination. The epistemic contamination which leads counter speech to backfire also maintains unjust material conditions. To interpret disabled people’s objections to ableist and inaccessible social conditions as expressions of ‘natural tragedy’ operates to sustain those very conditions. This misinterpretation is thus a stage of a pernicious cycle.

### **§3.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented an analysis of how perspectival communication can be wrongfully obstructed. Perspectival communication enables us to coordinate on

shared ways of looking at the world. As it is a practise of exchanging and negotiating interpretation, it is central to our communal epistemic practices. I have shown that, because interpreting perspectival communication requires adopting the communicated perspective, it risks being unintelligible when there is a clash between the communicated versus hegemonic perspective. Challenging ideological mis-interpretive resources requires challenging the dominant perspective. However, this is precisely the kind of speech that is likely to be rendered unintelligible because it requires perspectival clash. To be prevented from communicating in this way is to be excluded from our shared sense-making practices; this is constitutive of hermeneutical marginalisation.

Moreover, when this speech is unintelligible, the audience may not merely lack understanding but *misinterpret* what the speaker says. In such cases, attempts to highlight injustice can be distorted in the way they are reconciled with the dominant interpretive resources. This can produce cases in which attempts to criticise flawed ideologies ‘backfire’: the communicated perspective is unintelligible from the dominant perspective and the contents are consequently reframed in such a way they are compatible with the latter. This is a pernicious mechanism by which ideological ignorance may be maintained.

Having explored the way in which mis-interpretive resources may obstruct communication, in the next chapter I examine another way attempts to ameliorate hermeneutical injustice may be undermined by these resources.

## 4. Baptismal Amelioration & Replicating Frames

### §4.1 Introduction

In previous chapters, I have explored the way in which hermeneutical injustice may arise from distorting resources and how this may impede our ability to understand and communicate about the world. In this chapter, I examine how attempts to *ameliorate* hermeneutical injustice may be prone to (re)produce distortions by projecting the originally flawed resources onto new domains.<sup>68</sup> In chapter two I argued that, in some cases, the inadequacy of our resources is due to what they include rather than what they omit. I argued that it is possible that having the wrong resource – a distorting mis-interpretive resource – for some target is worse than having no specific resource at all, as in cases where this resource is a frame which produces misunderstanding. I argued that, in light of these distortions, when we appraise our interpretive resources, it is necessary to consider not only what we have names for but the representational aptness of our shared frames. In Chapter three I showed how the ‘contaminating’ effect of these distorting resources can result in the misinterpretation of perspectival communication which obstructs attempted counterspeech.

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<sup>68</sup> I here use ‘amelioration’ to broadly describe attempts to address hermeneutical injustice, whether by coining new terms, eliminating or revising existing ones. This might not be limited to Haslanger’s (2020b) use of ‘amelioration’ which describes a specific methodology for such projects. However, I take my use to be broadly continuous with Haslanger’s, as it refers to projects which are aiming to address injustice.

In this chapter I turn to consider consequences of these observations for the amelioration of hermeneutic injustice. Specifically, I highlight the risk that when one attempts to ameliorate hermeneutic injustice one may reproduce the distortions and obstructions that gave rise to the original injustice, creating new mis-interpretive resources to fill the original gap.

I begin by introducing an analogy with photographic representation. Photography displays the same distinction appealed to in the thesis thus far between what is represented and how. How some subject is represented relies on the resources used, e.g., which film stock is used, analogously to interpretive frames. I draw on analyses of ‘Shirley Cards’ – images of white women used to calibrate the colour of film photographs – as an example of how a representational resource can come to manifest and perpetuate ideology (in this case, racist ideology). I then turn and explore the parallel case in language. As in the case of photographic resources, words and phrases can become loaded with perspectives by the context of their use, including ideological frames. If we then attempt to produce new representations of the world – by photographing new subjects or naming previously ignored categories – we may replicate these distortions by using the same distorting resources. To illustrate the risk for ameliorative projects I examine the growing use of ‘emotional labour’ as a catchall for invisible feminised labour, which I contend is a cautionary tale in replicating ideology via our naming practices.

As noted previously, much of the scholarship on hermeneutical injustice has centred on *lacunae* which preclude understanding. Chapter two complicated this limited focus, showing that in cases of ‘positive’ hermeneutical injustice we may have resources which *distort* our understanding. I here wish to highlight a second



assumption prominent in this scholarship which arises from the lacunae framework; an emphasis on what I shall term *baptismal amelioration*. Baptismal amelioration describes ameliorating an inadequacy in our interpretive resources by (merely) naming some new target. For instance, in this chapter I examine how a category of domestic labour that has gone widely unrecognised has been dubbed ‘emotional labour’, attempting to fill a prior lacuna by naming a new category. It is the obvious way of thinking about amelioration that would arise from thinking about hermeneutical injustice as a ‘gap’ where a name should be: the solution is to fill this gap with a name.

While I don’t deny that baptismal amelioration may suffice in some cases, in this chapter I highlight the limitations of this picture, in order to offer a more complex (and cautious) characterisation of the process of amelioration. I previously highlighted that the hermeneutical injustice may not only arise in cases of flawed conceptual boundaries but may also be produced and sustained by distorting frames. I established that the problem may not only be that we *lack* a name for some category, but that we have access to the wrong name. This has the immediate consequence that baptismal amelioration will not suffice in cases where the issue is not a lacuna. For example, it was argued in the previous chapter that the medicalised bad-difference view of disability was an ideological mis-interpretive resource. The problem in this case is not that we have no word for ‘disability’ but rather how disability is conceptualised and represented; consequently, this cannot be ameliorated by a baptism.

Moreover, attending to the effects of distorting frames reveals the risk that baptismal amelioration could be *harmful* if the new label is itself a distorting frame. If this

analysis is correct, we thus have reason to proceed with caution in our ameliorative projects, which pose risks and face demands which have been underexplored to date. I here explore this by means of a case study in what I take to be a flawed attempt at amelioration: the concept creep of the term ‘emotional labour’.<sup>69</sup>

The growing use of ‘emotional labour’ as a catchall for feminised labour – and, in particular, what I contend is a domestic form of epistemic labour – reflects a partially successful ameliorative project, the failures of which are instructive. I suggest that this category of domestic epistemic labour was indeed the site of a hermeneutical injustice. It was erased for two reasons: firstly, due to its status as (invisible) domestic (and thus feminised) labour; and, secondly, due to the failure to recognise the epistemic demands of feminised labour. The expansion of ‘emotional labour’ to capture this domain was, therefore, a response to a genuine lacuna and has been a successful baptism of sorts. However, I argue that the choice of term ‘emotional labour’ both reflects and perpetuates the second layer of erasure which arises from an implicitly presupposed incompatibility of the epistemic and the feminine.

This example offers a case study of how ameliorative projects which are only concerned with lacunae and baptism may fail. It illustrates how prior ideological frames may be deployed to label new categories, which risks misrepresenting them. When our interpretive resources are systematically distorting in ways that produce hermeneutic injustice and we attempt to utilise these resources to ameliorate this ‘gap’, we may reproduce the original distortions. In the case of the domestic

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Concept creep’ refers to an ever more expanding use of the term in ways that depart from its original meaning.

management which is grouped under ‘emotional labour’, this labour has gone unrecognised due to its status as (epistemic) feminised labour. Feminised labour is in general devalued and erased; in this case that process is compounded by dominant conceptions of reason and rationality as gendered (i.e., male). There is a prominent, ideological conception of reason and emotion as gendered and at odds with one another. To name invisible feminised labour ‘emotional’ when it has no clear affective dimension manifests this ideological frame. While it names an overlooked category, it does so with a gendered frame that contributes to the original erasure.

Further, I suggest that characterisations of previously-obscured phenomena which distort it in order to reconcile it with the previously-obscuring ideology may be particularly appealing because of the mistaken sense of understanding they offer. I have previously highlighted the pernicious confidence of inaccurate intelligibility that comes with misunderstanding. When we seek to interpret unfamiliar phenomena, we often rely on resources we already possess; familiarity is an aid to (apparent) intelligibility. Consequently, characterisations of these new domains which reconcile it with the previously-obscuring ideology and thereby distort their targets, may be especially likely to offer the *sense* of intelligibility. It is thus crucial to attend to these risks in projects of amelioration.

I begin, in §4.2, by considering how our representational resources may come to be mis-calibrated due to ideology and how this constrains efforts to produce better representations of the world, by analogy with photography. I then turn to consider how this may occur when baptising new targets, in §4.3, exploring how our naming practices may import frames which reflect our prior social practices. To explore how attempts at amelioration may reproduce the ideology they attempt to resist, I present

the case study of ‘emotional labour’ which is increasingly being used as a catchall for feminised labour and, in particular, household management. I first argue that the broader erasure of women’s invisible and domestic labour has led to a lack of recognition of this labour and the growing use of ‘emotional labour’ to discuss it is therefore an attempt to filling a lacuna, in §4.4. However, in §4.5 I argue that this labour is also unrecognised because of the supposed dichotomy between the feminised status of the labour and its epistemic demands, which are taken to be at odds on the dominant conception of emotion and reason. Labelling this category of labour ‘emotional’ reflects and perpetuates this ideology. Finally, in §4.6, I argue that we must be especially wary of this risk because of the previously discussed potential for distorting ideology to offer a deceptive sense of understanding. I end with some concluding remarks in §4.7.

## **§4.2 Representing New Subjects**

### *§4.2.1 Representing What Versus How*

In Chapter two I introduced a distinction between two ways we might appraise the adequacy of our interpretive resources. I here consider the consequences of this distinction for attempts to ameliorate hermeneutical injustice. My aim in this section is to bring into focus two different ways in which our interpretive resources may fail to furnish us with apt representations of the world. I have previously highlighted the importance of attending to not only what is represented, but how. Correspondingly, we must attend to the way in which our resources enable (and constrain) how their targets are represented. Focus has often been limited to what we have the resources to represent, and the harms of lacking names. This neglects the potential for

distorting frames to render our resources damaging. By drawing an analogy with racial bias in photography, I highlight the importance of attending to how our shared interpretive resources frame their targets and constrain the representations we are able to produce. Specifically, I utilise the example ‘Shirley Cards’; images of white women which were used to calibrate the tonal range of photographs, making white skin the ‘norm’.

The concerns that have dominated analyses of hermeneutical injustice to date are, primarily, *what* we have names for and, secondly, *who* is producing them (Fricker, 2007; Falbo, 2022; Dular, 2023). I have termed this the *taxonomic view*. This can be summarised as a focus on which categories we have names for and where our conceptual boundaries are drawn (alongside who contributes to the determination of these boundaries). The taxonomic view is succinctly summarised by Fricker’s characterisation of the injustice women who experienced sexual harassment faced prior to the coining of a name for the experience as “a gap where the name of a distinctive experience should be” (2007, p. 151). Fricker identifies the issue as the lack of a name for a specific target. It is an injustice because this is not an incidental gap, but rather a gap that has arisen because of the unjust marginalisation of women in our naming practices. We can describe this as concerning the taxonomic adequacy of our communicative resources, i.e., which informational contents (Haslanger, 2018; 2020a; 2020b) have labels. However, this is not the only way our resources can go wrong.

Another way our resources can go wrong is in *how* they represent their contents. In Chapter two I argued that the taxonomic view neglects the role of our conceptual resources to not only distinguish but also *frame* subject matters. As Haslanger

highlights, our conceptual resources not only serve to distinguish informational contents via drawing distinctions in logical space, but they also “marshal and organize our capacities for attention, categorization, interpretation, memory, language, inference, affect, and the like” (2020b, p. 238).

Our interpretive resources include not only systems of distinctions and categorisations but also frames. These frames enable us to coordinate not only on *what* we are talking about, but how we ‘look at’ the facts under discussion – the perspective we take up. This perspectival coordination is central to our shared epistemic practices, as explored in the previous chapter, and also underpins wider social coordination: which alternatives we consider, what we take to matter, what we recognise we are able to change. I argued in Chapter two that it is important to attend to frames when appraising the (in)adequacy of our interpretive resources as frames can be *distorting*, systematically producing misunderstanding by enabling one to grasp inapt *interpretive structures*. These distorting frames are *ideological* when their distortions operate to sustain unjust social practices. In summary, while the taxonomic view concerns *what* our shared resources enable us to represent, attending to frames reveals that sometimes the issue is *how* it is represented.

The distinction between inadequacies in what we have the resources to represent and how our resources represent raise different considerations for amelioration. On the taxonomic view, our interpretive resources can be flawed when we they lack required categories. If the injustice is constituted by certain targets lacking names, then this is addressed by naming these targets (or adjusting existing conceptual boundaries to

produce an improved taxonomy). Gaps ‘where names ought to be’ can be filled by *baptising* the target in question; call this *baptismal amelioration*.<sup>70</sup>

I don’t deny the importance of baptismal amelioration or taxonomic adequacy. Sometimes we lack a term which unifies the relevant group of things, or our terms fail to track important conceptual boundaries. However, as the taxonomic view captures only some of the ways our interpretive resources may be unjust, this captures only one sort of amelioration. In other cases, as explored, our resources are inadequate because of the way they frame their targets. For instance, conceptualising disability as a natural tragedy produces misunderstanding. What is required in these cases of mis-interpretive resources is not (or, not only) the introduction of a new term for a previously unrecognised category. What is required is a revision to the dominant conception of disability.

In this chapter, I aim to examine a way in which attempts at baptismal amelioration may be undermined by neglecting the role of frames. I specifically aim to explore the significance here of *which* name is selected and how this may perpetuate injustice: when the name chosen for the new category is a distorting frame, earnest attempts at amelioration may perpetuate hermeneutical (and broader forms of) injustice.

#### §4.2.1 *Shirley Cards*

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<sup>70</sup> Of course, the emphasis on baptism specifically reflects a lacunae-centred analysis as well as a taxonomic view; one could recognise the potential for positive hermeneutical injustice on the taxonomic view and consequently amelioration would include not only baptism but also introducing, revising and eliminating conceptual distinctions.

I here introduce an analogy to explore this overlooked way in which our shared interpretive resources may be flawed, and the upshot for amelioration. The analogy is with photography, as another sort of representation of the world. Specifically, photography offers an example of how representational resources may come to be mis-calibrated in ways that reflect *and perpetuate* unjust social arrangements. These resources will systematically misrepresent what they are deployed to depict; as such, it is necessary to revise and recalibrate the resources themselves, not only the contents of our representations.

Suppose you survey the representation in media and appraise its adequacy. We can question the adequacy of photographic resources and the representations they are used to produce in different ways. One factor you might consider is *who* is represented; this is akin to considering *what* we have names for. Suppose you are surveying fashion magazines and struck by the inadequacy of their representation; the women photographed are overwhelmingly slim and disproportionately white. This appraisal could be made at any point from the emergence of the fashion magazine industry to present, but for the purposes of this case study, suppose it is the early 1970s. The first *British Vogue* cover to feature a black woman has been printed in 1966 – Donyale Luna, her hand covering her mouth and nose (Cazzaniga, 2023) – 50 years after the first issue was published. The first *American Vogue* cover to feature a black woman will be Beverly Johnson in 1974, 82 years after its founding (Okwodu, 2021). Suppose you survey the available mainstream fashion media and find that there is a severe lack of representation of racial diversity. You conclude that this is due to systematic racism. In conducting this evaluation, you identify an



inadequacy in the *contents* of the representations in these magazines. The subjects of these photographs, the targets represented, are limited.

You may also examine *who* is taking these photographs, the diversity of who is producing these representations. While it takes 82 years for *American vogue* to feature a Black cover model, it is not until 2018 – 125 years after the magazine was established – that the cover is shot by a Black photographer, Tyler Mitchell (Fetto, 2022). These two dimensions of representation – what they represent and who produces these representations – have been explored in analyses of hermeneutical injustice.<sup>71</sup> The central concern has been with cases where we *lack* a representational resource due to the *marginalisation* of those who require it in our meaning-making practices. These considerations are important, but alone they are inadequate. The photographic representations being produced in venues like *Vogue* in the 1970s were lacking both in what they represented and who produced them. However, photography in this period was also constrained by the *resources themselves*.

Celluloid film is a representational resource<sup>72</sup>. It is used, in combination with a camera, to produce (photographic) representations. The properties of the film, such

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<sup>71</sup> Of course, just as marginalized communities develop their own hermeneutical resources which may fail to gain uptake in the dominant community, there was not a uniform lack of ability to photograph dark skin. Publications such as *Essence* and *Ebony* (founded 1970 and 1945 respectively), aimed at a Black American readership, featured portraiture of dark-skinned subjects. As in the case of hermeneutical injustice, the skills and techniques developed within marginalized communities largely failed to gain consideration or uptake in the dominant mainstream.

