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Autistic autobiography and hermeneutical injustice

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Abstract

This paper examines epistemic injustice in knowledge production concerning autism. Its aim is to further our understanding of the distinctive shapes of the kinds of epistemic injustices against autists. The paper shows how Ian Hacking's work on autistic autobiography brings into view a form of hermeneutical injustice that autists endure with respect to their firsthand accounts of their experiences of autism. It explores how understanding the distinctive shape of this hermeneutical injustice can help us further appreciate dangers and harms of using interpretive frameworks for autistic experience that neglect autists' own contributions to the formation of words and concepts for capturing their experiences. In particular, the paper argues that even when autists are included in knowledge production concerning autistic experience, they remain vulnerable to forms of hermeneutical marginalization that can stifle the coming into being of autistic experience.

KEYWORDS

autism, autistic autobiography, hermeneutical injustice, Ian Hacking, Köhler's phenomena, form of life

“Epistemic injustice” picks out a wide and varied collection of phenomena that can be characterized broadly as “forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices” (Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus 2017, 1). Miranda Fricker, in well-known and influential work (2003 and 2007), identifies and carefully examines two kinds of epistemic injustice, testimonial and hermeneutical. Roughly speaking, testimonial injustice concerns credibility assessments of testimony. It occurs when a hearer gives a speaker less credibility than the hearer would otherwise have

given the speaker because of the hearer's prejudice (Fricker 2007, 15). Hermeneutical injustice concerns access to and participation in the production of knowledge. It occurs when aspects of one's social experience are obscured or are difficult to articulate and understand because of gaps in collective hermeneutical resources for understanding those experiences (Fricker 2007, 1).

Conceptual and practical imperatives guide the ongoing study of epistemic injustice inspired by Fricker's seminal work: to improve our understanding of the nature of different kinds of epistemic injustice against oppressed groups—the “distinctive shapes” of these different forms (Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus 2017, 2) and how to diagnose them—and to pursue ways of resisting, addressing, and preventing them. Here I examine epistemic injustice in knowledge production concerning autism, an under-theorized topic that has only recently begun to receive more sustained attention.¹ I show how Ian Hacking's work on autistic autobiography (2009a; 2009b; 2009c; and 2010) brings into view a form of hermeneutical injustice that autists endure with respect to their firsthand accounts of their experiences of autism.² I argue that appreciating the distinctive shape of this hermeneutical injustice can help us further appreciate dangers and harms of using frameworks of interpretation for understanding autistic experience that neglect autists' own contributions to the formation of concepts and words for capturing their experiences. In particular, I argue that even when autists are included in knowledge production concerning autistic experience, they remain vulnerable to forms of hermeneutical marginalization that can stifle the coming into being of autistic experience. I conclude by reflecting on some important limitations of my examination of hermeneutical injustice that autists suffer.

1 | HACKING ON AUTISM AND THE LINGUISTIC MEANS FOR DESCRIBING ONE'S EXPERIENCES

There are two closely related ideas from Hacking's work on autistic autobiography (2009a; 2009b; 2009c; and 2010) concerning the linguistic means for describing and expressing experiences that shed light on the role of firsthand accounts of autism in how we are coming to understand autism and that help bring into view hermeneutical injustices autists endure. First, while “neurotypicals” (what some autistic communities have come to call non-autistics) have an age-old language for describing their experiences, a language for describing autistic experiences has been missing. Second, a language for describing and expressing autistic experiences is being created right now, and autistic autobiography has an important role in this language creation.

1.1 | Language for describing experiences and why it's been missing for autistic experience

Let's start with the first idea—that there is a key asymmetry between neurotypical people and autistic people when it comes to having the linguistic means to describe and express their experiences and sensibilities. When it comes to neurotypicals, Hacking writes, “there has been a language for the intentions, desires, and emotions of other people for all of historical time” (2009b, 56). While this language for describing experience “crafted by and for neurotypicals” (56) goes back to our distant ancestors, it has evolved and will keep

¹E.g., Dohmen 2016; Hens, Robeyns, and Schaubroeck 2018; Li and Koenig 2019; Legault, Bourdon, and Poirier 2019.

²Hacking himself does not explore the implications of this work for understanding the epistemic injustice autists suffer.

evolving. These “age-old ways to describe what others are thinking, feeling and so forth” (2009a, abstract) are “being honed every day, in both the street and the garret” (2009c, 503). Importantly, for Hacking, some of this language is perceptual. We say we see or hear others’ mental states in their intention-laden bodily movements, gestures, facial expressions, tones of voice, and postures in face-to-face encounters. For example, you might say that you see what someone is going to do with that fancy cocktail—drink it or offer it to you. We also say that we can hear the excitement in a friend’s voice, see the joy, fear, or sadness in a friend’s eyes, and that we can feel the tension in someone’s body.

