

## MISINTERPRETIVE FRAMES AND EPISTEMIC CONTAMINATION

Emilia L. Wilson

OUR INTERPRETIVE RESOURCES enable us to make sense of and communicate about our shared world: possessing the concept ‘banana’ enables one to identify bananas; possessing a ‘script’ for lectures may guide us to sit in the audience unless we are the speaker. When these interpretive resources are flawed, it impedes our ability to understand, as has been explored in the literature on hermeneutical injustice.<sup>1</sup> Recent work emphasizes that these resources may be flawed not only in lacking what is required to render some target intelligible; they may also include resources that *distort* the world, producing misunderstanding.<sup>2</sup> The nature of this “distortion” and its relation to injustice, however, remains undertheorized.

In this article, I turn away from the dominant focus on naming categories to consider the powerful interpretive role of *frames* (e.g., scripts, narratives, stereotypes, metaphor) that characteristically guide how we interpretively structure information. I relate the role of frames to structural views of understanding in order to put forward an analysis of *misinterpretive frames*: frames that systematically produce misunderstanding. I highlight the role of these misinterpretive frames in sustaining pernicious ignorance and perpetuating unjust social practices, showing that it is essential to attend to frames in our theorizing about hermeneutical injustice.<sup>3</sup>

One of my central interests in this article is how distorting frames may not only fail to furnish us with understanding but lead us to misunderstand in a way that propagates error, contaminating otherwise valuable epistemic resources. By way of analogy, suppose we have a dictionary for translating a language that 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 does not appear in the dictionary at all, while some others have entries but are mistranslated. Such

1 See, e.g., Foster and Ichikawa, “Normative Inference Tickets”; Fricker, “Epistemic Injustice”; Maitra, “New Words for Old Wrongs”; and Mason, “Two Kinds of Unknowing.”

2 Bell, “Just the Facts”; Dular, “One Too Many”; Falbo, “Hermeneutical Injustice”; and Flores, “Calling Trauma, Elite Capture, and Hermeneutical Injustice.”

3 See Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing.”

a dictionary is flawed and fails to fully equip us with the ability to competently translate. However, the terms that lack translations and those that are included but are mistranslated are importantly different kinds of flaws. For an entry that merely lacks any translation, this error is 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 propagate when we use the dictionary. A mistaken translation may thus pose distinctive harms in comparison to cases of missing entries.<sup>4</sup>

Analogously to the dictionary example, I draw on structural conceptions of understanding to contrast mere *lack of understanding*—whereby we lack apparent intelligibility—with cases of pernicious, substantive *misunderstanding*—whereby we have a mistaken “sense” of understanding. I do not take it to be the case that we may say that between lacking understanding and misunderstanding, one is decisively more pernicious; this is highly contextual. Rather, my goal in this article is to examine the distinctive ways in which misunderstanding may be harmful. Misinterpretive frames are those that, akin to the mistranslated dictionary entries, provide a mistaken sense of understanding. I further develop a novel analysis how these epistemic flaws may sustain injustice by examining how frames naturalize and normalize unjust social arrangements.

I begin in section 1 by sketching an account of misunderstanding as “grasping” what I term an inapt interpretive structure, which is distinct from merely failing to understand. I then, in section 2, offer an account of *misinterpretive frames*, which enable us to grasp inapt interpretive structures, thereby producing misunderstanding. In section 3, I highlight the role of these misinterpretive frames in hermeneutical injustice and argue that the concealed incompetence that misinterpretive frames give rise to is central to the perpetuation of hermeneutical injustice. Finally, in section 4, I show that *ideological* misinterpretive frames can *contaminate* otherwise valuable epistemic resources in ways that sustain unjust social practices, sustaining harms beyond the epistemic domain.

## 1. MISUNDERSTANDING

In this section, I introduce the structural view of understanding in order to sketch a correspondingly structural view of misunderstanding.

4 I intend this to be an illustrative toy example of missing versus mistaken resources and therefore have simplified; I do not undertake a detailed analysis here of this as an actual case.

### 1.1. Understanding

Understanding is often characterized by (favorable) contrast with mere knowledge of disparate facts: “we would surely rather understand than merely know.”<sup>5</sup> Understanding is centrally about how things relate to one another. Jonathan 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.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Georgi 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.”<sup>7</sup> Understanding is here characterized as “grasping” how disparate pieces of information “fit together” into a coherent whole.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

In summary, understanding may be roughly characterized as *grasping how things fit together*. What is the structure that one “grasps” when one understands? I term this an *interpretive structure*, which is a way of organizing a body of information in the following (nonexhaustive) interconnected ways.<sup>10</sup>

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

5 Pritchard, “Knowledge and Understanding,” 74. It has even been argued that understanding is the primary bearer of epistemic value and ought to be the central subject of epistemology. See Elgin, “Exemplification in Understanding”; and Gardiner “Understanding, Integration, and Epistemic Value.”

6 Kvanvig, *Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, 197.

7 Gardiner, “Understanding, Integration, and Epistemic Value,” 171.

8 See also Grimm, “The Value of Understanding”; and Riggs, “Understanding ‘Virtue’ and the Virtue of Understanding.”

9 For explicitly structural accounts of understanding, see Shazly, “Communicating Understanding”; Strevens, “No Understanding Without Explanation”; and Zagzebski and Grimm, “Toward a Theory of Understanding.”

10 Throughout this article, my use of the term ‘information’ is not factive; i.e., it includes false beliefs and misleading evidence.

accessibility; elements that are salient require less cognitive effort to access.<sup>11</sup>

3. *Importance and Evaluation*: These are judgments about which pieces of information matter and how. These judgments contribute to which pieces of information are considered salient.
4. *Inquiry*: Information is organized by what questions are under discussion and how the body of information is deemed to answer them. This structure guides when an 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 are subject to which factors are salient and which questions we are seeking to answer. Which questions are raised turn, in part, on what is salient and importantly unexplained. An interpretive structure is thus a holistic, structured representation; as such, it has been compared to gestalt perceptions.<sup>12</sup> I explore how we may evaluate this structure in section 1.2 below.