<sup>72</sup> The nature of photographic representation, specifically whether it is ‘transparent’ such that one perceives the object of the photograph, is disputed (see Lopes, 2003). Even if one takes a transparent view of photography, however, such that celluloid film can be thought of as akin to a mirror, it remains a representational resource. Thanks to Colin Troesken raising this point.

as its light sensitivity and tonal range, in part, determine the properties of the representation. As such, it offers a useful analogue for thinking about how we may use our representational resources and how they might let us down in the properties of the representations they produce. In order to explore this, I shall discuss the use of so-called “Shirley Cards” to calibrate the colour grading of skin tones. Film had to be calibrated to the correct tonal range – if you are familiar with the practice of taking a photograph of a plain white surface to calibrate the correct white-balance you have encountered this process. For skin tones, so-called ‘Shirley cards’ were used – in motion picture the equivalent was white ‘China girls’.<sup>73</sup> The original Kodak Shirley Cards presented a white woman, with brown hair and blue eyes, in a black dress with white gloves alongside bright primary colours (supposedly so-called after the original Kodak employee to be featured) (Roth, 2009; Flory 2008). These white women were the benchmark reference for *normal* skin tones; if the processing produced their skin tones correctly it had the right tonal range. Consequently, these film emulsions were ill-suited to capturing darker skin tones, especially alongside lighter ones (and, in a failure that anecdotally proved more commercially significant, the hues of chocolate and wood in advertising) (Roth, 2009, pp. 119-120).

The calibration of this film was the product of at least four factors. Firstly, there were of course some constraints on the available technology. However, this is only part of the story: “Film emulsions *could* have been designed initially with more sensitivity to the continuum of yellow, brown, and reddish skin tones, but the design process would have had to be motivated by a recognition of the need for an extended

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<sup>73</sup> The origin of the term ‘china girl’ is disputed, but sometimes suggested to come from the use or resemblance of porcelain mannequins (Yue, 2015, p. 99).

dynamic range” (Roth, 2009, p. 118, emphasis original). This need was unrecognised, in part, because of the second factor; segregation. Kodak’s film was developed in a social context where racial segregation was the norm; as such, the particular difficulties of *contrast* which arose from photographing dark and light subjects beside each other were not salient. A third factor was market forces; Kodak, and other production companies sought to sell what was in demand and light skin was both seen to be desirable and the norm in wealthier markets. Finally, and more centrally for my purposes, the film was designed this way due to *ideology*: racist ideals on which whiteness was the norm. The design of film both reflected and perpetuated whiteness as *normal*: both in the sense of being the default and in the prescriptive sense that this is what photographs – and people – *should* look like.

#### §4.2.2 *Material Anchors*

This calibration of film emulsion is a clear manifestation of racist ideology in a representational resource. This is an illustrative example of a particular way our representational resources more broadly may be inadequate due to ideology, which is useful for examining how our interpretive resources, in particular, may be flawed. In this case we have a resource which is not adequate to represent certain subjects because it has been developed for other subjects. The omission of some subjects was ideological and value laden, not a mere technical limitation; these values were, in turn, ingrained into the resources themselves. Improving representation here, therefore, requires attending to not only the omissions of our representational contents but the corresponding inadequacies of our representational resources. This mis-calibration may both reflect *and contribute* to the inadequacy of the targets of our representations.

Liao & Heuber (2021) analyse the case of Shirley Cards to develop an account of ‘oppressive things’; material artifacts (and environments) which are *congruent* with oppression. Something is *congruent* with an ideology if it is (i) biased in the same direction as the ideology, (ii) causally embedded in the ideology, (iii) the causal relationship is bi-directional. The use of Shirley Cards satisfies these features and is thus congruent with racist ideology. Firstly, it is biased in the same direction as white supremacist ideology, favouring white skin tones. Secondly, it clearly a product of this ideology; its design was causally influenced by both segregation and white supremacist beauty ideals. The third condition is especially significant. Shirley Cards were not merely a product of racist ideology but, once established, a mechanism of it; they upheld the racist ideals that produced them. Liao and Heuber describe these film stocks as a *material anchor* “for patterns of thought and action” (2021, p. 101). These anchors shape “patterns of association, behaviour, and imagining” (Liao & Heuber, 2021, p. 102).

Liao and Heuber illustrate the effects of film as a material anchor in Syreeta McFadden’s (2014) frustrations with attempting to photograph brown skin. Realising that their darker skin does not photograph well establishes a pattern of negative associations. McFadden came to associate photographing dark skin with ugliness and aesthetic displeasure. This, in turn, produces behavioural effects, such as avoiding group photographs. Finally, these frustrations can impose an *imaginative* constraint, such that McFadden did not only believe that the current film stocks do not capture their likeness will but that they *could not*. The restriction of imagination is also apparent in Roth’s interviews with video engineers, who claimed that the difficulties capturing darker skin tones was “purely technical, based on physics” (Roth, 2009, p.

130). This naturalisation of the inadequacy, casting the issue as a purely technological matter, is an example of the erasure of contingency discussed previously. The alternative cannot be imagined if the issue is presupposed to be an inevitable natural one. The technology, which was *designed* in such a way as to ingrain racial norms, is seen as inevitable and, as such, it is the darker skin tones themselves (and darker skinned people) who are ‘the problem’.

This is, therefore, a case in which social norms become ingrained in a representational resource which, in turn, comes to ‘anchor’ those norms. These film stocks thus served an *ideological function*. This is a vivid example of how our representational resources may come to be imbued with the values of the social context within which they are deployed, and how they may then come to sustain these values. It illustrates why examining what we see represented and who produces these representations is, alone, insufficient. An attempt to improve the racial representation in media would not succeed if only the subjects and photographers were considered: it is also necessary to address the adequacy of the resources themselves, otherwise these distortions will be projected forwards.

In summary, the use of Shirley Cards in film development is an example of how our representational resources can constrain how we are able to represent the world. Moreover, their use illustrates how these constraints can be naturalised and come to *maintain* the ideology which produced them. Just as these resources serve as *material* anchors, our linguistic resources may also anchor and preserve social and interpretive practices in persistent and undesirable ways.

### §4.3 Linguistic Anchors

In the example above, the film emulsions were mis-calibrated to capture only a specific range of subjects. I argue that, just as pointing this mis-calibrated film at a more diverse range of subjects does not alone suffice, concern with baptism alone – as emphasised by the taxonomic view – will be prone to reproduce distortions. We do not simply need *some* way of picking out the previously obscured target, we need the *right way* of representing it. We need frames that enable us to grasp apt interpretations (or, least, we need to avoid mis-interpretive frames). Below, I will offer a case study which I suggest falters in this respect, in order to highlight the pitfalls of neglecting this dimension of flawed interpretive resources. Here, I flesh out the above analogy, highlighting the role of linguistic resources in coordinating our shared perspective on the world. In parallel with the concept of material anchors like Shirley Cards, I show that linguistic resources may also become imbued with the social context in which they are used, in turn becoming *linguistic anchors*.

#### §4.3.2 Lexical Frames

Let me start with a clarification. The above photographic analogy turns on highlighting a distinction between *what* is represented from *how*. Our representational resources can produce constraints on how subjects are represented. These cannot (always) be entirely ameliorated by turning our current resources to new targets if *how* those overlooked targets are represented continues to be distorted. One might object as follows to using this as an analogy, particularly the presumed parallel between baptism and photography: we can speak about *how* the subject of a photograph is represented because photography is *depictive* – that is, it

produces an image which resembles the target – but linguistic representation is not. I can introduce the term ‘mot’ and tell you it refers to animals with patterned fur and, in doing so, establish a successful referential relationship. This does not rely on any depictive relationship between either the written word or the sound and what the term has been stipulated to pick out.

The claim for this analogy to be successful need not be that *all* language is perspectival in this way, simply that much of it is (see Crary, 2021; Stanley & Beaver, 2021). It is worth emphasizing here that the proposal I am advancing is not one of widespread ‘sound symbolism’ (Nuckolls, 1999). There is no necessary relationship between a lexical string and what it picks out. The view that names are not significant – looms large if we take a taxonomic view. However, it is clear that we may often consider *how* some subject matter is linguistically represented – how it is *framed*. When we describe some interaction as ‘sexual harassment’ versus ‘workplace flirting’ we frame the same interaction in different ways, disposing one to interpretively structure information differently. This difference is analogical with examining the depictive properties of a photograph. When two words frame a target in different ways, we may meaningfully say that they represent the target in different ways, analogously to photographing the same subject using differently calibrated photographic film.

To this point, I have discussed various sorts of frames; narrative framing, metaphors, social scripts, etc. Here I am specifically interested in *lexical* frames; the frames carried by particular words and phrases. I take it to be uncontroversial that many words carry frames. Many words do not only enable us to pick out some piece of the world but lead us and others to *see* that target in a particular way; they cue a

perspective. This is clear when we consider different terms for the same subject (e.g., ‘sexual harassment’ versus ‘workplace flirting’, ‘domestic labour’ versus ‘housewifery’.) This role of language in shaping our perspectives has been discussed under various terms. Leopore and Stone (2018) relate Camp’s account of perspective to the Fregean notion of ‘tone’ and utilise these to analyse slurs.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Cappelen identifies what he terms ‘lexical effects’ (2018, pp. 122-134); the range of cognitive and non-cognitive effects of particular lexical items. He relates this to Lakoff’s discussion of frames, connecting the role of lexical effects to phenomena like slurs and branding.

Lexical frames can have powerful effects which are significant for political discourse. Consider Lakoff’s example of ‘tax relief’. This phrase produces a metaphor; ‘relief’ frames lowering taxes as alleviating an affliction. Because of the way we already frame ‘relief’, the use of ‘tax relief’ where ‘tax cuts’ would have been equally apt descriptively, cues a favourable perspective on the proposal.

The power of lexical frames has clear consequences for attempting to ameliorate hermeneutical injustice: when we name unrecognized targets, *what* we name this new category has the potential to illuminate or distort. For the purposes of this chapter, I am especially interested in words and phrases that come to acquire frames because of the social practices they are embedded in (though of course there may be all kinds of other lexical frames). Leopore and Stone write that “words often evoke

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<sup>74</sup> Leopore and Stone (2018) reject Camp’s claim that perspective is part of what is *said* since it is open ended and indeterminate. I set aside at what point, if any, social meaning could become linguistic meaning. Clearly, in many of these cases, the cued perspective is not sufficiently conventional regardless of whether, and when, we think ‘social meaning’ could become linguistic.



the histories of who has used them most notably. These uses can become a kind of quotation that summons an attitude or milieu the speaker identifies with” (Leopore & Stone, 2018, pp. 209-210). It is easy to imagine how different the ‘tone’ of the term of dog in two different dialects may become where in one community dogs are pets while in another they’re viewed as pests.

In his writing on ‘persuasive definition’, Stevenson offers a fictionalized account of how initially thin descriptive terms may acquire significant frames (or ‘emotive meaning’ in Stevenson’s terms) by association with their use:

There was once a community in which "cultured " meant widely read and acquainted with the arts. In the course of time these qualities came into high favour. [...] It became unnatural to use "culture" in any but a laudatory tone of voice. [...] In this way the word acquired a strong emotive meaning. It awakened feelings not only because of its conceptual meaning, but more directly, in its own right; for it recalled the gestures, smiles, and tone of voice which so habitually accompanied it. As the emotive meaning of the word grew more pronounced, the [descriptive] meaning grew more vague. (Stevenson, 1938, pp. 332-333)

The idea here is that a word may itself become imbued with our perspective towards its informational content, to the extent that this is crystalised into a frame that takes on a life of its own. Notably, while we may think the perspective cued in some metaphors, for instance, is about the relationship between the actual things described, here the perspective is distinctively cued by the word itself. It is not *only* that the word ‘cultured’ cues a particular perspective because of the dominant perspective towards the properties it describes, but that the lexical item itself comes

to acquire this laudatory tone. The perspective may initially be towards the target, but it migrates to the lexical item. Stevenson is specifically interested in the idea that the frame may come to supersede the term's descriptive meaning in governing its application, as when someone next insists that '*true* culture' is 'imaginative sensitivity'.

### *§4.3.2 Projecting Ideology*

Because words can acquire frames from the context in which their use is embedded, baptismal amelioration is complex. When we use language to represent the world, we don't just attach arbitrary labels to divisions in logical space, we also use this language for perspectival coordination. Consequently, words can accrue frames from the linguistic, and broader social, practices their usage is embedded within. An especially severe example illustrating the relationship between social practices and language is Lynne Tirrell's (2012) analysis of slurs used in the Rwandan Genocide, specifically the Kinyarwanda terms for 'snake' and 'cockroach'. There was an established perspective and set of related social practices for cockroaches and snakes. Notably, there was a specific practice of beheading snakes. Consequently, the pejorative use of the term as a slur against Tutsi people was 'action engendering':

The long standing practice of killing snakes set a model of what is to be done with snakes, and these everyday behaviors [sic] in rural Rwanda set a conceptual framework for 'snake.' The application of 'snake' to Tutsi licensed the application of a host of other terms that are part of the inferential role of 'snake.' This cultivated anti-Tutsi attitudes and licensed inferences about what should be done, granting permissions for action. When told to kill the snakes,

the question ‘how?’ would not arise. Rwandans already knew how to kill snakes, and knew that it was mandatory. The derogatory terms used in the propaganda were well chosen, meshing everyday linguistic and non-linguistic practices, to engender genocidal actions. (Tirrell, 2012, p. 205)

Mirroring Liao and Heuber’s discussion of material anchors, this is a *linguistic anchor* for patterns of thought, attention and action. Imaginatively and cognitively, this language made conceivable these acts of violence. Behaviourally this language laid the groundwork for the genocide of Tutsis (and the method of their murder). In summary, words can carry frames, cuing perspectives in the audience. In some cases, words can become imbued with the dominant perspective of the social milieu in which they are used.

When we deploy existing linguistic resources to baptise new categories, it is possible to import corresponding extant lexical frames. This is important because it means that our naming practices can become *vectors* of ideology, projecting current distorting frames onto new domains.<sup>75</sup> The example of coming up with the new word ‘mots’ and stipulating that it means ‘animals with patterned fur’ is not a terribly realistic vignette of how we go about identifying new categories. Typically, instead, we use words already in circulation to describe new things. In doing so, we may also apply existing frames, intentionally or otherwise. ‘Sexual harassment’ used extant linguistic resources in naming an unrecognised and misunderstood category. Other examples include ‘ghosting’ and ‘stealthing’. The former describes ending communication without warning or explanation, the latter the non-consensual

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<sup>75</sup> I mean ‘vector’ here in the sense of a mechanism of reproduction, as used in epidemiology.

removal of a condom. Finally, there are cases like ‘doxxing’, releasing someone’s personal information online, comes from ‘docs’ as an abbreviation of ‘documents’. Note that, while ‘doxxing’ introduced a new lexical item, it is unlike the ‘mots’ example since it develops from an existing linguistic resource. In each of these examples, extant linguistic resources are deploying to new a name, but the resulting labels differ in significant ways.

Firstly, they vary in their *transparency*. ‘Sexual harassment’, like ‘cyberbullying’ or ‘phone sex’, may be understood by an unfamiliar audience without definition provided they are acquainted with the terms of which it is composed. ‘Ghosting’, ‘stealthling’ and ‘doxxing’ are not transparent, by contrast; they are opaque, such that when first encountering their use a hearer would likely require an explanation of these terms. Opacity, of course, is a matter of degree. ‘Sexual harassment’ is an example of an especially transparent term which uses extant resources. In some cases, existing language comes to form a new concept: e.g., ‘ghosting’, ‘stealthling’, ‘doxxing’. These terms vary in their transparency – how easily an unfamiliar speaker could infer the meaning from the term – and whether they are figurative (‘ghosting’) or literal descriptions (‘sexual harassment’).