By contrast, when it comes to autism, language for describing autistic experience has been missing. There is little preexisting language for describing and expressing autistic experience. Hacking writes: “[T]ruth conditions for statements about what other [neurotypical] people want or think or feel have been firmly entrenched in human life for as far back as we can honestly speculate. But there were no truth conditions for statements about what people with autism want or think or feel” (2009c, 506). Why has there been “little ready-made language” (2009b, 56) in which to describe autistic experience? Hacking argues that the language asymmetry rests on another asymmetry between autists and neurotypicals. While the rich, age-old language neurotypicals use to describe their experiences rests on “Köhler’s phenomena” (2009a), in the case of autism Köhler’s phenomena are absent. Hacking uses the phrase “Köhler’s phenomena” to capture an insight of the Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler, who noted: “[N]ot only the so-called expressive movements but also the practical behavior of human beings is a good picture of their inner life, in a great many cases” (1929, 250). On this view, it is because in a great many cases human behavior pictures human thoughts, feelings, and intentions in such a way that one can directly (non-inferentially and immediately) see what other people are thinking, feeling, and intending by attending to the ways those aspects of their mental life are pictured in their behavior. As noted above, in ordinary life neurotypicals use perceptual language regularly to describe their knowledge of other minds. This perceptual language captures how neurotypicals experience intersubjective interaction in many everyday face-to-face social encounters—that is, as having non-inferential, unmediated perceptual access to others’ mental lives.

While Köhler himself does not offer a sustained defense of the claim that people have perceptual access to others’ mental states in his *Gestalt Psychology* (1929), the work Hacking cites in the passage quoted above, we can look to contemporary discussions of perceptual access views to further elucidate Köhler’s phenomena. The idea that at least some of our access to other minds is perceptual has begun receiving serious consideration in contemporary philosophy and psychology.³ Proponents of perceptual models of our understanding of other minds claim that we can, at least in some cases, immediately perceive the mental states of other people (see, e.g., Zahavi 2011 and Krueger and Overgaard 2012). They do not argue for the implausible thesis that *all* mental phenomena are perceptible. Nor do they deny the need for sophisticated inference to accurately attribute mental states to others in some circumstances and for some mental phenomena.

A central question in ongoing debates about the perceptibility of mental features is what kinds of mental features are perceptible. Emotions and intentions are often taken as paradigmatic examples.⁴ For example, trepidation can be audible in someone’s voice, sorrow can be visible in someone’s eyes, and what a child is going to do with a toy (play with it, offer it to

³Although thinkers have suggested that knowledge of other minds is perceptual throughout the history of philosophy, sustained discussion of what it would mean to have a perceptual model of knowledge of other minds is a fairly recent development. See Avramides (2011) for helpful discussion.

⁴On emotions see, e.g., Gallagher 2008; Green 2010; and Smith 2015. On intentions see, e.g., Gallagher and Varga 2014.

someone, throw it) can be visible in the child's bodily movements.⁵ Another central question is what renders some mental features perceptible. Köhler, we have seen, claims that the picturing relation between human behavior and human mental phenomena like feelings and intentions makes perceptual access possible. Köhler's appeal to a picturing relation between human behavior and human mental features can be further elucidated in terms of the notion of "expressive behavior." Some mental features are embodied in such a way that they serve as expressions (such as smiling, baring one's teeth, laughing, crying) or are "characteristic components . . . of (being in) the relevant states" (Bar-On 2015, 190). For example, smiling is a characteristic component of feeling pleasure, baring one's teeth is a characteristic component of anger, and so forth. One can see another bare their teeth in anger or wrinkle their nose in disgust. The baring of teeth and wrinkling the nose are among the bodily components that are distinctive of anger and disgust, respectively. In some cases, we perceive not only the type of mental state expressed but also the quality, degree, and object of an expressed state. For example, one can perceive the location of pain and its severity. One can perceive what a friend is angry about. Expressive behavior can also display rage as opposed to panic at a specific attacker and extreme or mild curiosity at a doll disappearing behind a screen, for instance, as Dorit Bar-On (2015) mentions. But not all mental phenomena are manifested as expressive behavior. Some mental phenomena may have no behavioral correlates at all, let alone expressive ones. Perhaps more important for appreciating what Hacking is sensitizing us to, how autists and neurotypicals manifest their mental lives in their expressive behavior may differ fundamentally, such that neurotypicals' behavior does not provide pictures of their mental features for autists, and vice versa.

This way of putting the point, that Köhler's phenomena are absent *between* autists and neurotypicals rather than claiming that autists lack Köhler's phenomena, brings out that the absence of Köhler's phenomena runs in both directions:

Expert observers report that autistic children do not see that someone is in a bad humour; they do not follow the direction of a startled person's gaze; they do not readily understand what another person is doing, i.e. they do not easily recognize intentions.