What is it to *grasp* such an interpretive structure? Grasping is commonly characterized in terms of both phenomenal experience and ability: seeing or knowing how pieces of information relate to each other. I here take both to be typical features of successful grasping. First, 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.<sup>13</sup> Second, when one grasps some interpretation or explanation, one (typically) has certain abilities. Alison Hills 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.<sup>14</sup>

Grasping is standardly 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 does

11 For formal accounts of salience structure, see Munton, *Priority and Prejudice*; and Watzl, “What Attention Is.”

12 See Camp, “Perspectival Complacency, Perversion, and Amelioration”; and Sliwa, “Making Sense of Things,” 124.

13 Belkonien, “Grasping in Understanding.”

14 Hills, “Understanding Why.” For other abilities-based accounts, see De Regt, “The Epistemic Value of Understanding”; and Grimm, “Understanding as Knowledge of Causes” and “Understanding.” It may be argued that some abilities accounts are overly demanding. See Kelp, “Understanding Phenomena.” However, I remain neutral on these disputes as I take these abilities to be characteristic of understanding rather than defending their necessity.

not 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>15</sup> 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 information according to this interpretation. Following Elisabeth Camp, I take grasping an interpretative structure to be a matter of mental organization and disposition. That is, the structure must be actually mentally instantiated in an agent's cognition in order to be grasped.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth pausing here to clarify my use of 'grasping' in order to preempt potential confusion. There is, it may be thought, 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 (be 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, I take this concern to rest on an ambiguity about the *object* of understanding in this case. 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 well 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.<sup>17</sup> Such an agent is able to offer the explanations the theory produces but is not disposed to actually interpret information they encounter in the world. As Camp notes, to intuitively "get" a characterization is not necessarily to adopt it as an accurate representation of the world.<sup>18</sup> For example, I might be fluent in the dominant cultural schemes of my social milieu without taking them to be factually or normatively apt. As I am interested in instances of misunderstanding the world, when I speak in this

15 For this reason, grasping is taken to be qualitatively different than belief, such that no additional belief means that one grasps, though for a competing view, see Sliwa, "Moral Understanding as Knowing Right from Wrong." 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 that accepting it amounts to grasping.

16 Camp, "Perspectival Complacency, Perversion, and Amelioration," 31. Camp speaks of "characterizations" rather than interpretive structures when discussing the holistic interpretations produced by some frame or perspective, but I take the notions to be here equivalent.

17 An anonymous reviewer suggests the helpful characterization that we may say that both skeptics and conspiracy theorists understand a conspiracy theory, but only conspiracy theorists misunderstand the world.

18 Camp, "Perspectival Complacency, Perversion, and Amelioration," 30–33.

article of agents grasping interpretive structures, this means grasping them with the world as their object, unless explicitly indicated otherwise.<sup>19</sup>

### 1.2. *Misunderstanding*

With the structural view of understanding laid out, we may now turn to misunderstanding. Conversely to the merits of understanding, which are favorably contrasted with “merely knowing,” misunderstanding can be worse than merely failing to know. It is widely recognized that the sense of understanding can come apart from successful understanding.<sup>20</sup> The same body of information may be organized in different—and, crucially, better or worse—ways. Given the same sequence of events, two individuals may differ on causal explanations and on which event they take to be centrally important. Although the same information may be reasonably interpreted in different ways, it is plainly possible to misinterpret evidence. Understanding must therefore require grasping an *apt* interpretive structure. I here use ‘apt’ rather than ‘accurate’ since the latter invites a more factive reading, and some dimensions of interpretive structures, such as salience, are not straightforwardly truth evaluable. The terminology of aptness is also adopted by Camp and Paulina Sliwa.<sup>21</sup> While both discuss aptness as a property of *perspectives*, this can be quite easily transposed to interpretive structures since it simply moves us from holistic suits of interpretive dispositions to the holistic interpretations that these dispositions produce.

Consequently, we can say that one lacks understanding when one fails to grasp an apt interpretive structure. We may then distinguish mere *lack of understanding*, whereby one does not grasp an interpretive structure and thus has no sense of how things fit together, from *misunderstanding*, whereby one grasps 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 (mis)understanding—to be gradable notions.

An interpretive structure may be inapt in various ways. Let us start from the simplest ways in which an interpretive structure may be flawed and work outwards. First, an interpretive structure might be straightforwardly inaccurate by,

19 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, Beisbart, and Brun, “What Is Understanding?” 13; and Grimm, “Understanding.”

20 Camp, “Perspectival Complacency, Perversion, and Amelioration”; Nguyen, “The Seductions of Clarity”; and Trout, “Scientific Explanation and the Sense of Understanding.”

21 Camp, “Perspectival Complacency, Perversion, and Amelioration”; and Sliwa, “Making Sense of Things.”

for instance, reversing relationships of causation. Consider a simple scenario: I accidentally knock a glass off my desk and it shatters.<sup>22</sup> 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 that 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 karmic punishment for failing to call my mother.) One element of the epistemic evaluation of an interpretive structure is to simply ask how many true versus false beliefs this structure ultimately equips us with. Beyond this, however, interpretive structures may get the world wrong in more subtle and complex ways, concerning which facts matter and how.

Suppose in the previous example 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.<sup>23</sup> Gravity is part of why the glass broke, but it is not an explanation of why this glass broke in this instance, just as the invention of the wheel is a bad explanation of a car crash. Camp highlights that which features are salient—specifically, those that are judged to be abnormal and diagnostic—is evaluable according to whether these features in fact “depart from statistically accurate baseline conditions” and whether “they are actually relevant for an agent’s classificatory purposes.”<sup>24</sup> Here, we begin to see the entanglement of epistemic and pragmatic evaluation. Identifying explanatory and causal relationships interfaces with judgments of (ab)normality and salience relative to our inquiry. Attributions of explanatory significance are also shaped by judgments of importance and evaluation—including, according to recent empirical evidence, normative evaluation.<sup>25</sup> If my office mate expresses frustration at my breaking of the glass, I might attempt to defend myself by claiming that the glass was unusually fragile—had it been more robust, it would not have broken. One response is to deny this fragility, rejecting the counterfactual. However, my office mate might instead insist that I was blameworthily careless, and *that* is the relevant explanatory factor.

22 I am here contrasting different ways one may misunderstand the breaking of glass, whereas a lack of understanding would instead occur if one were simply wholly mystified as to why it broke and can produce no explanations whatsoever.

23 McGrath, “Causation by Omission.”

24 Camp, “Perspectival Complacency, Perversion, and Amelioration,” 47.

25 Icard, Kominsky, and Knobe find that when there are multiple causal factors contributing to a negative outcome, participants attribute greater causal significance to those that are deemed to violate norms (“Normality and Actual Causal Strength”).

Jessie Munton has recently argued that a salience structure may be distinctively epistemically evaluated according to its relationship to inquiry: a salience structure (and therefore, I take it, the interpretive structure it partially constitutes) is epistemically evaluated according to whether it centrally attends to the information that is most relevant to our epistemic tasks.<sup>26</sup> The primary epistemic task here is taken to be inquiry, since successful inquiry can improve our epistemic position. The interpretive structure plays a central epistemic role in shaping which lines of inquiry we are disposed to pursue, what explanations we accept, the inferences we draw, etc. The inquisitive dimension of the structure, in particular, guides 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 (e.g., relations of explanation and dependence) and also, dynamically, whether it is conducive to further epistemic goals (e.g., whether it makes salient fruitful lines of inquiry or whether the inferences dispose one to truth-preserving, etc.).