These terms also vary in how evocative they are, whether and to what extent they frame their targets. Transparency and evocativeness are independent of one another – though there is, I suspect, a tendency to overlook the role of lexical frames for terms which are especially descriptive and transparent. ‘Sexual harassment’ is transparent, but it is also, importantly, a substantial frame. Harassment is a thick term that carries a significantly negative evaluative frame and thus to describe this behaviour as harassment was not only thinly descriptive but also a way of reframing

what had otherwise been trivialised. Conversely, terms which are not transparent may nonetheless be evocative. ‘Ghosting’ and ‘stealththing’ require explanation, but the figurative use of extant terms frames the described behaviours in light of the name used. ‘Stealththing’ has associations of secrecy and furtiveness, perhaps invasion, suggesting the dishonest and non-consensual violation it describes. By contrast, ‘doxxing’, at the time of introduction, does not frame its target. This term is both opaque and what we might term (at the time of introduction) a *mere label*. Of course, over time, such words have accrued a frame – ‘doxxing’ has a substantively negative normative dimension. However, at the time of introduction it did not; no frame was imported from existing resources.

Lakoff’s example of ‘tax relief’ is one in which a frame is deliberately leveraged in order to produce a politically fruitful metaphor. In other cases, we may only be concerned with shifting existing conceptual boundaries or drawing new ones, and neglect to consider the way in which the lexical items we use frame what they are used to represent. I argue that if we neglect to consider how the words we use to describe overlooked phenomena when attempting to ameliorate hermeneutical injustice we will be prone to reproduce distorting frames. Just as photographing a more diverse range of subjects will not resolve the inadequacies in our representations unless we also revise the materials used to produce these representations, naming new categories and redrawing conceptual boundaries will not *alone* ameliorate flawed interpretive resources. The concern put forward in this chapter is that, by definition, there is an obscuring perspective dominant in cases of hermeneutic injustice which has produced this gap in the first place. If that same perspective, or some aspect of it, is imported in the naming of the new phenomena

then the *way* in which this target is represented may perpetuate the original distortion.

With this concern put forward, I next turn to consider the case of ‘emotional labour’ which I take to illustrate the risk that the dominant distorting perspective will be reproduced by the way in which previous hermeneutic gaps are described.

## **§4.4 Epistemic Domestic Labour**

Let’s take stock. Above, I took photographic film stocks as an example of how a representational resources can ‘anchor’ harmful social practices. I argued that lexical items can operate as equivalent ‘linguistic anchors’ when they accrue ideological frames, such that their use cues a harmful perspective. I now turn to consider how this complicates amelioration, specifically how it may undermine attempts at baptismal amelioration if the new name replicates an extant ideological frame.

### *§4.4.1 ‘Emotional’ Labour*

As a case study, I will examine the use of ‘emotional labour’ as an increasingly broad catchall for feminised labour and particularly the work of what we might otherwise term ‘domestic management’. I argue that the work being discussed is unrecognised domestic epistemic labour which, initially, falls within a hermeneutical lacuna. To term it ‘emotional labour’ can thus be understood as an attempt at baptismal amelioration – however, this label is inapt and frames this labour in a way that perpetuates misunderstanding. It thus serves as an illuminating cautionary tale in the risk of neglecting lexical frames when attempting to ameliorate hermeneutical injustice.

The broad use of ‘emotional labour’ is exemplified by a viral 2017 article for *Harper’s Bazaar* in which Gemma Hartley begins by describing how, on Mother’s Day, she asked her husband<sup>76</sup> to arrange a cleaning service in lieu of a gift.

The gift, for me, was not so much in the cleaning itself but the fact that [...] I would not have to make the calls, get multiple quotes, research and vet each service, arrange payment and schedule the appointment. The real gift I wanted was to be relieved of the emotional labor [sic] of a single task that had been nagging at the back of my mind. [...] the day before Mother's Day he called a single service, decided they were too expensive, and vowed to clean the bathrooms himself [...] leaving me to care for our children as the rest of the house fell into total disarray. In his mind, he was doing the thing I had most wanted—giving me sparkling bathrooms without having to do it myself.

(Hartley, 2017)

Hartley’s husband took himself to be doing just what she had asked because he only understood the observable, physical labour of cleaning the bathroom. Yet, what Hartley hoped to be relieved of was the research and administrative work that went with doing the job, to “do the emotional labor I would have done if the job had fallen to me” (2017).<sup>77</sup> A 2015 *Guardian* piece whose title asks *Is Emotional Labour Feminism’s Next frontier?* opens:

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<sup>76</sup> Throughout this chapter I will focus on heterosexual relationships, since I am focussing on norms of the traditional (i.e., heteronormative) gendered division of labour.

<sup>77</sup> Though this work has been described under various labels, including ‘household management’ and ‘mental load’, but ‘emotional labour’ is the most common.

We remember children's allergies, we design the shopping list, we know where the spare set of keys is. We multi-task. We know when we're almost out of Q-tips, and plan on buying more. (Hackman, 2015)

Kate Manne characterises - emotional labour as "*keeping track and anticipatory work*" (2020, p. 124; emphasis original).

I argue that the labour being described by this popular usage is, in fact, primarily a form of *epistemic labour*, which I define as labour one performs in their capacity as an epistemic agent. I argue that this domestic epistemic labour is the target of *dual* erasure. Firstly, it goes unrecognised as invisible, feminised labour. The pieces surveyed which dub it 'emotional labour' capture this first level of erasure: there is a hermeneutical lacuna which obscures this labour. We can therefore recognise the above pieces, which term this labour 'emotional', as an attempt at (baptismal) amelioration. However, the second layer of erasure is a product of women's epistemic oppression (Fricker, 2007; Dotson, 2014; Pohlhaus, 2020). Due to the feminine being cast as in emotional, and in opposition to the epistemic: even when domestic epistemic labour is recognised as labour, it is typically not recognised as epistemic.

I propose that the failure to recognise domestic epistemic labour as occurring at all, produced a *hermeneutical injustice* which can be understood as a lacuna; there was no specific category which captured the work being done. The pieces above attempt to address this by *naming the experience* and may therefore be understood as attempting something akin to baptismal amelioration. However, while the pieces noted above attempt to affirm the value of domestic epistemic labour, they ultimately reinforce the second layer of erasure by labelling it "emotional". On the dominant ideological conception of emotion, the *dualist* conception, emotion is feminine and



corrosive to reason (Anderson, 1995; Fricker, 1995; Jaggar, 1989; Lloyd, 1993; Rooney, 1991). Thus, to label domestic epistemic labour “emotional labour”, on this dominant conception, is to mischaracterise it as non-epistemic. This naming *framed* the labour as emotional, reflecting its feminisation – this choice of label was, I argue, a manifestation of the gendered ideology which produced the original lacuna.

The work characterised by Hartley’s and Manne’s descriptions of ‘emotional labour’ is, in fact, primarily epistemic. I show that any account of epistemic labour must include a broad range of epistemic labour including managerial labour. On this understanding of epistemic labour, the category of domestic labour being discussed is a clear case of epistemic labour.

#### *§4.4.2 Epistemic Labour*

To date most uses of the term ‘epistemic labour’ have focused on the division of labour, particularly as a relationship of dependence. Gauker defines a division of epistemic labour as “a social arrangement in which people benefit from the expertise that others possess regarding subjects of which they themselves do not possess an expert understanding” (1991, p. 303). On Goldberg’s influential account, epistemic labour is divided when one depends on the “epistemic perspective(s) and/or epistemically-relevant disposition(s)” (2011, p. 112) of others (Cf. Pasnau, 2013).

While the focus in much of the literature has been on specialisation within scientific research (Hallsson and Kappel, 2018; Habgoode-Coote, 2019), these definitions include a much broader range of activity. Consider a project manager; individual team members rely on their manager’s oversight and expertise. Others have focussed on the epistemic labour required in order to give others knowledge, through teaching

and testimony. Johnson (2019) argues that teaching is an epistemic form of care labour and is marginalised in much the same way – and for the same gendered reasons – as care work more broadly. Berenstain (2016) argues that epistemic labour is exploited when a marginalised agent is expected to testify about their oppression to a member of the privileged group, regardless of uptake.

Each of these accounts capture important features of epistemic labour. Bringing them together, I propose that epistemic labour is labour one performs in their capacity as an epistemic agent. In order to possess knowledge and participate in knowledge production, one must possess certain capacities. It is the use of these capacities which makes some labour epistemic in nature. Conducting scientific research, planning a project, managing a team and educating other agents requires utilising these capacities. It is this that makes the labour (at least partly) epistemic in nature.

One might worry that all kinds of labour will require the labourer to act, to some extent, in their capacity as an epistemic agent and we thus risk the category of epistemic labour becoming trivial. However, this is not a concern for my proposal but rather a general challenge for individuating forms of labour. When writing a paper, for instance, one performs the minor manual activity of pressing the keys – yet this is patently not manual labour. A precise characterisation of how we ought to individuate types of labour by their primary or most salient demands is beyond the scope of this project. However, there is no reason to think this concern is particularly pressing for individuating epistemic labour as compared to other forms of labour.

It is not my aim here to offer a precise definition of epistemic labour. Rather, I hope to have shown that, when we consider the nature of epistemic labour, the relevant

factors appear at the level of the agent's capacities. To the extent that some labour requires epistemic competence to be performed successfully then that labour is, to that extent, epistemic. Once we acknowledge that it is this process-level consideration that matters, we see that the category encompasses a broad range of activity. This extends beyond scientific research and formal education to include, for instance, managerial labour. Having sketched out the category of epistemic labour, I next highlight the role of epistemic labour in domestic contexts.

It is unsurprising that domestic epistemic labour falls primarily to women. While there is growing recognition that men ought to contribute to domestic labour, overall, it continues to be disproportionately performed by women (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010). Data from the Office of National Statistics (2016) show that, in the UK, women perform 60% more unpaid domestic labour than men. The picture looks even bleaker when we begin to look at specific subcategories of domestic labour, with women performing a greater proportion of routine, everyday chores while men tend to take on more sporadic tasks (Batalova and Cohen, 2002). As mundane, everyday work we should therefore expect domestic epistemic labour to fall primarily to women.

Catchall analyses like Hartley and Manne's collapse the epistemic labour of 'household management' and the (genuinely) emotional labour of navigating one's partner's emotions when delegating tasks into a single category. But these are different forms of labour: epistemic labour is a necessary part of domestic life, while much of this emotional labour is a contingent consequence of the expectation that women will be responsible for domestic labour. It is, therefore, crucial we identify domestic epistemic labour as a distinct category, one which – despite its importance – is undervalued and underrecognized.

Empirical research into domestic labour has largely overlooked invisible labour (Daniels, 1987; Daminger, 2019). However, the sparse literature produced indicates that women perform more domestic epistemic labour than men. Deutsch (1999) suggests that the work of “management” presents the largest time gap between genders in domestic labour. Even in relationships where the more visible forms of labour – like childcare and housework – were divided equitably, women were still primarily responsible for delegating tasks and issuing reminders (Ahn, Haines, and Mason, 2017). Therefore, the wider inequities in the division of domestic labour are likely to be even more acute in the epistemic realm.

Daminger found that the women in the heterosexual couples she interviewed did “more cognitive labor overall and more of the anticipation and monitoring work in particular” (Daminger, 2019, p. 609; emphasis added). Invisible labour, such as epistemic labour, is harder to recognise, which might partially explain why men tend to overestimate the proportion of domestic labour they perform (Pew Research Center 2015). This dynamic is captured by Hartley’s opening anecdote: her husband only understood the visible product of the work she had asked him to do. Therefore, domestic epistemic labour represents precisely the kind of routine, invisible work that is performed overwhelmingly by women without recognition or acknowledgement.

The failure to recognise domestic epistemic labour is, I contend, an epistemic injustice. In performing this domestic epistemic labour, women are relied upon as competent epistemic agents while being denied recognition as such. On Fricker’s original account, relying on an agent as a “source of information” while failing to recognise them as a knower is the primary harm of epistemic injustice (2007, pp. 129 - 145). In this case, while not narrowly concerning the transmission of information,

one is performing labour in one's capacity as an epistemic agent without being recognised to do so. Moreover, the failure to recognise the category of domestic epistemic labour constitutes a hermeneutical lacuna. Daminger notes that as a consequence of the invisible and habitual nature of domestic epistemic labour "it may be difficult to give oneself full credit for contributing to the household, to pinpoint the source of stress or time pressure, or to advocate for a more equitable division of labor" (2019, p. 620; emphasis original). Those who perform this labour find that they lack the resources to render this experience communicatively intelligible.

Hartley describes not just her frustration with the division of domestic labour, but her inability to convey this to her husband (2017, 2018). The local failure to recognise domestic epistemic labour occurring thus leads to an inability to identify, and communicate, this inequity due to inadequate conceptual resources. Content like Hartley's is so popular because it is not simply relatable but revelatory.

Domestic epistemic labour thus presents a distinctive category of domestic labour which is undervalued and underrecognized. It is vital to identify this labour in order to demand recognition for, and more equitable division of, domestic epistemic labour. We thus have an erased category which needs to be recognised; this is a lacuna that constitutes a hermeneutic injustice. We may therefore understand the transformation of usage of the term 'emotional labour' as an attempt to ameliorate this injustice via *baptismal amelioration*: to name the distinctive category, filling the 'gap'. However, it is, I contend, a flawed amelioration, which produces the distortions that led to the original erasure.

## §4.5 Distorted Amelioration

At the outset of the chapter, I set out a broad worry for expanding our representations: if the contents of our representations have been ideologically constrained in a way that influences the *calibration* of these resources, then they will not be apt to capture the overlooked targets. The way in which white supremacist ideals of beauty had become embedded into the development of film itself, meant that simply pointing a camera towards a more diverse range of subjects would not suffice. I now turn to this worry as it manifests in attempts to ameliorate flawed interpretive resources. In cases of hermeneutic injustice, the erasure of the target in question is not merely bad luck but *structural injustice*; it is therefore predictable that the wider ideology which obscured this target has also shaped our wider shared resources. Consequently, utilising these resources when we turn to represent the overlooked domain, may result in projecting the old distortions that erased it. That is, when we attempt to baptise the erased target with existing resources, we risk framing it in such a way as to import the original obscuring ideology.

### §4.5.1 *Baptising 'Emotional Labour'*

I suggest that the expanded use of 'emotional labour' to describe domestic epistemic labour illustrates this risk. Domestic epistemic labour is the target of dual erasure: it is, firstly, underrecognized and undervalued as labour and, secondly, not recognised as epistemic. In the previous section I highlighted the first layer of erasure, in which domestic epistemic labour is not recognised as labour at all. This produced a hermeneutical lacuna. In this section I turn to the second layer of erasure, which fails to recognise this labour as distinctively epistemic. I argue that the popular folk usage

of “emotional labour” perpetuates a gendered conception of emotion. This reinforces an ideology which underpins women’s epistemic oppression, erasing the epistemic competence this labour demands.

The key issue is with the dominant *dualist* conception of emotion. On the dualist conception emotion is conceived as (i) feminine and (ii) incompatible with, and corrosive to, (masculine) reason (Anderson, 1995; Fricker, 1995; Jaggar, 1989; Lloyd, 1993; Rooney, 1991). The dualist conception belongs to an extensive system of co-supporting attitudes which underpin many of our social epistemic practices. We can therefore describe the dualist conception of emotion as ideological (Anderson, 1995; Keller, 1985; Plumwood, 1993). In particular, the combination of (i) and (ii) operate to uphold the oppression of women (Dotson, 2014; Pohlhaus, 2020), by denying them full personhood and framing reasonable grievances as ‘hysterical’.

Just as film stocks were developed in a way that both embedded and perpetuated ideology, the language of emotion is laden with dualist ideology; these linguistic resources have become imbued with the dominant perspective of the social milieu in which they are used, such that these words operate as ideological frames. The dualist ideology is deeply flawed and we ought to reject it. Within the philosophy of emotion there is an extensive literature on the epistemic value of emotions (Brady, 2013; Jaggar, 1989). Since some emotional capacities are in fact (also) epistemic, there will be emotional-epistemic labour (though this will not be “emotional labour” in Hochschild’s sense). My argument here, however, does not turn on a claim about the actual nature of emotions. Instead, the point is the pervasive influence of the dualist conception which the contemporary usage of “emotional labour” operates on, and thus perpetuates. On this ideology emotion is incompatible with reason.

To describe the feminine in the language of emotion is *congruent*, in Liao & Heuber's sense, with sexist ideology. The inclination to represent women as emotional, in a negative, non-rational sense, is biased 'in the same direction' as sexist ideology (i.e., against women). This language is a product of that ideology; that is, this language is used to represent women and feminised targets because of this ideology. Moreover, this causal relationship is bi-directional: representing women as emotional and therefore irrational serves to sustain and rationalise their oppression.