Conversely, most people cannot see, *via* the behavior of severely autistic people, what they feel, want or are thinking. Even more disturbing is an inability to see what they are doing: their intentions make no sense. With the severely autistic, it may seem as if they do not even *have* many intentions. (Hacking 2009a, 1471)

Neither the autist nor the neurotypical can immediately see what the other is doing, thinking, feeling, and so on, whereas neurotypicals can immediately see what other neurotypicals are doing, thinking, feeling, and so on in a great many cases.⁶

A number of others writing on challenges to interpersonal understanding between autists and neurotypicals emphasize, in various ways, that the challenges run in both directions, and they explore the scientific, philosophical, and practical importance of appreciating this fact (e.g., Gernsbacher 2006; Milton 2012; Dinishak and Akhtar 2013). There are, however, distinctive features of Hacking's characterization of the symmetry that have not been adequately explored in discussions of his work on autistic autobiography and are important to underscore and amplify for my discussion of hermeneutical injustice against autists in section 2. One distinctive feature is that the two-way absence of Köhler's phenomena between autists and neurotypicals is, on Hacking's account, an absence of a perceptual ability—being able to immediately *sense*

⁵Some theorists have attempted to extend the perceptual model to include perception of mental features besides emotions and intentions such as desires (McNeill 2015). Some theorists (e.g., Krueger and Overgaard [2012]) have also argued that thoughts and cognitive processes are perceptible when gestures are part of the thinking or cognitive process.

⁶I challenge this point in section 2 by suggesting that it is possible that autists' firsthand narratives of their experiences of autism could inform neurotypicals' perceptions of autistic behavior in ways that would allow for some measure of perceptual, not just inferential, access to autists' feelings, intendings, and so forth.

or *perceive*—to see, feel, or hear—what the other is feeling, intending to do, and so forth in their expressive bodily movements.

A second distinctive feature of Hacking’s account of the symmetry is that the nature of the unintelligibility between autists and neurotypicals is relevantly different from the nature of the unintelligibility between people that do not share a “common civilization.”⁷ Reflecting on the prevalence of the alien trope in autism narratives, Hacking observes:

These phenomena [Köhler’s phenomena] are the “bedrock” for a “shared form of life,” to use two of Wittgenstein’s compelling phrases. Not only does Temple Grandin feel like an anthropologist on Mars, but neurotypicals feel they are confronted by unintelligible Martians when they first confront the reality of autism.⁸ It is important that she says Mars, and not Papua New Guinea. Innumerable languages are spoken in that part of the world, and the customs first encountered by Europeans are passing strange. But in no time at all, visitors and inhabitants were talking, generating creoles, taking advantage of each other. They did not share a common civilization, but they shared something far more fundamental, captured by Wittgenstein’s metaphor of bedrock. (2009b, 56)

Here Hacking speaks of culturally diverse visitors and inhabitants finding the behavior of each other to be “passing strange.” This two-way kind of unintelligibility (regarding something as surpassingly strange) is contrasted with a more fundamental kind of unintelligibility, the kind that is created, in part, by the absence of Köhler’s phenomena, which Hacking further characterizes as the absence of the bedrock for a shared form of life. Because the European visitors and the inhabitants of Papua New Guinea enjoy the presence of Köhler’s phenomena between them, the bedrock for a shared form of life, they can use this shared bedrock of relevant similarities in their patterns of nonlinguistic behavior to begin to communicate, even when their spoken languages and customs differ. The visitors and inhabitants begin to learn each other’s spoken language by using the shared, nonlinguistic, behavioral bedrock as a starting point. In other words, Köhler’s phenomena are the bedrock of a shared form of life that help make a shared language for expressing and describing experiences possible despite variations in customs and cultures. Hacking suggests that autists and neurotypicals do not have this shared starting point.

Hacking’s appeal to the idea of a shared form of life here raises a number of questions. How to understand Wittgenstein’s term of art “form of life” (*Lebensform*) is a matter of contention. Is there one form of life, the human form of life, or are their forms of life? Are the activities that partly constitute a form of life culture-specific activities or “natural” behaviors? Hacking sometimes uses the plural form, “forms of life,” which suggests he wants to recognize a plurality of forms of life for humans. As for the second question, relating to culture-specific or natural behaviors, he further describes forms of life as “ways of living together” (2009a, 1468) but does not further specify ways of living together as culture-specific or natural or both. He

⁷We should be wary of blanket statements regarding the unintelligibility and intelligibility of experience, given the inner diversity of social groups and cultures. José Medina (2017) rightly observes: “For a pluralistic conception of social groups and cultures, it is problematic to say that it is simply *impossible* for an experience to be understood within a particular culture. Instead of focusing on complete success or failure of understanding, it is important to appreciate that intelligibility is a matter of more or less: doing better or worse in understanding oneself and others is a matter of trying as hard as one can, of paying attention to the emerging expressive and interpretative possibilities, no matter how inchoate or embryonic” (2017, 43).