The aptness of an interpretive structure is, very roughly, about whether the structure gets the world right, and I take this to be an epistemic evaluation. On this, two clarificatory remarks ought to be made. First, to what extent do moral flaws in an interpretive structure render it inapt? For instance, Ella Kate Whiteley writes of “surplus” attention on certain identity properties, whereby this salience is relative to some moral standard.<sup>27</sup> On one reading, this moral evaluation is somewhat consequentialist: Is the interpretive structure conducive to realizing moral value? This question, while important, does not feature in my operative notion of aptness. However, the evaluation of interpretive structures cannot exclude value judgments (e.g., moral inferences, judgments of importance) when interpretive structures themselves encode these. Asking in such cases if the structure “gets the world right” requires an evaluation of the normative dimensions, but this is limited to those the structure itself encodes.<sup>28</sup> Second, it is contested whether the norms of inquiry are themselves epistemic.<sup>29</sup> One observation is that even if inquisitive norms are not wholly epistemic, it is clear that our inquisitive *activities* may be subject to epistemic evaluation. Consider someone closing inquiry because they take a question to be decisively

26 Munton, *Priority and Prejudice*, 67.

27 Whiteley, “A Woman First and a Philosopher Second.”

28 I adopt the assumption that evaluative judgments of blame, justice, importance, etc. may be appraised as mistaken or correct, whatever the correct view of the metaethical underpinnings of such facts is.

29 See Flores and Woodward, “Epistemic Norms on Evidence-Gathering”; and Thorstad, “There Are No Epistemic Norms of Inquiry.”

settled and adopting an unjustified belief in doing so. More tentatively, this dispute turns in part on what the ultimate bearer(s) of epistemic value are taken to be: I am inclined against views on which epistemic normativity is parochially confined to the alethic or justificatory status of doxastic states.

I do not take this to be a full account of the aptness of an interpretive structure: this is a structural representation akin to a map or scientific model and, as such, has correspondingly complex conditions for representational success (which, likewise, combine standards of accuracy with pragmatic considerations). Nonetheless, we generally take it that such representations can get things right to a greater or lesser degree; I take the same to be true of interpretive structures in the rough ways gestured at above. That is, I take successful representation to not simply be a matter of maximally factive content, and I take misrepresentation to be possible.<sup>30</sup>

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, if one substantially *misunderstands*, 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. INTERPRETIVE FRAMES AND MISUNDERSTANDING

We have various ways of collectively exchanging and negotiating interpretive structures, such that we can coordinate on what matters and how. Shared frames guide how we interpretively structure information. In this section, I consider how distorting frames may produce misunderstanding. In order to do so, I here consider the relationship between our interpretive frames and the interpretive structures we are enabled to grasp.

Our interpretive resources may play two roles, which I roughly distinguish here. We may, in general, draw a distinction between what some representation represents and how that target is represented; doing so is essential if we are to talk about “misrepresentation.” This distinction between what is depicted and how it is depicted can be extended to distinguish two roles that our interpretive resources can play. First, our interpretive resources play a *taxonomic* role, picking out categories and drawing distinctions. Sally Haslanger terms these

30 See Camp, “Thinking with Maps”; and Elgin, “Is Understanding Factive?”

divisions in logical space their “informational content.”<sup>31</sup> Second, our interpretive resources “marshal and organize our capacities for attention, categorization, interpretation, memory, language, inference, affect, and the like.”<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

Interpretive frames, as used here, are a broad category that (nonexhaustively) includes metaphors, words, diagrams, scripts, and stereotypes.<sup>34</sup> These frames guide how information is interpretively structured by equipping us with a particular perspective and thereby enabling agents to grasp interpretive structures.<sup>35</sup> Stephen Grimm offers the example of an individual who knows the relative sizes of the earth and sun but comes to better grasp this relation when it is illustrated by an apple seed and basketball.<sup>36</sup> Frames equip us with attentional, inquisitive, evaluative, and inferential dispositions that shape how we interpretively structure information. Interpretive frames prominently include what we sometimes call *schemas* or *scripts*, which are malleable interpretive blueprints that guide how we interpret and incorporate information. We rely on frames like schemas to reduce cognitive load and render the world intelligible.<sup>37</sup> Social schemas guide how we expect others to act, both descriptively and normatively.

Some frames are specific and idiosyncratic. Whiteley has developed a compelling analysis of how the order of properties in sentence constructions can create a wrongful “attentional surplus.”<sup>38</sup> Other frames are more conventional and shared (e.g., social schemas and scripts, conventional metaphors). Shared frames are powerful tools for wider social coordination of expectations and behavior. Shared frames include what Hilde Lindemann terms “master narratives,” a kind of stock scenario that is common knowledge.<sup>39</sup> 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

31 Haslanger, “How Not to Change the Subject?” and “Going On, Not in the Same Way.”

32 Haslanger, “Going On, Not in the Same Way,” 238.

33 Yablo, *Aboutness*.

34 Bermúdez, *Frame It Again*.

35 Camp, “Metaphor and That Certain ‘*Je ne sais quoi*,’” “Perspectives and Frames in Pursuit of Ultimate Understanding,” and “Imaginative Frames for Scientific Inquiry.”

36 Grimm, “The Value of Understanding.”

37 Di Maggio, “Culture and Cognition”; Eickers, “Coordinating Behaviors”; Schank and Ableson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding*; and Sewell, “A Theory of Structure.”

38 Whiteley, “A Woman First and a Philosopher Second.”

39 Lindemann, “Holding One Another” and “Miscarriage and the Stories We Live By.”

to make sense of ourselves and other people.”<sup>40</sup> Shared frames are shared not merely in the sense of being widespread; rather, they are common knowledge. They form a central element of what is sometimes termed the “social imaginary”—“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.”<sup>41</sup>

As an example of a shared frame, take the widespread use of illness-as-warfare metaphors: “the war on cancer,” “the body is invaded,” “battling illness,” “medics on the front line.” Such metaphorical frames enable us to grasp particular interpretive structures.<sup>42</sup> 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. Such a metaphor operates as a kind of blueprint for how we interpretively structure information. The holistic, unified interpretive structures that illness-as-warfare metaphors enable us to grasp relate to illness, medicine, medical practitioners, and so on.