Ideologies tie together attitudes and practices in ways that are hard to disentangle. This raises difficult and important questions about how to go about dismantling the dualist ideology. However, I set this problem aside here because the contemporary use of "emotional labour" reflects no such corrective project. The contemporary use of "emotional labour" simply reinforces this ideology by using "emotional" as a synonym for "feminised". The view that emotion is inherently feminine is inextricably linked to the idea that emotion is incompatible with reason, due to the corresponding gendering of reason and objectivity. The supposed dualism of emotion/reason is "modelled after and in turn used to model the masculine/feminine dichotomy" (Anderson, 1995, p. 63). To label domestic epistemic labour "emotional" is, on the dualist conception, to say that it is non-epistemic.<sup>78</sup> To term this labour emotional cues a perspective which does not aptly represent what is being described.

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<sup>78</sup> Ellie Anderson has recently developed an account of what she terms 'hermeneutic labour' (2023), which is simultaneously epistemic and emotional, underlining the shortfalls of the dualistic conception.



Feminist epistemologists have highlighted the ways in which these gendered conceptions of reason shape our epistemic practices in deep and pervasive ways (Anderson, 1995, Longino, 1990, Rooney, 1991). Supposedly feminine, and emotional, ways of knowing are devalued within collective inquiry and, correlatively, women are not recognised as competent epistemic agents. Rooney highlights how these ideas distort our conception of reason in “ways that still subtly but powerfully inhibit the voice and agency of women” (Rooney, 1991, p. 76). Thus, by employing a gendered conception of emotion, contemporary usage of “emotional labour” reinforces the wider dualist ideology which underpins women’s epistemic oppression. In particular, it perpetuates the corresponding conception of emotion as opposed to reason, thereby erasing the epistemic competence domestic epistemic labour demands.

This expanded conception of “emotional labour” departs considerably from the term’s original meaning in sociology, as the management of one’s emotions (Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild’s original analysis included a range of activity, from the unnatural nastiness of (predominantly male) debt collectors to the unnatural friendliness of (predominantly female) air stewards. However, as the term has gained wider uptake it has become cemented in popular usage as a catchall for women’s invisible labour. I shall argue that this transformation fails to properly capture the category it purports to illuminate. When we have some target which is obscured by our dominant interpretive resources, to the extent that this distortion spreads throughout our conceptual system we risk reproducing it by leveraging extant resources to illuminate the new target. I suggest that this new, expanded use of ‘emotional labour’ to capture domestic epistemic labour offers a case study which exemplifies this tendency.

### *§4.5.2 Feminising Epistemic Labour*

As originally defined by Hochschild (1983) “emotion labour” referred to managing and moderating one’s emotions. Hochschild observed the perpetual unpleasantness required of debt collectors and friendliness required of air stewards. The original concept was therefore a specific, somewhat technical one. It would be unsurprising if a technical sociological term had become somewhat looser – or “blunt” to use Hochschild’s description (Beck, 2018) – as it had become popular. However, the contemporary conception of “emotional labour” is not simply a more expansive version of the original idea: the artificial hostility required by some male-dominated professions cannot be accommodated. Contemporary use of ‘emotional labour’ does not include the work of the debt collector – because it is not feminised. On the popular usage “emotional labour” simply means ‘women’s work’. I don’t intend this to be controversial; it is overt to varying degrees in contemporary definitions. Consider Hartley’s definition:

Emotional labor, as I define it, is emotion management and life management combined. It is the unpaid, invisible work we do to keep those around us comfortable and happy. It envelops many other terms associated with the type of care-based labor I described in my article: emotion work, the mental load, mental burden, domestic management, clerical labor, invisible labor. (Hartley, 2018, p. 11)

This definition expands beyond emotion altogether, enveloping all sorts of ‘life management’. The “we” here is women. Others include organising office parties (Bartz, 2017). Manne’s definition of “*keeping track and anticipatory work*” (2020, p. 124; emphasis original) is somewhat more specific, more narrowly picking out domestic epistemic labour, but makes no reference to emotions at all. What unifies these disparate accounts of “emotional labour” is that they describe the work women do without (adequate) recognition.

Why, then, label this work emotional at all? Seemingly, because it is performed by women. Labelling women’s unrecognised work ‘emotional’ is a manifestation of the dualist conception. It conflates the feminine and the emotional, a characteristic feature of the dualist ideology. To label domestic epistemic labour emotional is, on the dualist ideology, to label it *non-epistemic*: this is an ideological lexical frame. Use of “emotional labour” to describe domestic epistemic labour thus erases the epistemic competence this labour demands, reproducing the original ideology in how it frames this labour.

“Emotional labour” is an attempt to address the hermeneutic gap surrounding domestic epistemic labour I highlighted. However, while the popularity of the pieces discussed above demonstrates the need for such a solution, use of “emotional labour” is ultimately counterproductive. Many women, aided by their first personal experience of the labour described, have found these discussions to enable greater understanding (though, I note that one of the most popular pieces on the topic doesn’t mention emotion at all but instead uses “mental load” (Emma, 2017).)

“Emotional labour” nevertheless mischaracterises domestic epistemic labour, which is particularly problematic as a communicative resource.

Hartley herself was unable to convey to her husband the nature of the labour she resented performing alone: “he was trying to grasp what I was getting at. But he didn’t. He said he’d try to do more cleaning around the house to help me out. He restated that all I ever needed to do was ask him for help” (Hartley, 2017). Setting aside the implications of ‘helping’ here, her husband could only recognise the physical and observable dimension of housework even after Hartley attempted to explain. He failed to understand the epistemic labour Hartley was performing, that she “[doesn’t] want to micromanage housework” (Hartley, 2017).

The problem, I contend, was that Hartley lacked a communicative resource which conveyed the distinctive – that is, epistemic – nature of the labour she was concerned with. ‘Emotional labour’ therefore fails to provide a communicative resource which addresses the hermeneutic gap surrounding epistemic labour: instead, it obscures it further. Manne defends the contemporary catchall meaning as “an instance where the term has naturally evolved, in order to keep pace with the needs of language users” (Manne, 2020, p. 125). However, as I have argued, the problem with this use of “emotional labour” is precisely that it fails to fulfil the needs of language users. Instead, it reinforces the second layer of erasure.

Use of “emotional labour” to describe domestic epistemic labour is a product of the dualist ideology which perpetuates the gendered conception of emotion. On this conception, to label some labour “emotional” mischaracterises it as non-epistemic. Therefore, the contemporary usage of “emotional labour” erases the epistemic agency domestic epistemic labour requires.

Domestic epistemic labour is the target of dual erasure. We must recognise domestic epistemic labour as an important and distinctive category of domestic labour.

“Emotional labour”, contrary to Manne’s suggestion that the meaning of the term has changed “to fulfil the needs of language users” (Manne, 2020, p. 125), in fact, reinforces this erasure. Instead, we require a conceptual resource with which to highlight domestic epistemic labour as an important, and distinct, form of domestic labour. I do not suggest that ‘domestic epistemic labour’ is the right term for this. However, there are other promising terms already in circulation; for example, ‘household management’ or ‘mental load’.

To summarise, to use terms like ‘emotional’ to describe women’s overlooked labour compounds the feminisation – and thus devaluation and erasure – of this work. Epistemic labour occupies an intersection of two crucial ways women are marginalised: they have their labour devalued and their epistemic competence dismissed. Consequently, domestic epistemic labour is the target of dual erasure. It is widely overlooked and denied recognition as labour, so much so that we lack the conceptual resources to conceptualise and communicate about it. In addition, in instances where this labour is recognised, it is mischaracterised as non-epistemic. The folk usage of ‘emotional labour’ as a catchall for invisible feminised labour, and domestic epistemic labour in particular, reflects the insidiousness of this dual erasure. The viral uptake of the term reflects the need for adequate conceptual resources with which to understand domestic epistemic labour. However, to use ‘emotional’ as a catchall description for feminised labour perpetuates a conception of emotion, central to women’s epistemic oppression, on which it is opposed to reason. Thus, this attempt to shed light on domestic epistemic labour ultimately reinforces its erasure.

## §4.6 Reconciliation and Apparent Intelligibility

What I aim to have established here is not that we must *avoid* the importing of existing frames in these cases. Rather, I point to a risk that must be attended to when doing so. The leveraging of extant resources, in general, is not what I mean to critique here; I take it that doing so is fruitful when done well and more generally often unavoidable. Indeed, once we recognise the significance of the names we choose, we see that a *good* name (e.g., ‘sexual harassment’) is a crucial tool for successful amelioration. In the next chapter I explore and defend the deliberate leveraging of lexical frames for amelioration. To term this work ‘household management’ would also deploy extant concepts, but without the above distortion. As our extant resources are likely to be suffused with the distortion which produced and obscured the gap in the first place, care must be taken. We will generally be prone to import frames; flawed ones can entrench ideological distortions while fruitful ones can advance understanding the target. The case I have attempted to make here is in favour of examining the role of frames in amelioration, highlighting the risks of being limited to the taxonomic view of hermeneutical injustice and its amelioration.

I here end by turning to consider a reason that we ought to take this concern to be particularly acute. Above I have suggested that since in cases of hermeneutic injustice our resources and practices are flawed in systematic ways we ought to be cautious to deploy extant resources to map new terrains. On one reading the worry here is that since the distortion is ‘in the water’ so to speak, we run the statistical risk

of deploying a contaminated resource simply because so many resources will be contaminated. However, I want to highlight that the risk is not merely about base rates in this way; extant distorting resources will appear to offer greater apparent intelligibility when they reconcile the newly-recognised target within the wider ideological system. The concern here is that when we attempt to make sense of a previously occluded target, the resources which seem to offer the greatest apparent understanding of this target, may seem this way precisely because they render the target – which had been obscured by the dominant ideology – intelligible from that ideology.

Returning to the photography analogy, I noted that film developed to capture white skin tones fails to capture the detail of darker skin tones. This can result in photographs which lack detail, collapsing into only light and dark tones. Such images are straightforwardly, visibly flawed. However, another issue can arise in the *recovery* of these lost details. To reconcile the grading of the film (or the graphics card) with the details of the subject, the resulting image can end up being *lightened* (e.g., via bright lighting) bringing it into the ‘normal range’. In rendering the subject of the representation visually intelligible, so to speak, they are distorting: the subject is reconciled with the representational resource in such a way as to entrench the distortion, rather than repairing the inapt resource.

In the previous chapter I argued that mis-interpretive resources which offer *apparent intelligibility* can be particularly pernicious. The *sense* of understanding these resources offer, by enabling us to grasp an interpretive structure, offers a deceptive experience of epistemic achievement we have not, in fact, obtained (Dotson, 2011; Nguyen, 2021; Trout, 2002; 2005). A significant factor in this sense of

understanding is ‘fluency’; we are more prone to grasp, and accept, explanations which feel familiar, and which can be incorporated with our prior schemas (Lewandowsky et. al., 2012). One way in which a previously obscured target may be rendered (merely) apparently intelligible is by reconciling it with the dominant perspective – while, in these cases, it is a starting assumption that this perspective has obscured it. This may mean that there is a disposition, in at least some cases, to choose names in ameliorative projects which project the distortions of the conceptual scheme which originally obscured this target. This is because, while these do not best represent, the target they do render it most readily graspable under the dominant conceptual scheme. I suggest this occurred in the case of ‘emotional labour’.

Originally, domestic epistemic labour is (more or less) entirely unrecognised. It is neglected as invisible domestic labour and further hard to conceptualise as feminised epistemic labour. We lack any representation of this work. The discussions explored above recognise that we need to identify this missing category but found that the most useful language for doing so was that of *emotion* which emphasising its feminised status and thereby making its epistemic status harder to recognise. Emotion is thus inapt terminology, but also the obvious terminology on the very perspective which has erased the category.

In short, when we notice domestic epistemic labour but look at it through an oppressive gendered ideology, we find our attention drawn to its affective dimension; we notice the potential emotional distress of this burden, the genuine emotional labour required as part of this managerial work. In doing so we neglect and erase the epistemic dimension, which is much more central to the words described. We find that terming this ‘emotional labour’ just *seems to fit*, crowding out other candidates



(like ‘mental load’ or ‘household management’). This offers apparent, but mistaken, intelligibility. This is an example of a wider risk, that apparent intelligibility may be most easily obtain by reconciling the target with the dominant perspective, producing a distorted representation, rather than rendering it truly intelligible.

It is thus crucial to not be limited by the taxonomic view and the corresponding emphasis on baptismal amelioration. The specific terminology chosen matters and, if we neglect this, we risk choosing terminology that perpetuates the original erasure in distortion; indeed, we may be especially drawn to such distorting terminology.

## **§4.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that how we name the overlooked targets of hermeneutic lacunae matters. Specifically, I have shown that we risk reproducing the ideological distortions which gave rise to the original injustice.

I began by considering photographic resources as an analogy to interpretive frames. The historical development of celluloid film is an example of a representation resource which was inadequate due to the dominant ideology in the context it was produced. In such cases, simply trying to expand what we represent (e.g., diversifying the subjects in media) will not suffice if we lack the resources to represent them. It is necessary to address the inadequacy of the underlying resource; otherwise resources which are shaped by ideology can come to perpetuate that ideology.

Just as our photographic representation may reflect and reproduce oppressive beauty ideals, a linguistic resource can become laden with dominant ideology. Words and phrases can come to be biased by the social context in which they are deployed, such that their use cues the corresponding perspective. Here, lexical frames are akin to film stocks; they can be ‘calibrated’ in ways that reflect the ideology under which they were developed. When we use existing linguistic resources to talk about new domains, we can import existing lexical frames. In this way, the development of new language can reproduce existing ideology. We thereby risk projecting this ideology onto previously neglected targets when attempting to name them.

I have argued that the contemporary folk use of ‘emotional labour’ is an example of this issue; a genuine lacuna was identified, however, the attempt to name it reproduced the very ideology of gendered dualistic reason that had, in part, erased it in the first place. I have suggested that not only do we risk doing so, given the productive aspect of ideology, but that these ideological distorting terms may be especially appealing if they offer apparent intelligibility by reconciling the overlooked target with the dominant ideology. We must therefore not be limited only to the taxonomic view and its emphasis on baptismal amelioration but consider the risks of producing mis-interpretive resources in our ameliorative projects.

## 5. Reframing Ideology

### §5.1 Introduction

It is common, colloquially, to speak of *reframing the debate*: changing what we are talking about, paying attention to, and/or taking for granted. Proposals abound for topics that we need to reframe; domestic abuse (Goodmark, 2009), climate change (Choi-Schagrin, 2021), abortion access (Watson, 2022), universal basic income (Fouksman, 2021), trans rights (Jenkins, 2023) and more. These attempts to shift what we're paying attention to and how it matters often manifest in disputes over language. For instance, 'pro-life' versus 'pro-choice', 'unborn child' versus 'foetus', 'domestic abuse' versus 'intimate partner violence'. Lakoff (2010; 2014) emphasises the risks of debating the facts within your opponent's frame. Doing so 'pulls you into their world view'; pointing to relevant facts will (often) not be enough if one continues to do so within a frame that mangles their significance. To argue against lowering taxes while continuing to use the language of 'tax relief' (Lakoff, 2014) is to fight an uphill battle.

Thus far, I have argued that distorting frames play a central ideological role, producing misunderstanding which upholds oppression. Consequently, a central project of ideology critique is attempting to challenge and reject these frames. I have argued, in Chapter four, that if we fail to attend to the ideological role of frames we may inadvertently reproduce the harms we sought to address. In this chapter, I examine the role of frames in resisting ideology. I argue that constructing better

frames enables us to *understand* the world, and communicate this understanding, overcoming the misinterpretations by which ideological frames operate.

Once we recognize the powerful and pernicious role of ideological frames, a question arises: should we attempt to *avoid and minimize* the effects of these frames or can we, under some circumstances, seek to *leverage* such frames? The issue here is normative. I have established the significant interpretive effects of frames; the question explored in this chapter is whether it is *permissible* to ‘exploit’ these effects. I argue that the project of resisting ideological frames is one of obtaining and communicating *understanding* and that frames can therefore serve an educational purpose – specifically, they can enable agents to grasp apt interpretive structures and thereby gain understanding. Reframing is an essential component of (successful) ideology critique. Attempts to reframe, as part of broader movements for resisting oppression, must therefore be recognized as a constitutive element of overcoming ideology – not a mere instrumental means by which to alter social practices or attitudes.