⁸In a well-known example of the alien trope, Grandin told Oliver Sacks (1995) that much of the time she feels like an anthropologist on Mars. Here are two other relevant examples. Autistic self-advocate Jim Sinclair characterizes the feeling they had during first encounters with Donna Williams, another autist, thus: “[A]fter a life spent among aliens, I had met someone who came from the same planet as me” (2012, 25). In another piece, Sinclair speaks to the two-way unintelligibility between autists and neurotypicals: “Grant me the dignity of meeting me on my own terms—recognize that we are equally alien to each other, that my ways of being are not merely damaged versions of yours” (1992, 203).

claims that neurotypicals share the bedrock (Köhler's phenomena) for a shared form of life but neurotypicals and autists do not. This leaves open how to understand the relationship between (merely) sharing the bedrock for a shared form of life and sharing a form of life. It does not follow automatically from neurotypicals sharing the bedrock for a shared form of life that all neurotypicals share a form of life. The example Hacking gives in the passage quoted above suggests that while the European visitors and the inhabitants of Papua New Guinea share the bedrock for coming to share a form of life, they do not share a form of life, at least in the sense of sharing culture-specific activities and customs. Shared Köhler's phenomena are not sufficient for a shared form of life, but they are the bedrock that helps make possible a shared form of life.⁹

1.2 | The language-creation argument

We have seen that there is a crucial difference between autists and neurotypicals when it comes to having a language for describing their inner lives. While neurotypicals have had one “for all historical time,” this kind of language has been missing for autists. The second idea in Hacking's account of autistic autobiography I wish to elucidate is twofold: a language for describing autistic experiences is being created right now, and autistic autobiography has an important role in this language creation. Following Hacking (2010, 638), let us call this “the argument of language creation.”¹⁰

The phrase “language creation” underscores the sense in which autism narratives play a radical, transformative role in shaping autism, both the classification and the people so classified. Autistic autobiographies help “to bring into being an entire mode of discourse” (Hacking 2009c, 501) by “creating the language in which to describe the experience of autism, and hence helping to forge the concepts in which to think autism” (Hacking 2009a, abstract). Hacking characterizes this language creation as a rare experiment in concept formation (2009c, 506). Moreover, it would miss the sense in which the autobiographies are part of a rare experiment in concept formation and would mischaracterize their role in the shaping of autism to think of them as merely using already existing language to report what it is like to be autistic. Rather, more radically, Hacking asserts that autistic autobiographies are helping create new ways of talking and thinking about autistic experience and, through this language creation, helping to constitute what it is like to *be* autistic (2009a, 1468), giving voice to a people (2009c, 503). “Constitute” is a strong word that prompts one to not underestimate how new ways of talking about and conceptualizing experiences shapes the character of those experiences and how they are understood. But this is not to say that if autists do not have words or concepts for an experience, they do not actually have the experience. Words and concepts themselves do not bring an experience into being. Rather the new words and concepts help render an experience intelligible, to others and to oneself, and this helps one describe, express, and understand the experience in new ways.

Notably, autistic autobiographies help constitute what it is like to be autistic for those who are autistic and for those who are not. The autobiographies constitute what it is like to be autistic for autists themselves by creating ways for autists to render those experiences intelligible

⁹A further question here, one that Hacking does not take up, is whether all autists, or at least some subgroups of autists, share a form of life. See Robert Chapman (2019) for a rich exploration of the twofold idea that autism can be understood as its own distinctive form of life and that interpersonal understanding between autists comes more easily than it does between autists and neurotypicals. Note that Chapman does not explicitly address Hacking's provocative suggestion in this passage that there is an important disanalogy between autists' and neurotypicals' mutual unintelligibility and the fact that inhabitants and visitors each find the other's behavior “passing strange.”

¹⁰Hacking extends the language-creation argument to autism fiction in Hacking 2009b and 2009c.

to themselves, to describe and express their experiences, and, by extension, “to be, to exist, to live” (Hacking 2009c, 501). They constitute what it is like to be autistic for neurotypicals by helping to create ways for neurotypicals to think about the lives of autists (514). Accordingly, the autobiographies are affecting autists’ self-understanding and neurotypicals’ understanding of autists.

How do the autobiographies help create new ways of talking and thinking about autism? In autists’ autobiographical writings we see the autists “choosing words from ordinary language to be applied in connection with their behaviour” (Hacking 2009a, 1472). Importantly, the choosing of words also involves a kind of retooling of ordinary language, of the “linguistic materials made in an age-long community” (1472). Hacking provides an example of this retooling of ordinary language, drawn from autistic autobiographies. The example concerns sensory-perceptual hypersensitivities in the visual modality. Many autists find lights or colors too bright. Some autism researchers use the terms “eagle-eyed” and “visual acuity” to describe autists’ visual hypersensitivity, hypothesizing that sensory hypersensitivities may be the basis for sensory acuity (Baron-Cohen et al. 2009). But Hacking observes a disconnect between autism theory and autistic experience on this front, as expressed by autists themselves in their autobiographical accounts. He writes: “‘Acuity’ sounds neutral, but too much sensation is, for many autists, unbearable, and seems to fit into the category of pain. But the fit is loose; we do not know quite what the words should be. We should listen carefully to the ordinary language of pain, and then note how people with autism try to adapt it to their own experience. . . . We want something subtler than thresholds, acuity and so forth” (2009a, 1472).