Frames are thus central to the 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 are better than others. Some may enable us to grasp inapt interpretive structures, thereby producing misunderstanding. The merit of a frame is often mixed, its value subject to the context in which it is deployed. For instance, the merits (and potential harms) of illness-as-warfare metaphors are contested.<sup>43</sup> Such metaphors may contribute to stigma surrounding the choice of palliative care over life-extending treatment, because the former is associated with “surrender” and failure to “fight.” However, in other contexts, illness-as-warfare metaphors may offer fruitful resources that enable patients to articulate their experiences. Moreover, Carolina Flores highlights that this evaluation ought to be attempted not for specific frames in abstract but rather relative to some specific domain: to borrow her example, the frame of “trauma” is an important one to include within our interpretive resources, yet its specific application to the settler colonial

40 Lindemann, “Miscarriage and the Stories We Live By,” 80.

41 Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 33. I take Medina’s “social imaginary” to be broadly equivalent to what has elsewhere been called the cultural as opposed to conversational “common ground” and “cultural technē.” See Langton, “Beyond Belief”; and Haslanger, “Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground,” “How Not to Change the Subject?” and “Going On, Not in the Same Way.”

42 Camp, “Metaphor and That Certain ‘*Je ne sais quoi*’”; and Fraser, “The Ethics of Metaphor.”

43 Byrne et al., “Patients’ Experience of Cancer”; and Granger, “Having Cancer Is Not a Fight or a Battle.”

experience of decolonization is distorting.<sup>44</sup> The “net value” of a given frame is thus complex. Some frames systematically lead us to grasp inapt interpretive structures, thus resulting in distortions that outweigh the merits of those frames.

Take the practice of using sexual scripts to frame the process of fertilization. Pervasive sexual scripts position men as the active parties in pursuit of sexual access, while women are largely passive, merely resisting or accepting this pursuit.<sup>45</sup> These gendered sexual scripts have been deployed to (mis)represent the process of fertilization in mammals. 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 fertilization—have persisted well after the idea that sperm enters the ovum by force has been empirically rejected.<sup>46</sup> The process of fertilization is an interaction between (at a minimum) the sperm, uterine tract, and ovum. The motility of sperms under only their own force is extremely limited; they do not “swim” to the fallopian tubes but are rather guided there. Furthermore, their journey crucially involves coordinated (rather than individualistic, competitive) movement.

Simplified abstractions are fruitful in science, so it is not a strong rejection of the “sexual pursuit” frame for fertilization that it fails to capture some features of the process or anthropomorphizes these gametes. However, the criticism is stronger: this frame has been widely imported because of preconceptions about gendered reproduction and perniciously distorts the events represented. In her work on the epistemic value of idealization and other fictions, Catherine Elgin proposes that for some idealization to be “true enough” is for its departure from truth to be *negligible*.<sup>47</sup> Crucially, this does not mean that the departure from truth is small, necessarily, as many valuable scientific idealizations are not even approximately true. Rather, it means that the departure *may be neglected* without derailing our inquiry. (Indeed, in many cases, it can aid our inquiry to idealize in various ways.)

The gendered, sexual framing of fertilization not only simplifies but *distorts* what it represents; this departure from truth is nonnegligible. To talk of a sperm, ovum, or uterus in terms of agency is already a departure from literal truth—but it may be a fruitful one; to speak of the agency of *only* the sperm, however, omits crucial features of the fertilization process. The activity of the ovum and uterine tract are explanatorily central even if the process is anthropomorphized; fertilization, or lack thereof, depends only partially on sperm activity (which is not

44 Flores, “Calling Trauma, Elite Capture, and Hermeneutical Injustice.”

45 Gavey, *Just Sex?*; and LaPlante, McCormick, and Brannigan, “Living the Sexual Script.”

46 Martin, “The Egg and the Sperm,” 490.

47 Elgin, *True Enough*.

best understood in competitive individualistic terms). To take the most important questions as relating to sperm activity reveals only part of the process and is a flawed approach to inquiring about the overall process of fertilization. The inquisitive structure produced by this frame is thus flawed. Moreover, these distortions are enmeshed within an interpretive structure in which sperm activity is cast as salient and important, while the role of the uterine tract and ovum are pushed into the background. The use of adversarial sexual scripts of gendered pursuit as a frame for scientific inquiry into fertilization is thus an example of a misinterpretive frame. This is not to say that the frame produces no advances in understanding, but on balance, it fails to serve the ends of our inquiry.<sup>48</sup> This is a case in which the problem is not (only) the lack of a fruitful frame but the use of a distorting one that produces an inapt interpretive structure.

One may question whether the issues with this frame are specifically epistemic, constituting misunderstanding, or whether it is instead the salient social and political sources and effects of this frame that are of concern.<sup>49</sup> While I take it that this frame does indeed have negative consequences (I return to the social consequences of misinterpretive frames in section 4), I do intend for the classification of misinterpretive here to be epistemic, as emphasized in the previous section. The frame results in an inapt interpretive structure, which directs attention away from relevant information and lines of inquiry—namely, the role of the ovum and uterine system in mammal reproduction. These are epistemic failings that lead us to misrepresent the world. Compare this with the discovery of symbiosis in lichen, leading to the coining of the concept.<sup>50</sup> The previous absence of the notion no doubt arose, at least in part, from Hobbesian social schemas in which zero-sum competition and conflict were the norm for nature. Yet it seems implausible to suppose that this conception of lichen was in any way load bearing for wider social dynamics—nor does recognition that Simon Schwendener's development of a theory of symbiosis constituted an advance in understanding of biology rely on a moral-political evaluation of the individualist social schema.

In summary, our shared interpretive frames can lead us to grasp interpretive structures and thereby produce understanding or misunderstanding. While the merit of a particular frame may be mixed and contextually determined, some are systematically distorting. Misinterpretive frames are those that are systematically distorting and produce misunderstanding.

48 Again, such evaluations are complex and contextual. The merits of a given frame have to be weighed against possible alternatives, and a somewhat distorting frame may be valuable if used among a plurality of alternative lenses.

49 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing for clarification on this point.

50 Spribille et al., "Evolutionary Biology of Lichen Symbioses."

## 3. CONCEALED EPISTEMIC INCOMPETENCE

I contend that attending to misinterpretive frames 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>51</sup>

3.1. *Hermeneutical Injustice*

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when our shared interpretive resources are inadequate. Specifically, on Miranda Fricker’s canonical characterization, hermeneutical injustice occurs when agents are unable to render socially significant experiences intelligible to themselves or others, due to “hermeneutical marginalization”—i.e., exclusion from the shared determination of interpretive resources.<sup>52</sup>

As an illustrative case of prototypical hermeneutical injustice, Fricker describes the case of Carmita Woods, as recounted in Susan Brownmiller’s memoir.<sup>53</sup> Woods was the target of repeated sexual advances and unwanted touching from her boss during a time 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 recognized reason for leaving her job. Fricker describes the original injustice as a “lacuna where the name of a distinctive experience should be.”<sup>54</sup> The problem, as described, was that there was some important target for which we lacked a label.

This characterization has come under sustained critique. First, a growing body of scholarship rejects the negative, “lacuna-centered” analysis.<sup>55</sup> In many cases, it is argued, the problem is not (only) that the *lack* of interpretive

51 It should be emphasized that what I propose here is an expansion of extant accounts to include the role of misunderstanding, not a challenge or alternative to previous accounts.