In this chapter I will consider two examples of (at least, partially) successful and merited reframing, in which mis-interpretive resources were revised or replaced.<sup>79</sup> I will argue that, in both cases, understanding of oppression was improved. The first is the reframing of disability as social. The second is the language of ‘sex work’. These examples illustrate two roles language may play in reframing. In the case of disability, established language was used, but activists sought to revise the dominant

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<sup>79</sup> I will not here explore the issue of how we ought to individuate frames, so while I will talk of reframing and its potential to ‘repair’ frames, I mean to be neutral on whether and when this involves revision versus replacement.

conception of the target. In the case of ‘sex work’, new terminology was introduced as a way of changing how the subject matter was framed.

I first defend the importance of reframing by examining the disability rights movement’s development of a social model of disability. I have previously argued that the medical, bad-difference model of disability is an ideological mis-interpretive resource. I argue that the development of a social model of disability was centrally a *reframing* of disability. I discuss Cantalamessa’s (2021) recent characterization of this project, which suggests that the promotion of the social model was akin to strategic marketing. Cantalamessa interprets the claims of disability advocates as challenging the dominant conception by making provocative and confusing claims. This reflects a broader tendency, shared by Lakoff (2010; 2014), to treat reframing as a matter of strategic communication – a way to bring ‘the other side’ over to your team. I reject this view. I argue that it fails to reflect the actual, historical development of the social model and wrongfully fails to engage with the claims of activists. I argue, instead, that the social model constituted an improved understanding of disability which (partially) overcame the prior mis-interpretive frame.

My second case study is the use of the language of labour to describe ‘sex work’ (Jeffreys, 2015; Leigh, 2013). This offers a different kind of reframing campaign to that of the development of the social model of disability. In developing the social model, disability activists largely retained existing language (i.e., ‘disability’) but sought to radically reframe the subject matter. This is one way of approaching reframing. Another way in which we can attempt to challenge distorting frames is by *leveraging* different frames in ways that utilize the effects discussed to this point:

compelling narrative framing, emotive word choice, evocative metaphors etc. The promotion of ‘sex work’ terminology presents an example of leveraging *lexical frames*. I claim that one of the reasons this language was chosen, in addition to *shedding* the pejorative lexical frame of ‘prostitute’ and related terms, was that it introduced a more fruitful way of framing the issue.

In examining these cases of reframing, I argue that these shifts produced greater *understanding* of injustice. Up to this point in the thesis, I have analysed the ideological role of *misunderstanding* in upholding oppression; conversely, obtaining understanding is central to ideology critique and resisting oppression. I here argue that recognizing the relationship between frames and understanding is central to capturing their role in movements which aim to resist oppression. Firstly, I show that this captures the continuity between movements’ internal activities like consciousness raising and their public protests. Secondly, I argue that recognizing the centrality of understanding identifies an epistemically vital role of frames, which has been overlooked – due to a focus on beliefs – to date.

The campaign to replace terms like ‘prostitution’ (or, ‘prostituted women’) with ‘sex worker’ attempts to reframe the subject matter by deploying a new lexical frame. Moving from the language of ‘prostitution’ (and other overtly derogatory terms) towards the language of labour reflects the conviction that justice for sex workers is an issue of workers’ rights (Jackson, 2016; Smith & Mac, 2018). The language of ‘sex work’ and ‘the sex industry’, however, is characterized by opponents as a misleading ‘sanitization’ of the subject matter (e.g., Bindel, 2018; 2022). Having argued that reframing is essential to obtaining understanding of oppression, I argue that lexical frames are not simply a strategic means by which to change people’s attitudes or

behaviour. They are better understood as pedagogical *tools* by which to overcome the interpretive distortions and imaginative constraints imposed by ideological frames.

This chapter proceeds as follows. In §5.2 I discuss the value of reframing in resisting oppression and argue that the development of the social model reframed disability. In §5.3 I discuss Cantalamessa's (2021) interpretation of this reframing as wholly pragmatic, merely seeking to disrupt the dominant conception. I go on to reject this account in §5.4, arguing that it wrongfully fails to engage with the claims of disability activists. In §5.5 I argue that the reframing of disability offered a greater understanding of disability and highlight the role of understanding in rejecting ideological frames. I then examine the strategic use of lexical frames and their effects in attempts to resist oppression. In §5.6 I present the language of 'sex work' as an example of fruitfully leveraging a lexical frame. In §5.7 I review previous discussion of these strategies and argue they have overlooked the relationship between frames and understanding.

## **§5.2 Reframing**

Our attempts to ameliorate hermeneutical injustice (and broader forms of injustice) need to include attention to ideological frames. I have previously highlighted, throughout this thesis, the limitations of considering the only *taxonomic* adequacy of our interpretive resources (where we draw distinctions, which categories we have names for, etc.). To only consider the taxonomic adequacy neglects the significant role of perspective and framing, which plays a central role in how we interpret and navigate the world. Since, on the taxonomic view, focus is on conceptual boundaries

and distinctions the corresponding sort of revisionary project will focus on adjusting these boundaries: the inclusion/exclusion of trans women from the category of women, the inclusion/exclusion surrogates and adoptive parents from the category of parent etc. Such projects are important. However, I have argued that we cannot *only* take the taxonomic view. It is crucial also to examine frames and their effects on how the categories in our taxonomies are represented.

Resisting ideological frames is essential to resisting the oppression they sustain, however, doing so is difficult (Cepollaro et. Al., 2023). Frames can centre irrelevant questions which engaging with only entrenches as relevant. Harmful salience effects can be compounded by the straightforward rejection of claims (McGowan, 2018; Saul, 2021). Dominant hearers can divert focus by shifting which questions are under discussion (Keiser, 2021). Further, as explored previously, these frames contaminate would-be counterevidence and counter-speech, rendering them resistant to challenge. Changing a frame, especially a hegemonic frame, is therefore difficult.

However, for these reasons, changing frames is required when resisting ideological mis-interpretive resources; the frame itself must be challenged because bare information will otherwise be distorted via misinterpretation. It is necessary to shift the underlying frame used to interpret information if ideology critique is to be successful. In doing so, the pernicious misinterpretation the ideological frame relies on is challenged and we can obtain better understanding of the world. I begin by arguing that, to make sense of social justice movements and their attempts to resist ideology, it is necessary to attend to the role of (mis)understanding.



My first case study here is disability and the development of the ‘social model(s)’ on which disability is a socially imposed (and oppressive) status. I here begin by arguing that the development of social models of disability by disability activists was a campaign to *reframe* disability. Particularly notable is the ‘British Social Model’ (BSM) developed in the 70s which was influential in activism during the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The BSM offered a new view of the significance of disability as a category, on which disability was socially imposed on top of physical impairments. This rejected the previously dominant medical model (arguably still the dominant conception today) on which disability was a natural and tragic property of the individual. I argue that the campaign for a social model *reframed* disability.

I have argued previously, in Chapter three, that the ‘medical model’ of disability is an ideological mis-interpretive resource. On this dominant conception, disability is an individual ‘bad difference’ of the individual’s body. I have argued this is a mis-interpretive resource because it wrongly places emphasis on the explanatory power of the individual’s body when interpreting contingent social marginalization (e.g., attributing inaccessibility to a medical condition which requires a wheelchair rather than inaccessible infrastructure). Moreover, it is an *ideological* mis-interpretive resource because this distortion serves to underpin unjust social arrangements (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, see Ch 4). That is, representing disabled people’s bodies as the regrettable cause of their marginalization, in turn obscuring the social arrangements which produce this marginalization, serves to perpetuate those oppressive social arrangements. Casting the medical condition as central, rather than the inaccessible infrastructure etc., legitimizes inaccessible infrastructure by directing attention elsewhere. The medical model of disability thus *frames* disability

as something regrettable and tragic, to be cured by medical intervention, and as a physical category which explains exclusion.

Disabled activists have, with some success, campaigned against this conception of disability over the last six decades (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). I contend that the campaigns which developed social models of disability were, in part, campaigns to *reframe* disability. Within the UK, throughout the 60s and 70s, a movement to highlight and address the oppression of disabled people included an attempt to offer a new model of disability. The British Social model (BSM) distinguished *impairment* as a property of one's body from *disability* as the societal oppression imposed on the basis of impairment (UPIAS 1975; 1976).<sup>80</sup> This was a rejection of the medical model, holding that disability was a social position and one of oppression. The work of the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) sought to address the isolation and segregation of disabled people as contingent and unjust social facts. I will here use 'BSM' to refer to the specific model characterised by the disability/impairment distinction and 'social model' as a catchall for rejections of naturalized medical conception (the plural 'social models' might therefore be more accurate, but I adopt the singular for convenience).

The dimension of reframing involved here is evident in Michael Oliver, who coined the name 'social model', and Colin Barnes' description of the new model:

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<sup>80</sup> This distinction between the way one's body is and the social significance of one's body reflects the proposed gender/sex distinction – and has been criticized along comparable lines (e.g., Tremain, 2017).

this social model *breaks the causal link* between impairment and disability. The reality of impairment is not denied but is not the cause of disabled people's economic and social disadvantage. Instead, *the emphasis shifts* to how far, and in what ways, society restricts their opportunities to participate in mainstream economic and social activities, rendering them more or less dependent. [...]. The social model therefore *shifts attention* to disabled people's common experiences of oppression and exclusion and those areas that might be changed by collective political action and social change. (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p. 22)

The above description reflects the centrality of reframing disability, rejecting the dominant perspective, to the importance of the social model. Oliver and Barnes speak of rejecting the causal link between impairment and disability, but, of course, this is not a denial that there is *some* causal link. Disability rights activists do not claim that, say, in the case of a person with a spinal cord injury who is unable to navigate their city from their wheelchair, their impairment has *no* explanatory role. Counterfactually, were they not 'impaired' they would not be disabled in this way and would not be affected by inaccessible infrastructure. However, they reject the causal *significance* and explanatory *centrality* attributed to the body by the medical model. They reject that impairment alone suffices for 'disability' understood as this marginalized position.

Simi Linton writes that it is medicalization "along with architectural and attitudinal barriers, that confine people. It is not wheelchairs" (Linton, 1998, p. 28). It was previously discussed (§2.2) that not all causal contributions make for a good explanation – the invention of the wheel is a bad explanation for a car crash. The

need for a wheelchair in Linton's quote is akin to the car crash case; the need for a wheelchair is not an adequate explanation for the user's inability to navigate their city. The social model reframes the accepted facts in a way that rejects the explanatory significance of the individual's body and instead centres the social arrangements that unnecessarily and unjustly exclude disabled people. It redirects our attention and changes which questions we are asking (e.g., why are environments constructed in ways that make navigating them with a wheelchair impossible? Why aren't there provisions to make learning accessible to disabled children incorporated in schools?). This (re)framing thereby shapes the way that facts about impairment and disability are *explanatorily, attentionally, evaluatively* and *inquisitively* structured.

The original BSM has been widely discussed, critiqued, and amended. It is not my goal in this chapter to offer or defend a specific model for the social construction of disability. I shall proceed with the assumption that a promising account of disability must recognize the social construction of disability and that, in this regard, the BSM offered a substantial improvement on the medical model. In doing so, I leave open that the best account of disability may be 'interactionist' rather than wholly social (see Shakespeare, 2013) and will not argue that the BSM was wholly successful (either as a new frame or as a political campaign).

My goal, instead, is to analyse the merit reframing disability in this way, given the assumption that the BSM was – however flawed – at least some improvement on the medical model, in light of its pernicious effects identified in earlier chapters. The development of a social model of disability is thus a reframing of disability which resists the dominant ideology; activists sought to change the dominant perspective

on disability as one part of a campaign to improve the social position of disabled people.

The development of the social model, thus, *reframed* disability. I will argue that this reframing was central to the political project of addressing the oppression of disabled people, in part, because it offered greater *understanding* of disability and ableist oppression. In the next section, I present an interpretation of this campaign as wholly strategic, neglecting this epistemic achievement, in order to subsequently show how this fails to offer a satisfactory account of the movement.

### **§5.3 Linguistic Disruption**

I now turn to consider a recent proposal which analyses the disability rights movement's reframing of disability as 'conceptual activism' (Cantalamessa, 2021). On this analysis, disability rights activists were primarily concerned with rejecting and disrupting the dominant conception of disability, not offering an improved account of disability. I will argue that this is mistaken and fails to offer a persuasive account of the movement because it neglects the epistemic advance constituted by this reframing. As this analysis relates to the nature of this intervention in a way that I take to be partially accurate and partially mistaken, it will offer a fruitful point from which to start.

Elizabeth Cantalamessa (2021) starts from the observation that the central claims of the disability rights movement are counterintuitive, or even paradoxical, by the lights of both 'common sense' and academic consensus. She writes that disability activists

and theorists “often make what appear to be false or misleading claims” (Cantalamesa, 2021, p. 47) citing claims like those above: that disability is socially imposed, that impairments are not in themselves negative, etc. Cantalamessa proposes that activists and scholars who advance these claims are engaged in *conceptual activism*. That is, these claims clash with the received view of disability because they sought to revise how we think about disability. On this conceptual activism view, activists are staging a *linguistic intervention*: they are attempting to change the meaning of disability. Cantalamessa draws on Rachel Sterken’s (2020) argument that linguistic interventions may be aided by communicative disruptions which lead to the breakdown of communication but thereby facilitate meaning change. Cantalamessa suggests that disability activists might not have been attempting to implement a *new* conception of disability, but instead merely aiming to disrupt the currently dominant one.

Conceptual activism is a form of ‘conceptual engineering’. Broadly, proponents of conceptual engineering hold the view that our representational devices, paradigmatically concepts, can be ‘defective’ and take up the project improving them (Cappelen, 2018; 2020; Chalmers, 2020; Koch, 2021; Koch, Lohr & Pinder, 2023; Thomasson, 2021). I shall largely set aside the topic of conceptual engineering as there are various theoretical disputes that are not relevant for my current purposes. Without a doubt, disability rights activists sought to revise the dominant conception of disability and the way disability is spoken about. Arguably, these revisions are so central to the original conception of disability that their success has been, or would be, constitutive of meaning change. However, there is substantial dispute as to what is required for such change, with some arguing that supposed cases of meaning change don’t involve change in concepts at all only in a community’s beliefs (Ball,

2020). Moreover, I remain neutral on whether, or when, the framing effects discussed here may be properly described as part of a term's linguistic meaning. As such, I will not focus on the dispute about what constitutes conceptual engineering (and, relatedly, whether the reframing of disability is an example of it). I take it to clearly be an attempt at amelioration in the sense used thus far, as it aims to challenge an ideological resource, but will bracket the question of whether, and how, the meaning (or concept) of disability has changed.<sup>81</sup>

I present Cantalamessa's interpretation of disability rights activists as engaged in 'conceptual activism' because it offers an exemplar of the wholly pragmatic way in which reframing campaigns are often interpreted. Cantalamessa proposes that the claims of disability activists are an example of an activist, non-academic conceptual engineering project. On her analysis,

disability studies theorists will make claims (like those mentioned above) that are not conveying a truth about disability in order to destabilize entrenched ways of thinking about disability and beliefs regarding the meaning of 'disability' [...] They do so as a means of challenging and changing the received meaning of 'disability' and its related concepts and terms. (Cantalamessa, 2021, p. 48-9).

Further, she argues that the claims of disability rights activists (and those in disability studies) "are not *describing* what it's like to have a disability, but

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<sup>81</sup> Relatedly, I will bracket the issue of *what is said* when conceptions of some word are under dispute, such that two speakers both advance different preferred meanings.

pragmatically advocating against biased conceptions of disability” (Cantalamesa, 2021, p. 48, emphasis original). I reject this. I argue that disability activists developed an improved understanding of disability which overcame prior ideological distortions. I contend that Cantalamessa wrongfully neglects this epistemic dimension of the project.

There are three central components of Cantalamessa’s view. Firstly, that the aim of disability activists is to disrupt or destabilise the dominant ‘common sense’ intuitions. The activists’ claims clash with common sense, and it is the resulting confusion that uttering these claims aims to produce, in order to undermine the dominant conception. Secondly, that this disruption is the purpose of such utterances, rather than saying something true or descriptively accurate. Thirdly, the focus is *against* dominant views of disability, rather than primarily in *promotion* of an improved concept. That is, disability activists sought to challenge the dominant framing of disability, but they did not necessarily advance a new, unified perspective of their own.

Note that Cantalamessa refrains from taking a stance on the truth value of these metalinguistic contributions and, as such, does not claim that activists are saying something *deliberately false* (Cantalamesa, 2021, p. 57). She does, however, emphasise the potential for so-called ‘noble lies’ and writes that “we can appreciate how agents engaged in conceptual engineering may make claims that overstate or overemphasize (or underemphasize) what they actually believe to be true in order to pragmatically encourage their interlocutor to take a critical perspective on their conceptual repertoire” (Cantalamesa, 2021, p. 57). Thus, while she does not claim that specific disability activists or theorists are saying things which are deliberately



false but politically advantageous, this reflects a stance on which truth or falsity of these statements is simply not the point. The point of these claims is to disrupt and prompt reflection on medical conceptions of disability. The point is *not* to describe disability or advance a better conception (or meaning) of ‘disability’.