These two observations concerning language use—first, the mismatch between the autism theorist’s use of “acuity” and the autistic person’s use of “pain” and, second, the loose fit between how the autist uses “pain” and the ordinary language of pain—help bring out senses in which autists’ retooling of the ordinary language of describing experiences is bringing into being new ways of talking and thinking about autistic experience. It is distinct from the language for describing and expressing pain created by and for neurotypicals even as it takes neurotypical language as its starting point.

Hacking’s observation concerning the retooling of language by autists can be extended to other domains of language used to describe autistic experience besides ordinary, everyday language for describing and expressing one’s inner life, including the language of autism “experts”: that is, the autism specialist language used by diagnosticians, psychiatrists, psychologists, behavioral therapists, and other professionals and researchers. For example, in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* diagnostic criteria entry for “autism spectrum disorder,” the term “stereotypy” is used to characterize repetitive motor movements deemed odd or unusual, like hand flapping, walking on toes, finger flicking, and complex whole-body movements like body rocking. These behaviors, also referred to as “self-stimulatory behaviors,” are routinely construed as problematic (for example, they are regarded as compromising focus and shutting out external stimuli, which is hypothesized to interfere with autists’ ability to learn) and are thus targeted for “remediation” (suppression, reduction, replacement, and elimination) in autism interventions.¹¹

Autistic people, including many involved in participatory autism research, have become increasingly outspoken in their resistance to this way of regarding and responding to such behaviors (Bascom 2012a; Kapp et al. 2019). Their use of the terms “stim” and “stimming” and “loud hands” are key examples of reclaiming the language used to describe these motor movements. “Autism rights or neurodiversity activists believe that stims may serve as coping mechanisms, thus opposing attempts to eliminate non-injurious forms of

¹¹Lilley (manuscript) offers an informative overview of the history of stimming in autism and autists’ resistance to the pathologization of their stimming.

stimming (e.g. Orsini and Smith, 2010). They decry practices such as ‘quiet hands’ (which teaches the suppression of hand flapping), instead using ‘loud hands’ as a metaphor both for using such non-verbal behaviour to communicate and for cultural resistance more broadly (Bascom, 2012)” (Kapp et al. 2019, 2). Autistic scholar-activist Melanie Yergeau’s (2012) video, “i stim, therefore i am,” powerfully illustrates the self-expressive power of retooling “expert” language used to describe stereotypies. Yergeau, the narrator of the video, reflects, while a childhood photo is shown: “Five year old body, there is grace . . . stiff and stimmy is grace . . . I am fascinated by my five year old body. It is loud, and it doesn’t give a fuck.”

Stimming behaviors are important modes of being, communication, and expression for both autistic communities and individuals. They are “considered vital in a collective/autistic cultural context, but they likewise hold significance for autistic individuals” (Yergeau 2018, 98). Particular kinds of stimming, particular ways of having “loud” hands, such as hand flapping, may admit of subtle variations in self-expressive and communicative meaning. Julia Bascom shares some examples of the array of meanings of autists’ flapping and others’ abilities to perceive these meanings:

Terra can read my flapping better than my face. “You’ve got one for everything,” she says, and I wish everyone could look at my hands and see *I need you to slow down* or *this is the best thing ever* or *can I please touch* or *I am so hungry I think my brain is trying to eat itself*.

But if they see my hands, I’m not safe.

“They watch your hands,” my sister says, “and you might as well be flipping them off when all you’re saying is *this menu feels nice*.” (2012b, 179)

Bascom’s reflections on hand flapping’s multifarious self-expressive meaning provides an example of the absence of Köhler’s phenomena between autists and neurotypicals. Bascom’s flapping has subtle variations that characterizing them as involuntary and meaninglessly repetitive does not capture. Moreover, in cases where “they” watch Bascom’s hands and *do* perceive meaning in Bascom’s expressive movements, they do not immediately see what Bascom is saying with their loud hands, *this menu feels nice*.

Autists’ retoolings of “expert” language used to characterize stereotypies also targets a presupposition that underlies this language: namely, that hand flapping, say, *must* be meaningful and communicative in the standard sense. Yergeau, for example, writes: “My hands story and proclaim, denounce and congratulate. My hands say both *fuck you* and *thank you*. Sometimes I am the only person who knows what my hands are meaning. Sometimes even I don’t know what my hands mean—but why must I always cherish or privilege meaning? Description cannot contain my hands” (2018, 13). Here Yergeau problematizes conflating behavior that should be preserved with bodily movements whose meaning is or even can be communicated or discerned. Some stimming behaviors may be valuable and yet not be aimed at communicative meaning, and retoolings of “stereotypy” like “stimming” make room for new ways of conceptualizing and experiencing stimming behaviors, a core aspect of subjectivity for autistic communities and individuals.