52 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

53 Brownmiller, *In Our Time*.

54 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 151.

55 Beeby, “A Critique of Hermeneutical Injustice”; Bell, “Just the Facts”; Dular, “One Too Many”; Falbo, “Hermeneutical Injustice”; Flores, “Calling Trauma, Elite Capture, and Hermeneutical Injustice”; Foster and Ichikawa, “Normative Inference Tickets”; Maitra, “New Words for Old Wrongs”; and Mason, “What Is Hermeneutical Injustice and Who Should We Blame?”

resources may *fail* to enable us to understand. Rather the problem may be the resources we *do* possess. Arianna Falbo terms the former case *negative hermeneutical injustice* and the latter *positive hermeneutical injustice*.<sup>56</sup> Second, to characterize the importance of terms like ‘sexual harassment’ as simply providing a previously missing label is to offer only a partial analysis. Important experiences might be not only named or unnamed; they may be misrepresented and *distorted*. Discussion of distortion appears in many critiques of the “missing name” characterization of hermeneutical injustice.<sup>57</sup> Examining how our interpretive resources guide the way we interpretively structure information offers insight into the way in which these resources may be distorting.

In the previous section, I distinguished between two roles that our interpretive resources may play: they may offer us categories with which to draw distinctions, serving a taxonomic role, and they may offer frames that structure interpretation. This may be extended to distinguish two ways in which we evaluate the adequacy of our interpretive resources. First, 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 that lacked a name; we needed to introduce a new distinction, carve out a new category in logical space. However, attending to the interpretive role of frames and noticing that our interpretive resources guide not only *what* we are able to think and talk about but *how* we are disposed to structurally interpret it broaden the scope of the “adequacy” of our resources. Even when we have names for the required categories, we may fail to understand if these names carry distorting frames.

Given the powerful interpretive role of frames, examining the adequacy of our interpretive resources must include examining the interpretive structures our shared frames scaffold. Understanding—and lack thereof—is 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 a consideration of others.<sup>58</sup> Such “Aha!” moments are characteristic of obtaining understanding.

The role of misinterpretive frames is apparent in Fricker’s original introduction of hermeneutical injustice.<sup>59</sup> She discusses historical homophobic

56 Falbo, “Hermeneutical Injustice.”

57 See Bell, “Just the Facts”; Falbo, “Hermeneutical Injustice”; Foster and Ichikawa, “Normative Inference Tickets”; Maitra, “New Words for Old Wrongs”; and Mason, “What Is Hermeneutical Injustice and Who Should We Blame?”

58 Brownmiller, *In Our Time*, 281.

59 This is not to say that *all* apparent cases of hermeneutical lacunae must turn out to be associated with distorting frames. One plausible example of a hermeneutic gap ameliorated by

conceptions of 'homosexual' as an example of hermeneutical injustice.<sup>60</sup> Here the problem is plainly not that we have the total lack of a name but rather that the extant resource is a distorting frame. In her discussion of Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*, she highlights various stereotypical schemas of 'the homosexual'—as sick, as a vampire—that render White's attraction to men initially inarticulable to him.<sup>61</sup> This is an example of hermeneutical injustice that is the product not of a missing name but rather of a distorting shared frame.

Attending to distorting interpretive frames is also crucial to fully capture the case of 'sexual harassment'. To simply describe Woods's experience as the result of a "missing name" omits a crucial dimension of the case. First, experiences like Woods's were not entirely unrecognized within society, but in the absence of 'sexual harassment', other terms were deployed. These include 'chasing around the desk' and 'flirting'.<sup>62</sup> 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 that they were used to describe.

To describe the problem as a "missing name" is insufficient in that it is both *negative* and *taxonomic*. Fricker acknowledges these contemporary terms, which are examples of what she characterizes as "ill-fitting meanings."<sup>63</sup> However, these are once again primarily analyzed negatively; in the *absence* of the required "missing name," marginalized agents "find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on to render them intelligible."<sup>64</sup> This description omits a central aspect of the problem with these terms. These resources lead to misunderstanding the phenomenon in ways that distort and justify it. In actuality, such resources do not merely fail to adequately illuminate the experience but *positively obstruct* understanding and perpetuate justifications of the behavior (e.g., as "just

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baptism is 'genderqueer'. See Dembroff, "Beyond Binary."

60 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 164–69.

61 White, *A Boy's Own Story*.

62 Beeby, "A Critique of Hermeneutical Injustice"; and Maitra, "New Words for Old Wrongs."

63 Fraser develops of an expanded inferentialist model of what it is for a concept to be ill-fitting that 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" ("The Ethics of Metaphor," 736). This gradable notion of fittingness can capture both the inadequacy of lacking the requisite inferences and encoding harmful inferences. However, this does not distinguish between the absence of accessible good inferences and the presence of harmful ones, which is my focus here.

64 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 148.

flirting").<sup>65</sup> These "ill-fitting" resources are thus *misinterpretive*. Rowan Bell characterizes such cases as *hermeneutical misfit*, which they define as occurring "when a thick concept's evaluative elements are 'ill-fitting'; it's not the case that we should respond to those features of the world in the way the concept's normative upshot suggests."<sup>66</sup> Bell's category of hermeneutical misfit falls within my notion of misinterpretive resources; however, it should be noted that my own analysis is broader than Bell's because it extends beyond "thick" normative concepts.

A trivializing frame like 'workplace flirting' disposes agents to misunderstandings on which the behavior is trivial, not a serious wrong. This places inappropriate explanatory centrality on the intentions of the perpetrator such that, provided the perpetrator conceptualizes it as harmless fun, the treatment should not be evaluated as a serious moral wrong. Correspondingly, the trivializing frames enable these agents to grasp interpretive structures according to which inferences that the victim ought to have a sense of humor about such treatment are salient and accessible. These misinterpretive frames thus distort the nature of sexual harassment by obstructing apt interpretation and enabling individuals to grasp interpretive structures that encode inappropriate explanatory relationships, evaluative judgments, and salience structures. While part of the problem of these terms may be taxonomic (e.g., in how they group unrelated behavior together), it is central to understanding their harm that as *frames*, they distort their targets. I therefore contend that misinterpretive frames are central to the perpetuation of hermeneutical injustice.

### 3.2. *Maintaining Ignorance*

One of the crucial ways misinterpretive frames are epistemically damaging, beyond mere lacunae, is that they produce *concealed epistemic incompetence*. This concealed incompetence, I contend, is a mechanism by which hermeneutical injustice persists. Fricker writes that "hermeneutical inequality is inevitably hard to detect."<sup>67</sup> Attending to the mistaken sense of clarity that misinterpretive frames confer offers insight into how hermeneutical injustice remains obscured.