I reject the claim that we should understand the promotion of the social model as *only* a kind of strategic provocation: this fails to capture the greater understanding of disability produced by this reframing. This epistemic progress was itself central to the political project because ideology operates by distortion and misunderstanding.

I am in partial agreement with aspects of Cantalamessa’s analysis. It is undeniable that the claims advanced by proponents of the social model clashed with the received view of disability. As the project of these campaigns was to reject hegemonic conceptions of disability which sustained the oppression of disabled people, this was inevitable. An attempt to offer a model of disability which captured these ‘common sense’ intuitions would only have reproduced the same ideology these campaigns sought to reject (Fletcher, 2023; Haslanger, 2020a; Haslanger 2020b). In addition, Cantalamessa’s description of metalinguistic disputes as debating “not *really* the facts but how we are to evaluate and weigh those facts” (Cantalamessa, 2021, p. 51, emphasis added) accords with my own characterisation of the project as a reframing. This intervention was plainly motivated by political goals (addressing the oppression of disabled people) and to that extent I do not reject the description of the proponents of the social model as ‘pragmatic’.

I am also in partial agreement with Cantalamessa (2012) and Sterken (2020) that disruption and disorientation can be politically fruitful. I have repeatedly stressed in

this thesis the pernicious effects of *inaccurate* intelligibility. Mis-interpretive frames offer this mistaken sense of intelligibility. If we take the kind of interpretive backfire and contamination considered in Chapters two and three as the contrast, then disorientation may well be desirable. *Accurate unintelligibility* is preferable in these contexts to *inaccurate intelligibility*. It can prompt reflection and challenge otherwise unexamined hegemonic frames. It is, at least, a starting point.

In addition, recognising that confusion can be productive also serves as a kind of ‘fallback’ to defend interventions which might confuse audiences who deploy distorting resources. Cantalamessa is correct that many of these claims will seem incoherent from the dominant perspective. I think the confusion of those who adopt the dominant perspective cannot be the whole story, as I argue below. However, recognising that communicative disruption and breakdown also serves political ends is, I suggest, an important consideration when defending the permissibility of such interventions.

Nonetheless, the claim that these activists did not intend to describe disability ought to be rejected. To read the claims by disability activists as *wholly* rhetorical, aiming only at disruption, is an inadequate account of these campaigns. Recognising that the reframing of disability sought to not only improve the lives of disabled people but also obtain and communicate better *understanding* offers a more fruitful and accurate view of this campaign. This improved understanding was central to the model’s role in resisting oppression and the ideological frames which sustain it. In the next section, I argue against Cantalamessa’s failure to engage with activists’ claims.

## §5.4 Describing Disability

I here develop a critique of Cantalamessa's wholly pragmatic reading of disability activists' claims in order to present my own analysis of the positive epistemic contribution of this reframing campaign. I argue that, as a point of methodology, we ought to engage with the claims of disability activists at face value, or else risk perpetrating a form of epistemic injustice. I will then show that in doing so, in combination with the view of ideology presented here, we can make sense of the nature of this campaign as both a political *and epistemic* intervention.

My central concern is with rejecting the claims that that (i) activists did not seek to *describe what it's like to have a disability* and, relatedly, (ii) that these claims were wholly pragmatic. I think we must understand these activists to be, and have been, advancing a frame which seeks to better represent disability. The project was not *exclusively* political, the improvement was also epistemic.

I argue that, on methodological and ethical grounds, the claims of disability activists ought to be analysed as sincere descriptions of disability which advance our understanding of the oppression of disabled people. On Cantalamessa's view, the campaign was one of disruption; it sought to destabilize the dominant conception of disability with the aim of thereby improving the lives of disabled people.<sup>82</sup> In doing

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<sup>82</sup> An analogy may be drawn here with other forms of protest. Some forms of protest are wholly, or primarily disruptive – for example, blocking traffic to direct attention to climate change. On Cantalamessa's characterisation, the claims of disability activists are comparable. Others, however, seek to directly implement their goals. In the 1970s, activists in Berkeley 'vandalised' pavements by installing curb cuts (Blackwell, 2017). This was both an act of protest and a pragmatic intervention. I claim that disability activists' reframing of disability is more like this second case.

so, activists did not seek to *accurately describe* disability, but rather to undermine the dominant conception of disability. Cantalamessa (2021, p. 56) notes Barnes' (2017, p. 2419) point that it is sometimes charitable to read ameliorative projects as offering 'noble lies' – statements which are, read literally, false but nonetheless politically fruitful.<sup>83</sup> On this characterization, we can view the campaign as destructive rather than constructive. I suggest this gets the nature of the campaign wrong and does so in ways that reflect a potentially harmful misinterpretation.

On Cantalamessa's view, we should not take disability activists to be making first-order claims about what it's like to have a disability, but rather strategically engaging in a metalinguistic challenge. The point of their communicative contributions was to alter how the word 'disability' is used and conceptualized, for political ends.

However, this fails to make sense of the activism described. In particular, it casts this communication as wholly outward facing and (as a first order claim) insincere; this is both historically unconvincing and methodologically undesirable.

Cantalamessa does not contest that disability activists *appear* to be saying something about disability. First order claims about the nature and experience of disability are common. Susan Wendell, discussing the social dimension of disability, points out that whether a specific disability precludes employment will turn not only on how many hours a disabled person can work but, also, what part time employment options are available (Wendell, 2013). When UPAIS (1975) asserted that many disabled ('physically impaired') people are capable of work but excluded from the

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<sup>83</sup> It is worth noting, however, that Barnes' is arguing that to categorise activists' claims as a 'noble lie' requires that we have a standard of truth; she is presenting an argument *against* wholly pragmatic interpretations of ameliorative projects.

workforce by unjust social arrangements, they were pointing to claims about the world and their significance for how we understand disability. An analysis of this campaign ought to take these claims – claims about the reality of disability – seriously. Cantalamessa’s interpretation fails to do so.

This interpretation of the disability rights movement, I argue, fails to offer a convincing account of their activities. Cantalamessa’s description casts disability activists’ claims as *strategically insincere*; while they *appeared* to be first order claims which described disability, they were in fact meant to be provocative. Derek Ball (2020), in what he dubs ‘the argument argument’, has argued against the tendency to analyse participants in purportedly metalinguistic disputes as either mistaken or confused about the nature of their dispute. While an analysis could lead us to this conclusion, we ought to begin from taking interlocuters assertions at face value. Ball (2020, p. 40-41) highlights that in supposedly metalinguistic disputes – those in which the goal is not to simply capture the dominant conception of a term – interlocuters offer not only metalinguistic arguments but also first order arguments. We should attempt to make sense of offering these first order arguments. This is an application of broader principles of charity (Davidson, 1973; Ludwig, 2004) to the interpretation of disputes about language use. While certain participants of some conversations may turn out to be confused or insincere, we should not start from this assumption.

The principle of charity is complex to apply in cases where the common ground is fractured and, consequently, in cases where there is conflict over how to frame the subject matter. There are various ways of construing the principle of charity, the details of which shall not be of great importance here (Gauker, 1986; Ludwig, 2004).

The core point across these different characterizations is that, when interpreting an agent, we should do so in a way that is favourable to them, starting from the assumption that they are reasonable, rational, knowledgeable etc. We clearly ought not interpret those who frame the subject matter differently in light of *our own* frame (assuming we are able to recognize that we differ on this which, as explored in Chapter three, may be challenging). I here adopt what I take to be Ball's broad point, that we ought not start from assumptions of insincerity or error. Where possible, we should take contributions at 'face value' – i.e., if they are presented as first order claims, we should first try to make sense of them as (relevant, justified) first-order claims.

I take the importance of charity to have particular force in cases such as these where what is interpreted is the speech of oppressed agents about their own oppression. We should, in general, be wary of the risk of being overly quick to dismiss or doubt such claims. Barnes (2016), as discussed previously, highlights the pervasive testimonial injustice faced by disabled people when they make claims about their own quality of life. Since, on the dominant conception, disability is *inherently* negative, disabled people who insist they have good lives and do not want to be 'cured' must *necessarily* be mistaken (or dishonest). Consequently, disabled people's evaluation of their own welfare is dismissed as *biased* – it cannot *possibly* be accurate if they claim to have high (or 'normal' relative to non-disabled people) welfare.

The importance of starting from earnest engagement, which takes seriously that oppressed speakers are making meaningful first order contributions when they

purport to do so, thus carries particular force in these cases given the increased risk (and stakes) of dismissal.<sup>84</sup>

I have argued that to interpret the claims of disability activists as *wholly rhetorical*, on the basis they appear false or misleading, is a failure of charity which fails to engage with the claims advanced. I have suggested that doing so risks perpetrating epistemic injustice. In the next section I argue that is crucial to recognize that the social reframing of disability was *internally* developed via consciousness raising, which the wholly strategic interpretation fails to do. I argue that the social reframing of disability advanced our understanding of disability.

## **§5.5 Interpreting the Social Model**

### *§5.5.1 Inter- and Intra-group Communication*

I suggest that Cantalamessa's interpretation of disability rights activists ultimately fails. Centrally, Cantalamessa's interpretation of these claims as wholly strategic fails to make sense of disability activism. The reason is that aiming at confusion and disorientation (with no further claim which describes disability) can only make sense if we view this speech as *outward facing*. That is, aimed at disrupting and undermining the *dominant* conception. José Medina compellingly argues that we cannot fully understand protest as only outward facing speech (Medina, 2013, pp.

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<sup>84</sup> On pursuing hermeneutical justice, Fricker writes: "The form the virtue of hermeneutical justice must take, then, is an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one's interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being a nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources" (2007, p.169).

364-370). Of course, the dominant conception need not be held only by the non-oppressed – and disorientation can be valuable. Nonetheless, it is clear that the characterization of this communication in terms of ‘noble lies’ centres cases in which group members communicate with non-group members. This is both methodologically undesirable and historically inaccurate.

It is crucial here to highlight the significant role of *intragroup* communication in the development and debate of the social model – that is, communication between disabled people about the nature of disability. This is distinct from *intergroup* communication in which disabled people communicate the nature of disability to a non-disabled audience (or, at least, those who hold the medical model, though this will include some disabled people). Whatever our precise characterization of a principle of charity, to read the claims of disability activists as *false but politically fruitful* appears to take them to be outward facing intergroup communication. Yet, the BSM and subsequent social models emerged from organization within groups of disabled people.<sup>85</sup>

UPAIS was a group consisting of (only) people who are physically impaired (UPAIS, 1975). The significance of the movement for disability justice being composed of disabled people is central to the movement, as expressed by the slogan *nothing about us without us*. It was crucial to the union that its statements and campaigns were produced by disabled people. Further, in many cases not only the ‘authors’ but also

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<sup>85</sup> The emergence of ameliorative frames from consciousness raising groups is also seen in the case of ‘sexual harassment’ (Brownmiller, 1999) and ‘sex work’ (Leigh, 2013). Across these cases we see resources developed which give group members understanding of their oppression, which are *then used* to communicate that understanding.



the audience were disabled people. Early critiques of the BSM as neglecting the chronically ill and other ‘unhealthy disabled’ were lodged by disabled feminists, concerned with the gendered aspect of chronic illness (Wendell, 2016; Shakespeare, 2006). This is primarily an *intragroup* dispute about the nature of disability. These models came from consciousness raising and disputes between disabled activists and scholars. Of course, one could claim that this was an intragroup dispute about how to go about *intergroup* communication. However, this appears to fall back on the above risks of being overly quick to claim that the dispute is mistaken or performatively insincere. Disputes over the social model of disability ‘look like’ standard theoretical disputes: does our account capture the phenomena? Does it leave out something important, is it a useful representation?

I suggest that Cantalamessa’s analysis is the result of a misapplication of charity which risks perpetrating epistemic injustice. Characterizing campaigns to reframe disability as politically useful but *insincere*, when these campaigns include putatively sincere descriptions of disability by disabled people to a disabled audience, risks unjustly dismissing the claims of activists. In line with Ball (2020), I do not mean to suggest that we must *never* conclude that claims made in campaigns for justice are strategic or insincere, just that we should be extremely cautious in doing so. We should start from taking these claims at ‘face value’ – as describing what it is like to have a disability. Cantalamessa seems concerned with offering a charitable reading of the claims of disability activists, but I think her approach in doing so is mistaken. In particular, I think it risks perpetrating *contributory* injustice (Hookway, 2010), denying speakers the opportunity to challenge and revise the way disability is framed by contributing new interpretive resources.

To illustrate this, suppose that you are teaching a class and one of your students belongs to one or more social groups who are often excluded from higher education.<sup>86</sup> You are acutely aware of their identity and keen not to damage their confidence or otherwise undermine their inclusion. Suppose that in a seminar they make an apparently radical claim, and you judge that taking the claim at face value would be to take them as saying something plainly false. Wary of judging them to be saying something false, especially given their marginalized position, you take their contribution to be hyperbolic and engage with it as not meant literally. You have, I contend, wronged the student. In being so wary of judging what they say to be false, you have failed to engage with their contribution. This is a case of Hookway's contributory injustice (2010). In Hookway's illustrative case (2010, p. 155) a marginalized student's probative question is unjustly interpreted as clarificatory due to prejudice. In my example the intentions are benevolent but, nonetheless, excludes the epistemic contributions of the student.<sup>87</sup>

Certainly, it may be reasonable to clarify the strength of the claim (e.g., in the vein of a prior supervisor of mine, 'it seems like there is a more modest and a more radical interpretation of that point [...] which did you have in mind'). If the student did indeed mean to assert the more radical claim, this ought to be engaged with. To do otherwise is to be so averse to deeming the student's assertion false that you fail to

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<sup>86</sup> I should emphasize that I don't mean to suggest that those who hold the dominant position occupy an equivalent position to a teacher with respect to epistemic advantage.

<sup>87</sup> See Táíwò (2022) for analyses of similar ways in which putatively progressively values can result in behaviours which entrench oppression.

engage with the contribution at all. I take the wholly strategic reading of disability activists' claims to risk this kind of contributory injustice.<sup>88</sup>

### *§5.5.2 Understanding Disability*

The UPIAS' fundamental principles (1975) identified disability as a social position, one of oppression. It was a statement developed by disabled people coming together to produce a better account of what disability was, in order to address the unjust treatment they faced. I contend it was an attempt to *reframe* disability in order to *better understand* disability and the experiences of disabled people. As in the case of the student above, to properly engage with these claims might lead to a negative appraisal. Finding the BSM to be lacking is a necessary step towards developing a better model which succeeds in its goals. The BSM has been the target of sustained critique, including, as noted, by other groups of disabled people on the basis that it did not capture their experience. It cannot be the case that all proponents of social models offer a wholly accurate (or politically ideal) model of disability since they do not agree. Nonetheless, we can recognize them as *attempts* to offer a model of disability and engage with them as such.

Cantalamessa notes the lack of a *single unified* social model of disability (2021, pp. 66-67). However, it is not necessary for there to be a single model, or for every detail of a model to be correct, for this shift to be an advance in understanding. To borrow a widely used example in the philosophy of science, the shift to heliocentrism was an advancement in understanding even if the initial model claimed that the earth's orbit

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<sup>88</sup> Note, I take this to be true even in the case where this leads us to judge that the claim is indeed false.

was elliptical rather than circular. Getting everything right isn't necessary for understanding to be furthered, so – whatever errors or unresolved details a given model of disability may have – we may recognize the social model(s) as offering greater understanding of disability. Further, *engaging* with these models and critically appraising their shortfalls, requires taking them seriously as positive claims to a better representation of disability.

We ought, therefore, start from an engagement with the claims of disability activists at face value, as descriptions of what it is to be disabled and as developing a better model of disability. I contend that if we do so, we can recognize this campaign as one which reframes disability and thereby offers better understanding. The claims of disability activists are, I contend, best understood as not only a pragmatic political project but also an intended epistemic improvement. The social model offers an improved understanding of disability. Claims that it is “architectural and attitudinal barriers that confine people. It is not wheelchairs” (Linton, 1998, p. 28) are claims about the way the world is.