2 | THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LANGUAGE-CREATION ARGUMENT

In section 1 we saw that language for describing and expressing autistic experience is being created right now and that autists have an important role in the language creation, both in their retooling of ordinary language for describing and expressing inner life and in their retooling of “expert” language for describing autistic behavior and experience. I turn now to developing my suggestion that Hacking’s account of autistic autobiography—specifically the language-creation argument and observations concerning the mismatch between autists’ and

neurotypicals' language for describing and expressing their experiences—brings to light important dimensions of the epistemological significance of autists' participation in the creation of language for expressing and describing their inner lives. These dimensions concern dangers and harms of using a framework of interpretation for understanding autistic experience that is built on an assumed shared language of the inner. I argue that the language-creation argument helps us further articulate the ways in which autists are harmed in their capacities as knowers by sensitizing us to a form of hermeneutical injustice autists suffer.

Hermeneutical injustice arises from hermeneutical marginalization “of a persistent and wide-ranging sort” (Fricker 2007, 154). In the case of autism, autists' contributions to the formation of concepts for capturing their experiences and the distinctiveness of the language they use to capture their inner lives are often ignored or neglected. It is a form of hermeneutical marginalization to neglect these contributions and how autists' adaptations of ordinary language to express their experiences may be a loose fit with neurotypical uses of those same words. It is similarly marginalizing to ignore autists' retooling of “expert” language used to describe and explain their behaviors (such as stimming and loud hands, and retoolings of “stereotypies”). Autists, members of a group subject to prejudicial stereotypes that influence how their social experiences are interpreted and understood (that is, subject to identity prejudice, in Fricker's terms), are denied adequate opportunity to participate in the formation and revision of concepts to describe their experiences, and thus how those experiences are understood. As a result of their hermeneutical marginalization in the creation, revision, and uptake of words and concepts for understanding their social experiences (their thinkings, feelings, intendings, doings, and so forth), autists are subject to hermeneutical injustice. Aspects of autistic experience are obscured, resulting in gaps in knowledge—in neurotypicals' knowledge of autistic experience but also in autists' understanding of their *own* experiences.

This last point—that the hermeneutical marginalization results in gaps in autists' understanding of their own experiences—requires further unpacking and elaboration in the light of the language-creation argument. Let us start by distinguishing two different readings of how the creation of language for capturing autistic experience can improve understanding of autism. This will help illuminate the kind of hermeneutical marginalization I wish to call out here and how it can impede understanding of autistic experience. A natural reading of the language creation's significance is that it enables description of what it is like to be autistic. On another, more radical, reading of its significance, an alternative that Hacking introduces, the language creation is not so much about describing already well-defined autistic experience as constituting autistic experience (2009a, 1472). The second reading brings out the special significance of the language creation as a rare event in concept formation and of the importance of carefully attending to this language creation. Doing so helps make room for the coming into being of what it is like to be autistic, for those who inhabit the spectrum and for those who do not. This reading reveals a crucial dimension of autists' epistemic authority and power. When autists choose words from ordinary language and specialist language and create new ones to be used in connection with their experiences, they are not so much telling neurotypicals what it is like to be autistic as constituting what it is like to be autistic. This is not to say that autistic experiences for which words and concepts were lacking did not actually exist in the absence of words and concepts to capture them. It is to say that new ways of talking and thinking about autistic experience introduced by autists render autistic experience more intelligible. Autists' participating in this language creation can thus be seen as providing an opportunity for a robust form of epistemic authority and power in shaping people's understanding of and experiences with autism.

We are now in a position to see that the form of hermeneutical injustice I have been characterizing—neglecting or ignoring how autists' retooling of language is the creation of new language for their experience—obviates autistic ways of being for autists *themselves*, not just for those that do not inhabit the spectrum. Broadening out, a more general insight to glean from the discussion of dangers and harms of failing to attend to autists' participation in the language

creation is that not having concepts for one's experiences impacts one's ability to render those experiences intelligible to oneself. This stifles the coming into being of the experience, not just one's ability to communicate experiences that are, so to speak, already formed up.

Regarding how the kind of hermeneutical injustice outlined above impacts possibilities for neurotypicals coming to understand autistic social experience, recall the idea that the two-way unintelligibility between autists and neurotypicals is partly due to the absence of Köhler's phenomena, the bedrock for a shared form of life. If this is right, the absence of Köhler's phenomena between autists and neurotypicals makes the hermeneutical marginalization of autists outlined above particularly detrimental to neurotypicals' understanding of fundamental aspects of autists' social experience. If Köhler's phenomena were present between autists and neurotypicals, neurotypicals could, at least in some cases, directly see what autists are feeling, intending, and so on, as they do with neurotypicals in many cases, including in cases where neurotypical visitors and inhabitants have to learn how to communicate across their differences, cultural and otherwise. But since Köhler's phenomena are absent between autists and neurotypicals, neurotypicals rely on other routes to gaining understanding of what autists' behaviors mean. Autistic autobiography is an important alternate route to understanding autists' experiences and behaviors (Hacking 2009a). Uptake failures of autists' contributions to collective hermeneutical resources for expressing and describing their inner lives undermine this alternate route's potential for achieving understanding of autistic experience.