Recall the dictionary analogy in which some terms lack any translated entry while others are mistranslated. In a cases of a mere lack, in which a term has no entry, the error should be more easily discernible were we to encounter the target. If we encounter the untranslated term (though, of course, any number

65 Bell, "Just the Facts"; Dular, "One Too Many"; Falbo, "Hermeneutical Injustice"; and Flores, "Calling Trauma, Elite Capture, and Hermeneutical Injustice."

66 Bell, "Just the Facts," 380.

67 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 152.

of factors might preclude this, such as a missing slang term when we engage only with formal speakers), then 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 results in *concealed incompetence*. We are incompetent to translate both the untranslated and mistranslated terms, but in the latter case, the incompetence is concealed.<sup>68</sup>

A crucial problem with misinterpretive frames—and misunderstanding more broadly—is that misunderstanding “feels like” understanding. Kristie Dotson terms this *inaccurate intelligibility*.<sup>69</sup> Often, when we fail to understand something, it is apparent to us that we cannot render it intelligible. In such a case, while the inability to render some target intelligible is an epistemic constraint, it is one that can—if the individual realizes there is something to be made intelligible at all—be apparent to the agent. C. Thi Nguyen terms the experience of clarity that goes with (apparent) understanding an *inquiry-terminating heuristic* and highlights that a false sense of clarity can thus be pernicious.<sup>70</sup> Camp further notes that “the open-ended, intuitive, flexible, holistic nature of perspectives means that they implement selection, preference, and extrapolation in ways that tend to induce distortion *and blind us to those distortions*. . . . We fail to notice the streams of perspective-dissonant information we neglect, even as we take the streams of perspective-conforming information we do collect to support our interpretive acuity.”<sup>71</sup>

As such, being armed with misinterpretive frames is akin to having a flawed dictionary: it means not only that an agent is epistemically incompetent with respect to certain subject matters but that this incompetence is likely to be concealed. The agent does not take themselves to have any unanswered questions. This concealed incompetence is likely to sustain further harms since it is not apparent that there is any inadequacy in their resources. Grasping an interpretive structure gives a sense of closure. We will not work to correct our understanding because it is not apparent that there is any such correction to perform.<sup>72</sup>

68 Of course, it would be too strong to claim that it is *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.

69 Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” 245.

70 Nguyen, “The Seductions of Clarity.” See also Trout, “Scientific Explanation and the Sense of Understanding.”

71 Camp, “Perspectival Complacency, Perversion, and Amelioration,” 38.

72 This should be distinguished from Bell’s notion of “descriptive masquerade” in which purportedly merely descriptive concepts smuggle in evaluative judgments. My own category

This is an example of how ignorance is positively maintained, which is central to both hermeneutical injustice and systems of oppression more widely.<sup>73</sup> Ignorance-first analyses offer a “positive” account of ignorance as something that is maintained and shapes social arrangements rather than as the mere absence of knowledge. Charles Mills, in his influential account of “white ignorance,” contrasts the mere absence of belief (or holding false beliefs) with more robust dispositions to remain ignorant.<sup>74</sup> This ignorance is recalcitrant and persistent; it “fights back.”<sup>75</sup> Following Dotson, I here use the term ‘pernicious ignorance’ to refer to harmful, systematic ignorance more broadly.<sup>76</sup>

There are various factors that may sustain ignorance about the (in)adequacy of our interpretive resources. One is the complete concealment of the target such that any unintelligibility has 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 misinterpretive frames is a way in which inadequacies in our interpretive resources may be concealed even when 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 misinterpretive frames can thus produce a kind of inertia. This is an ignorance-preserving mechanism. Access to a frame like ‘chasing round the desk’ or ‘workplace flirting’ offers a mistaken sense of understanding that renders the unintelligibility of sexual harassment more robust. 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.

#### 4. EPISTEMIC CONTAMINATION AND IDEOLOGY

I now turn to consider the second key harm of misinterpretive frames, *epistemic contamination*—that is, the way in which misinterpretive frames 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*

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includes, in addition to cases like Bell’s, misinterpretive resources that are genuinely descriptive but nonetheless distorting and those that wear their evaluative components on their sleeve. See Bell, “Just the Facts.”

73 See Beeby, “A Critique of Hermeneutical Injustice”; Mason, “Two Kinds of Unknowing”; Mills, “White Ignorance”; and Pohlhaus, “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice.”

74 Mills, “White Ignorance,” 17.

75 Mills, “White Ignorance,” 13.

76 Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing.”

misinterpretive frames, which contaminate evidence in ways that sustain unjust social practices.

#### 4.1. *Epistemic Contamination*

Let us return to the dictionary translation analogy. The flawed dictionary contains errors in its translations. We can describe this in *static* terms, so to speak, characterizing the error in terms of false belief (namely, that for each mistranslated term, the erroneous translation given is believed to be correct). 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, consider a student in a mathematics exam who makes a minor error early on in answering a problem. Left unchecked, this initial error will proliferate downstream through subsequent steps. Errors in these kinds of epistemic tools contaminate the accurate information that these tools are used to process. Misinterpretive frames are analogous tools and may likewise contaminate the information they structure. While various sorts of errors may “propagate” in this way, the characteristic function of frames is to guide how we interpret bodies of information; correspondingly, a characteristic consequence of distorting frames is this sort of contamination.

We interpret new information by utilizing what we already know. In the social and political domain, there is substantial evidence that we are disposed to engage in “motivated reasoning”: one interprets evidence in ways that support one’s prior self-conception and political affiliations.<sup>77</sup> While various factors might be at play, frames offer insight into one potential mechanism: how we incorporate new information is subject to how it is framed by what we already accept. This mechanism itself is plausibly inevitable. However, when we are disposed to deploy distorting frames, the consequences of this interpretive guide can be severe. When interpretive frames are distorting, 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 a toothpaste advertisement that professes its product to be “recommended by nine out of ten dentists.” This has been deemed misleading because while it is, in a thin technical sense, true (nine of ten consulted dentists may have endorsed use of the toothpaste), this figure is presented in a way that wrongly suggests that this evaluation is comparative—i.e., that nine out of ten

77 Kahan et al., “The Polarizing Impact of Science Literacy and Numeracy on Perceived Climate Change Risks”; McKenna, *Non-Ideal Epistemology*; and Levy, *Bad Beliefs*.

dentists would recommend this toothpaste over other products. In cases like these, descriptively true information is presented in a misleading way. Where a misinterpretive 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 with how it is interpreted. I term this *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 deployment of gendered sexual scripts to interpret mammal fertilization. The process of fertilization 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 points to the inadequacies of the asymmetric frame of fertilization as male pursuit, this is subsumed by the frame it challenges: "The new research, far from escaping the stereotypical representations of egg and sperm, simply *replicates* elements of textbook gender imagery in a different form."<sup>78</sup>

Emily Martin highlights that that frame absorbs the new insight that the ovum is not wholly passive by adopting a characterization of the egg as a *femme fatale*, a sinister, devouring figure that captures the sperm. Thus, the flawed frame is used not only to interpret the original body of evidence; subsequently, new information—including, crucially, information that ought to lead us to *reject* this asymmetric gendered script as a frame for fertilization—is also reconciled with and thus distorted by the flawed frame. The activity of the ovum clashes with a "sleeping beauty" script, but rather than lead to abandoning the gendered sexual script of fertilization-as-pursuit, this is recast simply as a subversion of those same expected sexual relations. 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 a 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 operating to neutralize would-be counterevidence.