The social model is the product of an attempt to resist an ideological framing of disability as a natural and negative property of the individual. This ideological frame was both epistemically flawed, producing misunderstanding of the world, and harmful, rationalizing the oppression of disabled people. The task of resisting and replacing this frame was, therefore, not only an intervention which sought to improve the lives of disabled people but to do so by addressing the distortions of the dominant perspective. Its development sought *better understanding* of disability, thereby overcoming the misunderstanding of the dominant conception. Recognizing

this as central to the campaign for disabled people's rights offers a way of unifying inter and intra-group communication.

The social model must be recognized as a product of, and tool for, *consciousness raising* (Oliver & Barnes, 2012, pp. 166). The model emerged from disabled people's attempts to articulate their experiences which resulted in improved understanding, which they then attempted to communicate. Interpreting proponents of social models as engaged in pragmatic intergroup communication inappropriately and implausibly (in light of historical facts) centres the privileged group as the primary audience. Recognizing the campaign as consciousness raising offers insight into the epistemic contributions of the social model. The crucial insight of the social model is that the way things *are* – specifically, the isolation and segregation of disabled people – is not how they need to be. This reflects the merits of consciousness raising more broadly (Medina, 2011). On feminist consciousness raising, MacKinnon writes that “women's situation cannot be truly known for what it is, in the feminist sense, without knowing that it can be other than it is” (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 101). There is both an epistemic and a political dimension to this; it offers greater understanding of oppression which in turn enables insight into how it could be ameliorated.

I highlighted in Chapter 2 that understanding some situation partly involves ‘modal knowledge’ (Munton, 2023). Understanding the cause of an event, for instance, in part relies on knowledge of relevant counterfactuals. To recognize that some state of affairs could have been otherwise, and how they would have been different under alternate circumstances, is an epistemic achievement and a key component of understanding. The loss of certain kinds of modal knowledge, particularly as a result of *normalizing* and *naturalizing* contingent social arrangements, thereby obscuring

the possibility for things to change, is a core feature of ideology. Ideological mis-interpretive resources like the medical model obscure relevant counterfactuals, precluding asking relevant questions, and focus our attention on the wrong features. Social models reframe disability and draw attention to the contingency of isolation and segregation. This is centrally a political project: the reframing matters because it is important to address the oppression of disabled people. But it is also epistemic: the medical model is ideological in that it misrepresents the world in ways that sustain the oppression of disabled people. Reframing disability as social, as imposed by architecture and attitudes not wheelchairs, offers a better understanding of disability. Understanding alone is not enough for liberation but it is a vital first step.

Once we recognize that ideological frames are both socially pernicious and epistemically flawed, there is no reason to treat these campaigns as *either* pragmatic *or* epistemic. Ideology operates by misrepresenting the world in ways that sustain oppression; revising our representations of the world can tackle this injustice in part by producing more accurate representations. Disability activists both sought to disrupt a harmful frame and develop an improved frame which better represented reality. Recognizing this contribution as not only a political project but an epistemic advancement allows us to make sense of the internal and external dimensions of this campaign. I next turn to consider how lexical frames may be utilized to communicate understanding of oppression.

## **§5.6 Leveraging Lexical Frames**

In this section, I turn to examine how lexical frames may be leveraged as part of resisting oppressive ideologies. The reframing of disability is an example of reframing some subject matter while retaining existing language; it can be seen as an example of, or continuous with, 'reclamative' projects for slurs. Haslanger, for instance, describes 'slut-walks' as intending to "challenge the evaluative content of the slut-schema" (2013, p.17). The retention of existing resources with new frames is one major kind of reframing project. Another is to deploy *new* resources and eliminate extant, distorting ones.<sup>89</sup> As an example of this, I consider the language of 'sex work' (over terms such as 'prostitution', 'prostituted women' etc.). I suggest that this example is a case of the strategic use of lexical frames. The language of labour not only *sheds* the undesirable frame carried by 'prostitute', but also substantially frames the work described in a way that activists desire. It thus leverages a lexical frame; it tries to "chang[e] interests by changing names" (Stevenson, 1938, p. 334). This is an example of how lexical frames may be used to resist injustice; I will argue in the next section that this strategy is a vital tool for ideology critique.

Carol Leigh (2013) introduced the language of 'sex work' and 'sex work industry' at a feminist conference in the 1970s where the term 'sex *use* industry' was being used. It was suggested that since the word 'use' describes the side of the clients, sex work was a better name. More broadly, 'prostitute' had come to mean specifically selling sexual intimacy and, Leigh writes, the word "was tarnished to say the least" (2013, p. 229). In the way explored in Chapter four, this term had become *imbued* with dominant derogating perspective towards sex workers.

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<sup>89</sup> I will not take a stance on when we ought to pursue which project; I take it this will be dependent on various practical contextual considerations, and most movements utilize a multiplicity of interventions.

The language of 'sex work' and 'sexual labour' thus does two things. Firstly, and centrally, it *reframes the debate* by shedding the dominant perspective cued by the lexical framing of 'prostitution' and instead reorients discussion towards workers' rights (Jeffreys, 2015). Secondly, it also adjusts conceptual boundaries. 'Prostitution' refers to the sale of sexual services, or 'full-service sex work'. While this remains the paradigmatic case of sex work in many contexts, the category of 'sex work' itself is an umbrella term which *unifies* a wider economy of sexual labour (e.g., acting in pornography, stripping, online sex work, domming etc.). Leigh writes that the term “unites women in the industry – prostitutes, porn actresses and dancers – who are enjoined by both legal and social needs” (2013, p. 230).

The language of 'sex work' is thus centrally an issue of framing. The importance of reframing in this case is illustrated in two recent books, both by sex workers and activists, about the movement. In *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, Melissa Gira Grant presents a list of typical questions that sex workers are asked when invited to speak on 'The Debate' about sex work. These include:

“Is prostitution violence against women?”

“Are prostitutes ‘empowered’ or ‘exploited’?”

“How can we help women ‘escape’/’exit from’/’leave’ prostitution?” (2014, p. 35)

Grant contrasts this with “the questions rarely up for debate”, those she is left to raise alone:

“How do we define ‘prostitution’?”

“How do people who sell sex describe it?”



“What are some of the factors that lead women to oppose prostitution?”

(Grant, 2014, p.36)

In contrasting these questions, Grant highlights the dominant conception of sex work (or, as she terms it ‘the prostitute imaginary’) and how it shapes these discussions. The common ground is structured around the former set of questions, neglecting the latter.

In *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018), Juno Mac and Molly Smith acutely identify the presupposed binary oppositions that underwrite these discussions. Central is the dichotomy, also posed by the second question on the first of Grant’s list above, between *exploitation* and *empowerment*. Mac and Smith reject this supposed dichotomy, arguing for sex-ambivalence over either -positivity or -negativity.

However, this requires that we attempt to unearth deeply embedded assumptions about not only the value of sex work, but how we should conceptualise that question and the value of sex itself.

On the ‘sex-negative’ side, those who do sex work are framed as necessarily exploited and victimized. It is assumed that, in an ideal society, there would be no sex work. Sex workers, in this frame, need to be ‘saved’ – see (Grant, 2014, pp. 101-110) on saviour narratives and their fatal consequences. This is used to justify carceral responses as a means of eradicating (or, ‘abolishing’) sex work (e.g., Bindel, 2018; 2022). Catherine MacKinnon exemplifies this optimism about the potential for policing to benefit sex workers – *even if* it means they, too, are arrested – by describing incarceration as a potential “respite” (2011, p. 306).

The exploitation schema also perpetuates the violence sex workers suffer by *normalising* it. If all commercial sex is, in fact, ‘rape that is paid for’ (see Raymond, 2013) then sexual violence is inevitable; it is a *necessary* feature of sex work. This forecloses any inquiry into how violence towards sex workers can be minimized - other than its eradication via policing – or how legislation may exacerbate harm. An especially grievous example of this kind of normalisation was displayed in coverage of the murders of five sex workers in Ipswich in 2005. In a weekly column in the Daily Mail, in addition to claiming that the deaths of these women were ‘no great loss’ on account of their drug dependencies and status as street-based sex workers, Richard Littlejohn wrote that “in their chosen field of "work", death by strangulation is an occupational hazard” (2006).<sup>90</sup> This frame constrains sex workers’ ability to discuss the violence they face, for fear it will give ‘ammunition’ to those who promote policies that endanger them.

This motivates the need to reject this pervasive framing of sex work as inherently violent and misogynistic in a way that can only be dealt with by carceral means. However, on the imposed dichotomy, rejecting this entails the claim that sex work is *empowering*. This counters representations of victimized and exploited sex workers by instead representing sex workers as empowered and autonomous. They enjoy having sex and enjoy sex work; it is freely chosen and fulfilling. Mac and Smith highlight the ultimate trap of such attempts (2018, pp. 30-39), which require dismissing the experiences of the most vulnerable sex workers. Ultimately, these are both sides of the same coin. On the exploitation narrative, sex work is harmful, and

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<sup>90</sup> It should be noted that Littlejohn’s use of ‘work’ and ‘occupation’ here is deployed as a *reductio* of the language of ‘sex work’, as indicated by the square quotes.

this justifies its harsh policing. It is denied that it could constitute 'work' on the basis that it is exploitative. On the empowerment narrative, sex work is empowering and fulfilling; it is 'work' and therefore not exploitative.

Both of these claims rest on the same underlying framing of the issue. Firstly, harm to sex workers justifies criminalization. The exploitation schema appeals to harm to sex workers as justification of criminalization; the empowerment schema denies the grounds for criminalization by denying (or downplaying) the harms. Emphasis on the empowerment narrative is the product of attempting to reject the exploitation narrative *without* rejecting the flawed dichotomy it rests on.

In addition, the above claims rely on what Mac and Smith summarize as the 'work is good' frame: work is positive and fulfilling and if not then it isn't work (2018, pp. 40-46). Money and material resources are peripheral. The negative view claims that sex work isn't productive or good, and therefore it is misleading to call it 'work'. The positive view insists it is positive and fulfilling and therefore is work. What is needed, and what campaigners have continually sought to do, is to reject this underlying frame shared by both sides of the supposed dichotomy.

What is required is a *perspective shift* and this is what the shift to a framework of worker's rights aims to obtain. To frame sex work *as work* is to say that the safety of sex workers is a workers' rights issue. It is to say that their vulnerability to exploitation centrally arises from their material needs. A workers' rights framework aims to highlight that making survival sex work harder only makes *survival* harder and motivates a turn, instead, to harm reduction policies which recognize the needs of sex workers.

In the next section I defend the strategic leveraging of frames as a vital epistemic tool. Just as there is a trend to cast political speech like that of disability advocates as wholly strategic, there is a tendency to cast the deliberate use of ‘framing effects’ as akin to marketing or propaganda. It is suggested that when framing is ‘exploited’ this is a (potentially justified) manipulation of audiences. I reject this: frames and perspective have an essential epistemic function. I suggest such strategic use of language is best understood as a pedagogical tool which can enable audiences to overcome the imaginative constraints imposed by ideological frames.

## **§5.7 Pedagogical Reframing**

Let us suppose that the language of ‘sex work’ is used not only because of the distorting perspective it *sheds*, but also because of the desirable (from activists’ point of view) frame it *introduces*. Such strategic use of frames is often described, by defenders and critics, as a kind of marketing. Lakoff (2010; 2014) entreats the left to engage more with this sort of marketing, as he argues the right has done so successfully. Cappelen (2018, pp. 122-134) explicitly notes the role of lexical effects in marketing and proposes that philosophers of language engage more with research from marketing and business departments. Language (along with emotive narratives, design and other tools) is a means by which to change peoples’ behaviour and beliefs. I challenge this interpretation as it overlooks the relationship between framing and understanding. In particular, I suggest that the deliberate leveraging of frames is often best understood in *pedagogical* terms; narratives, lexical frames etc. are vehicles for understanding which enable learning.

### §5.7.1 Nudges

Leveraging lexical frames falls within a broader category of using frames to shape people's attitudes and behaviour. These fall within a wider category of interventions – including not only how information is represented but also things like policy and environmental design – which have been termed 'nudges' (Thaler & Sunstein, 2021). Examples include more straightforwardly making good options easier and hard options inconvenient (e.g. auto-enrolment in pension programs). They also include interventions like placing graphic images on cigarette packaging to discourage smoking. These latter kinds of interventions steer behaviour in a way that is more emotive and include a range of uses of frames.

Nudges, as put forward by Thaler and Sunstein (2021), have several paradigmatic features. Firstly, they have beneficial consequences. While the methods of nudges may be continuous with marketing, their design aims at beneficial outcomes (e.g., discouraging smoking, encouraging vaccine uptake, etc.). Secondly, they paradigmatically operate via leveraging cognitive biases and heuristics; agents are not overtly presented with reasons to act differently, merely guided to do so. Thirdly, nudges can be resisted; while they facilitate good choices, there is no *prohibition* of bad choices. For instance, healthy options may be placed in agents' eyeline because this increases the likelihood of them being chosen – but it is not costly for an agent to resist this measure.

Recently, there has been interest in the potential for *epistemic* nudges (Meehan, 2020; Grundmann, 2023), that is, nudges which target beliefs. It has been suggested

that nudges can be beneficial in addressing public attitudes to climate change, vaccine uptake and conspiracy theories (McKenna, 2023; Kahan, 2015). Such interventions are sometimes described as ‘epistemic paternalism’ – reflecting the broad view of nudges as a kind of soft paternalism – due to their supposed interference with agents’ epistemic autonomy. Before proceeding, it is worth briefly pausing to consider in what way epistemic paternalism is *epistemic*. Plainly, one aspect may be the intrusion into an agent’s epistemic autonomy. However, such intrusions might aim at a range of benefits for the agent - e.g., strategically framing messages about smoking to protect their health - while some interventions may seek to benefit the agent in some specifically epistemic capacity. For instance, if concealing, or obscuring some evidence is done on the basis of giving the agent more accurate beliefs overall.<sup>91</sup>

I here consider two ways of understanding the role of epistemic nudges like lexical frames. I will argue that neither wholly captures the role of leveraging frames in ideology critique, due to their *doxastic* focus. The first interpretation of epistemic nudges is that they *bypass reason*. The idea here, roughly, is that framing effects, alongside other biases and heuristics, are non-rational (or else, *irrational*). The bypassing view often reflects a dual model of cognition on which we have a higher system of reflective critical reasoning, in which we are rational, and a lower system of judgement which offers shortcuts but is flawed and unreflective (Kahneman, 2011).

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<sup>91</sup> Arguably, activists cannot be ‘paternalistic’ in the usual sense. Paternalism suggests not only the capacity to interfere, but also a status of power. It evokes the power of the father and state as father-figure. The legitimacy of paternalism is primarily discussed in the context of state actions. Members of resistant movements have no comparable power of the audiences of their campaigns. Nonetheless, the broader notion of epistemic paternalism may be preferable to talk of marketing, as it captures the idea that this intervention is manipulative yet epistemic in its goals.

Agents ought to form beliefs based on evidence and reason but frequently fail to do so; nudges *exploit* this epistemic weakness and are, thus, manipulative.

The defence of nudging from those who *accept* the bypassing view is broadly consequential and goes as follows. Leveraging lexical (and other) frames does, indeed, bypass critical reflection and reason. On this basis, it arguably constitutes propaganda (see Stanley, 2015). However, under some circumstances, the ends will justify these means. Stanley (2015, p. 112) grants the potential merit of what corrective propaganda which counteracts the effects of pernicious propaganda. Both forms of propaganda bypass audiences' rationality and are thus manipulative to some degree, however, corrective propaganda is a strategy for counteracting other forms. Moreover, it is highlighted (as in defence of nudges more broadly) that these shortcuts and weaknesses are not *introduced* but already operative in the background. The alternative to deliberate nudging is not critical reflection, it is simply that the same unreflective mechanisms lead us astray.

Here, the epistemic effects of lexical frames are akin to placing ugly graphic images on cigarette packages with the intention to create a beneficial aversion via irrational (or, at best non-rational) means. We might reason that agents *ought* to consult the evidence and thereby form the belief that smoking is dangerous - however, we know they are unlikely to do so (perhaps we also think the information space has been polluted by too much misinformation). In light of these non-ideal conditions, and the benefit to the affected agents, it can be justified to bypass their inadequate reasoning and insensitivity to the evidence. This is justified by both the epistemic benefit (true belief) and the health benefit to the agent.