But how might autistic autobiography serve as an alternate route to understanding autistic experience? Hacking characterizes autistic autobiography as giving neurotypicals inferential, non-perceptual access to autists' inner lives: "They suggest what to infer from autistic behaviour which on the face of it means nothing to us [neurotypicals]" (2009a, 1472). Another possibility, one not taken up by Hacking, is that autists' firsthand narratives of their experiences of autism could inform neurotypicals' perceptions of autistic behavior in ways that would allow for some measure of perceptual access to autists' feelings, intendings, and so forth. That is, perhaps it is possible, through the uptake of the new hermeneutical resources for understanding autistic experience that emerge from this event in concept formation, for neurotypicals to undergo a kind of perceptual learning that would allow for perceptual access to autists' inner lives, at least in some cases. This could bring about the presence of Köhler's phenomena between autists and neurotypicals, even if only in a more limited way than the presence of Köhler's phenomena between neurotypicals. On this construal of autistic autobiography's role in helping neurotypicals understand autistic experience, a danger of neglecting autists' contributions to the language creation is that it might close off possibilities for the relevant kind of perceptual learning and instead habituate knowledge seekers in a way that limits their capacities for learning about autistic experience in its specificity. This would be a form of meta-ignorance "that limits how others can appear to oneself . . . restricting one's sensitivity to differences and one's capacity to learn about this" (Medina 2013, 151). Thus, such neglect can lead inadvertently to becoming habituated to a kind of ignorance whereby neurotypical knowledge seekers fail to be sensitive to and are unable to perceive autists' thinkings, feelings, sayings, and doings in their specificity, even when neurotypicals try to do so.

All in all, autists' hermeneutical marginalization and failure to attend to the distinctiveness of the words and concepts created for expressing and describing autistic experience impede progress in understanding autistic experience in its specificity, given the role the new ways of talking and thinking about autistic experience play in shaping autistic experience both for those who inhabit the spectrum and for those who do not. We need to attend carefully to this event in concept formation and be alert to the possibility that autists' and neurotypicals' words and concepts for describing, expressing, and conceptualizing their experiences are relevantly different, both in terms of the words and concepts used to express their experiences and in their expressive modes and styles. Through neglect we miss important ways autists' experiences, including their "neurodivergent intersubjectivity" (Heasman and Gillespie 2019)

and “autistic sociality” (Ochs and Solomon 2010), are forms in their own right that cannot be fully appreciated by conceptualizing them merely in terms of the absence of what neurotypical people do and have (Baggs 2010; Dinishak 2016 and 2019). The language chosen for sensory-perceptual differences associated with autism (for example, hypersensitivities) and stimming are cases in point. Put more strongly, autists’ exclusion from knowledge production concerning autistic experience and our neglecting autists’ participation in the creation of words and concepts for describing and expressing their experiences run the danger of removing autists’ experiential differences and fundamental forms of unlike-mindedness between autists and neurotypicals.

3 | CONCLUSION

What I have been arguing is that in learning how to be careful interpreters of autists’ self-narratives, we can come to appreciate a form of hermeneutical justice and injustice in knowledge production concerning autistic experience and the ethical and epistemic benefits and dangers of each, respectively. We must read the autobiographies with an eye toward the way autists’ retooling of neurotypical language of describing experiences and sensibilities and retooling of “expert” language constitutes *new* language—new vocabularies for autists to capture their inner lives, new ways of talking about, conceptualizing, and understanding autistic experience. I suggested that addressing this kind of hermeneutical injustice requires recognizing autists’ epistemic privilege and power as language creators by supporting autists’ formation of new words and concepts to capture their experiences.¹² We need to do the work necessary to understand how they differ from neurotypicals’ words and concepts for capturing their experiences, and to incorporate them into our shared understanding of autism. These words and concepts give autists a voice of their own, a distinctive voice that empowers them as key contributors in the creation of new language, not merely as increasingly adept users of neurotypical language. Further, appreciating the newness of these ways of describing, expressing, and conceptualizing autistic experience is a way of recognizing autistic ways of being as forms in their own right, rather than merely as impoverished forms of more typical experience.

In coming to appreciate the distinctive shapes of epistemic injustices that autists suffer, it is important to notice that the danger of epistemic injustice is heightened when it comes to knowledge practices employed for understanding “new terrains of social experience” (Fricker 2017, 58–59). Thus, we need to proceed with particular caution in how we build our understanding of autistic experience and how it is similar to and different from the experience of neurotypicals. With this cautionary note in mind, let me end by complicating the contrast drawn earlier between autists and neurotypicals in my reconstruction of Hacking’s language-creation argument and note an important limitation of my illustrations of autists’ participation in creating language to capture their experiences.