Such frames are thus, to varying degrees, resistant to counterevidence. These distorting frames project their distortions in ways that *contaminate* would-be corrective evidence. I adopt the language of contamination to highlight that such frames are not simply recalcitrant such that counterevidence

78 Martin, "The Egg and the Sperm," 492 (emphasis added).

may be rebuffed; rather, such would-be counterevidence can worsen the misinterpretation since the frame is the tool by which it is interpreted. In this way, an otherwise corrective resource can become tainted. This process of epistemic contamination is especially pernicious when it misrepresents injustice as inevitable. In the final part of this article, I examine two kinds of distortion that misrepresent injustice in ways that operate to sustain it.

#### 4.2. Ideological Frames

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. Falbo highlights that while much of the scholarship on hermeneutical justice has focused centrally on the interpretive role of hermeneutical resources, hermeneutical resources “often serve crucial *productive* functions as well: they organize members of society and cast them into certain roles and relations with expected behaviours.”<sup>79</sup> As such, flawed frames not only have epistemic costs but can have negative social consequence too. In such cases, distorting frames that arise from unjust social arrangements may not only sustain the misinterpretations that these social arrangements give rise to; these misinterpretations may serve to perpetuate their originating unjust arrangements.

In light of their function in preserving unjust social practices, such frames may be described as *ideological* on a “functionalist” view of ideology.<sup>80</sup> Ideology, on this usage, describes (1) systems of social meaning (2) that are distorting and (3) that, in virtue of this distortion, serve to sustain (unjust) social practices.<sup>81</sup> Note that on this view, ideology is flawed both practically, in upholding injustice, and epistemically, via distortion. Tommie Shelby describes ideological beliefs as those that “misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations.”<sup>82</sup> Ideological misinterpretive frames are those that bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations via their distortions. In this section, I highlight two ways in which misinterpretive frames can operate to sustain injustice via misrepresentation of social reality: *naturalization* and *normalization*.

As an example of ideological misinterpretive frames, take Patricia Hill Collins’s notion of controlling images. Collins highlights a range of controlling

79 Falbo, “Hermeneutical Injustice,” 348.

80 Function and design talk here should be understood roughly etilogically; it describes the conditions for the persistence of frames, without presupposing any specific individual or collective intention. See Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories*.

81 Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements”; Jaeggi, “Rethinking Ideology”; Sankaran, “What’s New in the New Ideology Critique?”; and Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*.

82 Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 66.

images for Black women, such as “mammie” and “jezebel,” which act as “normative yardsticks.”<sup>83</sup> These racialized frames operate to “make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.”<sup>84</sup> After all, “if the social order really is natural or inevitable, then we cannot change it. If the social order is normal, however, we should not even try. . . . We don’t need to worry about changing things if they are the way they’re meant to be.”<sup>85</sup>

Ideology critique is thus, in part, an epistemic project. However, it is a complex one, as putatively ideological beliefs often contain some kernel of truth. The epistemic standing of demographic generalizations like “Women are more caring” is complex.<sup>86</sup> On one hand, many of these generalizations 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 generalizations take the form not of generics, which are recognized to have generally “slippery” truth conditions, but instead of precise and accurate statistical claims.<sup>87</sup> For example, take the claim “Boys are twice as likely as girls to be in the top 5 percent of mathematics performance,” which seems to support sexist prejudice but is also an accurate report of evidence.<sup>88</sup> One response is to cede that such claims have solid evidential support but insist that they are morally flawed and as such ought not be believed.<sup>89</sup> However, others reject that the evidential support for these generalizations alone establishes their epistemic value; they argue that such generalizations (even if descriptively accurate) are nonetheless *both* epistemically and morally flawed.<sup>90</sup> I follow this approach, which is independent of disputes regarding moral encroachment.<sup>91</sup> Munton identifies the epistemic flaw in believing demographic generalizations as the loss of *modal knowledge*. That

83 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

84 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 76–77.

85 Bell, “Just the Facts,” 1.

86 Haslanger, “Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground” and “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements.”

87 See Lemiere, “Philosophers Care About the Truth”; Leslie, “Generics and the Structure of the Mind” and “Generics”; and Sterken, “Leslie on Generics.”

88 Niederle and Vesterlund, “Explaining the Gender Gap in Math Test Scores.”

89 Basu, “Radical Moral Encroachment” and “The Wrongs of Racist Beliefs.”

90 Munton, “Beyond Accuracy” and “Lost in (Modal) Space”; and Puddifoot, “Dissolving the Epistemic/Ethical Dilemma over Implicit Bias.”

91 One could think that certain prejudicial beliefs have mundane epistemic flaws in addition to their epistemically relevant moral flaws or else reject moral encroachment and appeal only to the purely epistemic explanations.

is, one knows how things are but fails to know how they could be otherwise; one fails to recognize that this state of affairs is contingent. This is, crucially, an *epistemic* critique of such beliefs, not a merely ethical one. Munton describes the flaws of these generalizations as “a small part of a network of representations which provide additional implicit, sometimes explanatory, content.”<sup>92</sup> It is this wider network—i.e., the overall interpretive structure within which the belief is incorporated—that determines its epistemic standing.

Misinterpretive frames such as Collins’s controlling images can enable agents to grasp inapt interpretive structures that encode flawed salience structures, guide us to ask the wrong questions, and make available inappropriate explanatory and evaluative judgments. Take the frame ‘welfare queen’. This operates as a frame that shapes how information is incorporated into an agent’s interpretive structure. The “welfare queen” image operates to frame the Black women to whom it is applied, producing interpretive structures in which their poverty is viewed as blameworthy and they are viewed negatively as entitled and untrustworthy. Descriptively, the frame imposes a perspective from which certain Black women’s need for state assistance (in addition to potentially not being genuine) is explained by individual laziness and entitlement, which is itself explanatorily tied to their race.