In the case of political movements who seek to utilize lexical frames, the corresponding defence might go roughly as follows. Yes, the strategic use of emotive language is basically a form of propaganda; it changes peoples' sentiments without giving them *reasons* to change their minds. However, the ends justify the means. In the case of 'sex work', the dominant perspective is fatally dangerous to sex workers' and it is essential that laws and attitudes change. If using the language of 'work' leads people to act in ways (or believe things) that serve this goal, then it's use is justified. Frames can play this sort of role, but it is not the only way they might be utilized. I will not argue that frames are never used in this way, nor do I reject that doing so may be justified (whether by the production true beliefs or the reduction of harm). However, this is only one way that frames may be effective.

An alternate view has been defended, which holds that leveraging frames as an epistemic nudge does not, necessarily, undermine or bypass their capacity for reason. It is argued that, while in some way one's epistemic processes might be interfered with, this ultimately leads one to be in a better epistemic position (Lepoutre, 2022; Levy, 2021; McKenna, 2023). The proposal is that some nudges might *assist* us in engaging our critical faculties. Return to the cigarette packaging and suppose we argue that graphic images work as follows: people really ought to know the evidence that smoking is dangerous, but they tend to ignore it (perhaps for reasons of motivated cognition, perhaps due to misinformation). The graphic effect of this packaging draws their attention and thereby makes them more likely to *engage with* relevant evidence. This isn't an undermining of their rational capabilities but rather a nudge to *exercise* them.



We could posit an argument in this vein for 'sex work'. Suppose that this phrase is a non-negligible lexical frame which cues a perspective that serves the campaigners goals. One might defend this, denying it is akin to propaganda, by arguing that it only operates to *facilitate* audiences' engagement with the relevant arguments. These framing effects, on this view, change people's beliefs only by facilitating genuinely autonomous, critical processes. Using this language promotes the rights and interests of sex work by raising the salience of more important questions which can then be fruitfully engaged with.

The first response defends strategically bypassing the agents' intellectual capacities while the second holds that it might trigger fruitful engagement. Both responses cast framing effects and proper reasoning in different domains, with the latter understood to be the legitimate grounds for belief and action.<sup>92</sup> Both of these responses centre on the proper relationship between reasons as the basis for belief and action. Suppose I can utter two sentences that have the same informational contents but are framed differently. Suppose, further, that this framing will make a difference in whether you believe me. On the first view, the framing effect is directly leading to a belief change, bypassing your critical reasoning. On the second, this framing effect might simply *cause* you to engage with the contents of what is said. On both views, informational content and critical appraisal of evidence are the proper basis for belief. I argue this overlooks a vital role of frames, due to being limited to

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<sup>92</sup> An alternate response is developed by Neil Levy (2019) who argues that framing can *constitute* reasons and higher order evidence (e.g. graphic cigarette warnings might constitute higher order evidence about experts' view of the dangers of smoking). In doing so he rejects the dualistic view – however, the focus remains on evidence and reasons for beliefs and behaviour, so I group this with the instrumental responses above.

their *doxastic* consequences. However, frames are also tools for enabling understanding; this is central to their role in ideology critique and resisting oppression.

### §5.7.2 *Understanding Oppression*

In the first chapter, I examined the role of seduction scripts in obscuring sexual violence. I highlighted that, in cases where 'rape myths' are not false beliefs but instead a pernicious schema, attempting to 'debunk' these attitudes, in the way that one would a false belief, is liable to fail. We are routinely imperfect epistemic agents, as in cases where abandoned beliefs and defeated evidence continue to guide our reasoning. However, this is not the whole story. One element of the obstacle is that to attempt to 'debunk' these attitudes is a kind of category error; providing evidence in order to change people's beliefs about the nature of the world simply fails to get to the root of the problem.

Attempting to falsify these beliefs will also likely fail when the issue is not beliefs at all, but instead the background resources one relies on to interpret information. The background schema being deployed can survive the debunking of individual beliefs. The bad-difference medical model, for instance, frames disabled happiness as inspirational perseverance: even if the belief that disabled people have miserable lives is typically held by those who hold this schema, the schema does not *rely* on this belief. For instance, they might somehow be convinced that most disabled people are, in fact, happy (or, no less happy than non-disabled people) but simply interpret this as an adaptive preference. I contend that the consequence of these arguments is not that we need to avoid the capacities and dispositions via which ideological frames

operate; as I have argued, frames and perspective are indispensable. Rather, the need is for frames to facilitate understanding of oppression, in order to resist it.

Once we recognize the centrality of *understanding* to ideology critique, which I argued for above, a quite different potential role for leveraging frames emerges. In these cases, frames are not a way of *bypassing* reason to get the behavioural consequences we want or *merely causing* a revision to beliefs. Instead, frames are themselves the substance of what is contested, with beliefs and behaviour ‘downstream’ of this (even if those downstream consequences are what set the stakes of the dispute).

In these cases, the leveraging of frames is best understood in terms of *pedagogy*. Returning to the cigarette case, here is a third way we could tell this story. People overall know that cigarettes are dangerous, but they don’t tend to act on that fact (i.e., they still smoke). Perhaps they can state accurate information if called upon, yet they nonetheless do not *perceive* smoking as dangerous to the relevant degree. I am not claiming this is the case for most smokers, but it seems clear that such cases obtain and can motivate attempts to reframe. In this description of the case, we might say that the smokers in question *know* that smoking is dangerous, but they don’t *grasp* that it is. Recall, from Chapter two, that one may know something (e.g. that each step of a proof works, or the relative sizes of the earth and sun) yet fail to grasp it. In such cases, frames can enable one to grasp. On this view, the graphic images on cigarettes are intended to get the audience, who ‘merely know’ the dangers, to *grasp* the risk of smoking (and act accordingly).

In Chapter three, §3.6, I highlighted various obstacles to inhabiting a perspective and argued that ideological frames are likely to impose *imaginative constraints*. These constraints make counter-hegemonic perspectives inaccessible and thereby sustain misunderstanding. This misunderstanding, in turn, sustains oppressive practices. In Chapter five, I argued that obtaining understanding and overcoming these imaginative constraints is central to ideology critique. Frames can enable access to a perspective that would otherwise be inaccessible. In doing so, they can overcome the imaginative constraints, and the corresponding interpretive distortions, imposed by ideology.

A masterful narrative or evocative metaphor can grant us access to a way of looking at the world that would otherwise have been inaccessible. This is not always a desirable or epistemically valuable achievement, as has been explored in the previous chapters. Nonetheless, when we are enabled to grasp an apt interpretation, this constitutes achieving understanding. A powerful narrative, as explored in the first chapter, can make things *click*. A particular lexical frame can exemplify a shift in perspective, enabling an epistemic achievement. As considered in Chapter 3, a perspective can only be evaluated if it can, first, be inhabited. I aim in this chapter to highlight the imaginative power of the aesthetic and emotive properties of the frame. When the imaginative success they enable is an epistemic achievement, frames are tools for learning.

The epistemic value of these frames is clear when we turn to education. I contend that once we view the project as pedagogical, and aimed at improved *understanding*, the merit of the use of frames becomes apparent. Recall the discussion of how some explanations seem especially clear while others just don't 'feel right'. There is

substantial evidence that agents are more likely to accept explanations with greater fluency; elegant explanations are more convincing (Lewandowsky et. al., 2012). It is disputed whether a sense of clarity is a reasonable heuristic which can backfire under certain conditions, or a straightforward bias (see Baumberger et. al., 2016, p. 14). Let us suppose that it is unreliable, or not sufficiently reliable, to justify knowledge. Surely, it is wholly implausible to suggest that it is therefore *manipulative* for an explanation to be communicated in the way that makes it most fluent to one's audience. A teacher who seeks to present an explanation in the most elegant way, most easily grasped by her students, is not manipulating or marketing to their students; they are simply being a good pedagogue (Cf. McKenna 2023, p. 81). An explanation selected in this way is a *better* explanation.

The role of frames put forward here differs from those presented previously, which focus on belief. This reflects a difference in the role of evidence for knowledge versus understanding. I explored in Chapter 3 how the transmission of knowledge through simple testimony differed from the communication of a perspective. We typically think that evidence can, or should, lead us to change our beliefs and that knowledge can be gained from testimony. Understanding, however, has a different relationship with communication. While you can come to know on the basis of my say-so, it is often claimed that understanding cannot be 'transmitted' in the same way (Hills, 2009; Pritchard, 2010). Relatedly, while we might claim that someone *should* update their beliefs in the light of new evidence, it is less straightforward to claim someone *should* just understand. Sometimes grasping an explanation simply remains out of

reach and it can be unpredictable what leads things to ‘click’.<sup>93</sup> Frames and other forms of perspectival communication are essential tools for attempting to trigger this perspectival shift which allows one to grasp and thereby understand (or misunderstand).

Ideology isn’t (only) about beliefs; therefore, ideology critique isn’t (only) about changing people’s beliefs, whether by evidence or by other means (Haslanger, 2008; 2010; 2013; Langton, 2012). Ideological frames are, I have argued, central to the maintenance of oppression. They operate by enabling us to grasp flawed interpretations, thereby keeping true understanding obscured and out of reach. Reframing, therefore, constitutes a central form of ideology critique.

Returning to sex work, the dominant conception of sex work is ideological and mis-interpretive. It systematically produces misunderstanding of why people engage in sex work, what their needs are, and how they can be kept safe. The campaign for sex workers’ rights must tackle this misunderstanding. The frame of ‘sex work’, alongside other ‘rhetorical’ strategies like emotive narratives, can enable a shift in perspective which enables the audience to better understand. This reframing is not a *shortcut* to changing people’s beliefs; it is addressing what underlies those beliefs. In summary, once we recognize the centrality of understanding in ideology critique, the strategic

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<sup>93</sup> We can explain this on both the abilities and perceptual characterizations of grasping. Abilities typically cannot reliably be transmitted from testimony alone (e.g., my description of how I make bread) but the right explanation might enable one to acquire a new ability. If a person is unable to see a visual gestalt like the duck-rabbit illusion as a duck, there’s no assertion that will guarantee they come to see it as such – but, the features we point out *can trigger* the gestalt shift.

use of lexical frames can be seen as a valuable pedagogical intervention which facilitates understanding.

## **§5.8 Conclusion**

Ideology is epistemically pernicious which is crucial for the perpetuation of oppression. Therefore, ideology critique involves an *epistemic* intervention. Social movements which seek to resist ideology also seek to better represent the world which requires reframing. I have argued that two prominent social justice campaigns, for disability and sex workers' rights, centrally concern reframing projects. To succeed they must reject the dominant ideological frame. In both cases, I have argued that the revised frame offers improved understanding of the world. Recognising that these campaigns sought to develop better understanding captures the continuity between the development of these insights, via consciousness raising, and their communication, via protests. Further, it reveals that attempts to leverage lexical frames may not be best understood in terms of 'marketing' but instead pedagogy. Frames are not necessarily used to directly change beliefs but instead to enable understanding. Frames are tools for conveying perspectives and ideology critique can require a shift in perspective. Frames are therefore an indispensable tool for ideology critique in the wider movements to resist oppression.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have developed insights into how our interpretive resources may be epistemically pernicious in ways that sustain injustice. I have highlighted the role of distorting frames in obscuring, and thereby sustaining injustice, and examined how we may attempt to repair these.

I began, in Chapter one, by examining the way that a flawed perspective may lead to systematic interpretive errors and how narratives, even if fictional, could lead us to adopt such perspectives. I developed an account of how narratives which eroticise overcoming sexual refusal prescribe a perspective which disposes one to systematically misinterpret sexual violence as seduction. I argued that the narrative framing of these depictions could *exemplify*, i.e., enable viewers to grasp, a pernicious seduction script, thereby leading viewers to export this perspective. I proposed that this perspective ought to be categorized as a form of ‘rape myth’, due to its efficacy in excusing and legitimizing rape. I highlighted that perspectival rape myths are distinct from doxastic rape myths and thus require distinct interventions.

In the second chapter, I developed a general account of ‘mis-interpretive resources’, such as the seduction script exemplified by eroticized refusal narratives, as distorting frames which systematically produce misunderstanding. I introduced the idea of an interpretive structure as a way of mentally organizing information and characterized understanding as grasping an apt interpretive structure. I then distinguished merely lacking understanding, as a failure to grasp an apt interpretive structure, from misunderstanding, in which one grasps an inapt interpretive structure which offers the mistaken sense of understanding. Distorting frames which systematically



produce misunderstanding, i.e., mis-interpretive resources, are epistemically pernicious in two ways. Firstly, the mistaken sense of epistemic success they produce conceals one's epistemic incompetence and thereby preserves ignorance. Secondly, because mis-interpretive resources are not simply false beliefs but tools which guide one's inquisitive and belief-forming dispositions, they can *contaminate* otherwise valuable evidence and render it misleading. I highlighted the ideological role mis-interpretive resources can fulfil when their distortions operate to sustain unjust social practices.

In Chapter three, I examined how mis-interpretive resources can obstruct perspectival communication, in which a speaker attempts to communicate a 'point of view'. I developed an account of how attempts to critique mis-interpretive resources can be distorted, especially when the mis-interpretive resource is hegemonic, because the audience cannot access the communicated perspective. By highlighting the way in which social conventions can impose imaginative constraints, I argued that attempts to challenge hegemonic frames were vulnerable to misinterpretation which led them to 'backfire'. Oppressed speakers who seek to reject the dominant perspective on their experience can thus find that their attempts at counterspeech result in embedding the very frames they sought to challenge. This is a pernicious way in which ideological mis-interpretive resources can insulate themselves from challenge and thereby sustain the hermeneutical marginalization of oppressed speakers.

In the fourth chapter, I turned to consider another way in which extant distorting frames can undermine attempts to address injustice. Hermeneutical injustice is widely characterised as a problem of lacking a name; consequently, I highlighted that

amelioration is sometimes conceptualized as requiring the baptism of a new target. I argued that it is crucial not to neglect the role of frames as an interpretive resource when attempting to ameliorate hermeneutical injustice. I introduced an analogy with photographic resources, specifically the way in which film calibration reflects and entrenches racist beauty ideals. I argued that attempts to change only the contents of our representational resources without addressing how those contents are framed fails to fully address the problem. I showed that our naming practices can replicate existing frames, including ideological frames, as illustrated by the current use of ‘emotional labour’. Moreover, I argued that we were especially liable to do so due to the apparent intelligibility offered by reconciling new information with existing frames.

Finally, in Chapter Five, having established that amelioration must not neglect the importance of frames, I examined how we may attempt to ameliorate frames themselves. I presented the disability rights movement and the sex workers’ rights movements as campaigns which have centrally involved reframing. In both cases, I argued that the epistemic importance of reframing has been neglected. In Chapters Two, Three and Four, I established the significance of the way in which ideological frames are epistemically pernicious; the false sense of understanding they produce operates to keep things the (unjust) way they are. In light of this, ideology critique is a centrally epistemic process, if successful; in overcoming these frames we obtain better understanding of the world. The role of reframing in campaigns against oppression is (or can be) a way of obtaining and communicating understanding. This offers better insight into the relationship between consciousness raising and protest in campaigns like the disability rights movement. Recognising the pedagogical role of frames also offers an overlooked defence of the strategic use of lexical frames.

In summary, I have argued that perspectives are central to the maintenance of oppression and frames must be attended to in our attempts to analyse and resist ideology. Of course, examining our interpretive dispositions and the resources that guide them will not, alone, be enough without attention to the wider system they are embedded within. Mac and Smith, concluding their analyses of the fight for sex workers' rights, highlight that

those who support sex workers' rights – and, indeed, even some sex workers – often understand the struggle to be *only* about fighting stigma, better representation, achieving 'acceptance', and securing respect for what we do. [...] But this is only part of the picture. [...]

To only examine the way sex workers are *represented* in society – instead of the mechanisms of their oppression – is a politics of gesture. (2018, p. 216-7, emphasis original).

Mac and Smith are, of course, correct. We cannot only examine the representational and cognitive dimensions of ideology in order to dismantle it – and to dismantle it, changing representations and attitudes will not, alone, be enough. Social practices are not only anchored by linguistic practice and understanding ideology is only one step towards challenging it. However, these considerations are an important part of the picture – one, I hope to have shown, we cannot risk neglecting.

The frames we deploy, individually and collectively, orient us towards the world. The language we use enables us to coordinate this orientation. To replace prejudicial language, as one example, will not alone suffice. For the reasons explored in Chapter

four, new names for derogated targets will only come to acquire the same lexical frame unless the underlying perspective is also changed. However, when attempting to change frames and perspectives, language is one tool. It is my hope that this thesis has contributed to our understanding of how these tools may be utilized within broader projects of resistance.

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