First, “neurotypical” is used in different ways within different autistic communities, autism research, and the wider public.¹³ Some autistic communities and autism researchers have used the term broadly to refer to non-autists. Others use “neurotypical” more narrowly to describe non-autists who

¹²This is not to say that hermeneutical injustice can be wholly eliminated by individual effort. Fricker writes, “[I]nsofar as hermeneutical marginalisation is a product of social powerlessness (and is a form of it), the actual eradication of this kind of injustice will require significantly more than such slight interpersonal hermeneutical empowerments; it will require sufficient social equality in general, to ensure that new areas of hermeneutical marginalisation do not keep re-emerging with new patterns of unequal power” (2017, 55).

¹³Another issue concerns what “typical development” means. Historically, behavioral scientists have drawn general conclusions about human development and what counts as typical development based on samples of “WEIRD” children (that is, Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010), and this neglects variation in non-autistic development, for example across cultures.

are typically developing humans that fall within accepted norms for neurocognitive functioning and behavior (see, e.g., Walker 2014). Some groups of non-autistics (such as those diagnosed with mental illness) are not neurotypical in this sense and are excluded and marginalized, suffering testimonial and hermeneutical injustices (Scrutton 2017). Even on the narrow construal of “neurotypical” some subgroups of neurotypicals (for example, Indigenous peoples and trans people) have also been excluded and marginalized, suffering testimonial and hermeneutical injustices of various kinds. Thus, in understanding the contrast between autists and non-autists when it comes to having or lacking the linguistic means to describe their inner lives, it would be too simple to hold that all neurotypicals always and everywhere enjoy having the linguistic means to describe their experience.

Second, given the heterogeneity and complexity of autism and that autism intersects with other forms of diversity of lived experience, the linguistic means for capturing autistic experience will come to include language to capture relevant differences in the experiences of different subgroups of autists and in ways that include autists who have other marginalized identities (such as nonbinary autists and autistic girls and women). Recognition that the phenotypic expressions and experiences of autistic girls and women are distinct from those of autistic boys and men, for example, is just now emerging, in part because autistic girls and women have been, and still are, under-recognized (Carpenter, Happé, and Egerton 2019). Autism rights and self-advocacy groups are working to confront ways subgroups of autists are marginalized within autistic communities and autism rights movements, and to increase and improve representation of the many “autisms.”¹⁴

In this connection, a limitation of my discussion of the hermeneutical marginalization that autists suffer when it comes to creating language to capture their inner lives is that it focuses on examining epistemic injustices against autists who have facility with spoken and written verbal language. Kristien Hens, Ingrid Robeyns, and Katrien Schaubroeck offer an important caution about such a focus. They note “that including only those autistic people with whom they [autism researchers] share a common (verbal) mode of communication may also be a form of epistemic injustice,” and autism researchers need to find “ways to investigate and include experiences of those who are nonverbal or who face other communication difficulties” (2018, 7). Limiting inclusion of autists to those who share a common verbal mode of communication limits what can be learned about autism and autistic experience and harms a subpopulation of autists who are particularly vulnerable to both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Even further, one might argue, researchers should remain open to investigating nonverbal forms of language creation among autists, whether the autists participating in that language creation are speaking or nonspeaking, verbal or nonverbal, hearing or deaf.

This caution concerning privileging verbal modes of communication rightly observes that people with limited verbal language are particularly vulnerable to epistemic injustice, including those forms of it that involve hermeneutical marginalization. Yet, what I have been working to bring into view is that even when verbal autists *are* included in knowledge production concerning autistic experience, they remain vulnerable to forms of hermeneutical marginalization. We marginalize autists, hermeneutically, sometimes in subtle ways, when we assume that they and neurotypicals have a common mode of verbal communication when they contribute to shared hermeneutical resources and we then take for granted that autists are using words for ordinary language in the same ways neurotypicals are using them to describe and express their experiences.¹⁵ Incorporating first-person accounts of autistic experience into autism research

¹⁴For example, in July 2021, the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, or ASAN (2021), released a statement detailing its commitment to addressing racial injustices within autistic communities and organized advocacy: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/2021/07/working-towards-racial-justice-in-asan-and-the-autistic-community/>

¹⁵Janna Van Grunsven and Sabine Roeser offer an insightful philosophical exploration of the promises and challenges of bringing voice to verbal, nonspeaking autists through the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication Technology (AAC Tech). They argue that “AAC Tech must attend to the different ways in which individuals and communities can have unique communication styles and recognize that these individuals and communities can lose a part of their identity (or never fully gain it) if the technology upon which they depend for self-expression limits them to ‘conventional’ communication norms and practices that are in many ways alien to them” (2021, n.p.).

and beyond is an important step in improving progress in our understanding of autism. But we also need to approach the interpretation of autists' contributions to capturing autistic experience with greater awareness of the distinctiveness of the language of the inner that they are helping to create. In other words, taking seriously autists' contributions to creating a language for expressing and describing their inner lives requires building interpretive practices that honor the language creation as just that—the creation of new language that helps autists render their experiences intelligible not just to others but to themselves as well.

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