Now consider an agent who encounters evidence that Black women are disproportionately in receipt of welfare. An agent who is disposed to see racial inequality as symptomatic of structural injustice is likely to interpret this fact very differently than an agent who is prone to deploying the welfare queen frame. On the latter, this evidence can be easily assimilated into the frame, entrenching the perception that the supposedly individual failings that lead to poverty are themselves tied to race. These frames *clash*, to borrow Falbo’s terminology; whether or not they produce interpretations that are strictly factually contradictory, deploying one preempts deploying the other.<sup>93</sup> While evidence of racial disparity may be of important probative value within a racial justice frame, it is contaminated by the welfare queen frame, which incorporates it into an interpretive structure that is both descriptively and evaluatively distorted, leading this information to be misinterpreted.

Recognizing that the flaw in such beliefs is the interpretive structure into which they are embedded points to the important ideological function of misinterpretive frames. The resulting interpretive structures are inapt: they constitute misunderstanding because they “get the world wrong” in the ways set out above in section 1—and this epistemic flaw is *productive* in Falbo’s sense.

92 Munton, “Beyond Accuracy,” 233.

93 Falbo, “Hermeneutical Injustice.”

This interpretive distortion contributes to making the world persist in certain ways. I here consider the way in which naturalizing and normalizing frames contaminate our information about the world.

#### 4.3. *Naturalization and Normalization*

To naturalize some category, as used here, is to treat it as inductively and explanatorily powerful.<sup>94</sup> When evidence of demographic differences that are the product of contingent social structures is interpreted with a naturalizing frame, it is misunderstood. Even if the agent gains a belief that is evidentially supported in isolation, this belief produces (or perpetuates) misunderstanding.

Consider the belief that QWERTY keyboards are more efficient.<sup>95</sup> An agent who holds this belief has evidence that in all observed cases, individuals who attempt to use keyboards with a different layout are less efficient. They may predict that individuals in general type more quickly using QWERTY keyboards. Given the dominance of this layout, this may not be an inappropriate generalization in actual cases. However, we may find a different story if we consider how this agent projects this generalization to counterfactual scenarios. The efficiency of this layout is a historical artifact arising from its widespread use; that is, it is a contingent social fact. Suppose the agent thinks that the QWERTY layout is more efficient due to facts about the physiology of hands; that is, they naturalize this fact. The “modal profile” of this claim is then flawed.<sup>96</sup> The agent will predict that the efficiency of QWERTY keyboards applies, all other things equal, to scenarios in which the relevantly explanatory social history does not obtain. As Munton argues, this is, in part, an error of projectability—i.e., of generalizing from observed to unobserved cases. These unobserved cases may be actual or counterfactual.<sup>97</sup>

The efficiency of QWERTY keyboards is, in this way, akin to certain kinds of flawed demographic generalizations; a social fact is misunderstood when its contingency is unrecognized. The way in which, for instance, gendered differences in care labor depend on socialization is not grasped if naturalized. Gendered differences are instead seen to be deeply explanatory in themselves, to the neglect of more central factors. This fact is embedded in an inapt interpretive structure that gets relationships of explanation and dependence—and the corresponding counterfactual predictions—wrong. Misinterpretive frames that naturalize social arrangements, on which supposedly natural facts are

94 This includes “essentializing” social groups but need not be so ontologically demanding.

95 Haslanger, “Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground.”

96 Munton, “Lost in (Modal) Space.”

97 Munton, “Beyond Accuracy”; and Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*.

represented as salient and explanatorily central, thus obscure the contingency of (unjust) social arrangements in ways that sustain them.

Naturalization works in tandem with normalization. By ‘normal’ here, I mean what is taken for granted within a given context; what is normal is taken to not require explanation.<sup>98</sup> This is to be differentiated from other common uses of ‘normal’. First, something may be *statistically* normal, occurring in the majority of cases. Second, something can be normal in a *prescriptive* sense; in this sense, to describe something as normal is to categorize 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.<sup>99</sup> I here use ‘normality’ in a third sense, as describing what is default or does not require explanation. This is not the same as statistical normality because there are unlikely occurrences that nonetheless require no special explanation (such as winning the lottery), but neither is it a prescriptive normality.

As such, when I write about frames that “normalize” some state of affairs, this is distinct from normalization in the sense of something being within a set of social norms, as it is sometimes used. For instance, sexual violence, especially sexual violence that resembles the “blitz” script—that is, is perpetrated by a stranger outside the home—is not normalized in the sense of being conventional or overtly socially endorsed.<sup>100</sup> However, victim-blaming narratives, which entreat women to avoid the environments where such violence is expected to take place, do normalize this violence in the sense of taking it for granted. If the only response to this kind of sexual violence discussed is for potential victims’ behavior to change, then the perpetrators’ behavior is taken for granted. Important alternatives are pushed into the background, and unnecessary harm is cast as an inevitability.

Naturalizing and normalizing frames operate ideologically when they obscure the contingency of social practices, thereby perpetuating them. Suppose two mathematics students see a full ranking of their cohorts’ marks and see that the top performers are mostly men. Suppose these differences are the result of

98 Martin Smith, for example, takes normality to require less explanation; something is normal inversely to the degree to which it requires explanation. A given piece of evidence provides *normic support* for some claim to the degree that the evidence being misleading would require explanation. See Smith, *Between Probability and Certainty* and “More on Normic Support and the Criminal Standard of Proof.” For further discussion of the epistemology of normality, see Di Bello, “Proof Paradoxes and Normic Support”; and Littlejohn and Dutant, “Justification, Knowledge, and Normality.”

99 See Haslanger, “Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground.”

100 Littleton and Dodd, “Violent Attacks and Damaged Victims.”

instructors treating male and female students differently due to the instructors' own naturalized views of women's intellectual capabilities. One of the students is aware that female students tend to receive less support and encouragement from their instructors and to express less confidence in their own abilities. The other student has a strong disposition to deploy a frame that naturalizes and normalizes gender differences: they are disposed to see men and women as having relevant deep differences that bear significant explanatory weight, viewing men to be much more disposed to abstract mathematical reasoning. In this case, both students form an evidentially justified belief that men outperform women in the top percentile of the course.<sup>101</sup> Yet their *interpretation* of this information differs. The student who naturalizes gender differences interprets this difference in performance as inevitable, failing to notice the differences in instruction and socialization that produce it. If gender differences are naturalized, then such disparities are normal, and they require no particular explanation beyond the gender difference itself: women perform differently in mathematics *because they are women*. This is, *ex hypothesi*, an inapt interpretation. The student is disposed to make inaccurate counterfactual predictions and identifies erroneous relationships of dependence and explanation: they misunderstand.

If one interprets women's weaker performance as reflecting natural differences, then there is no reason (and perhaps no possibility) of intervening. In such a case, this misinterpretation of women's weaker performances serves to perpetuate the treatment that produces that observation. Turning back to the framing of some Black women as "welfare queens," Bell writes, "the Welfare Queen's purportedly indolent, freeloading nature makes high poverty rates among Black women seem appropriate and deserved, which in turn is used to justify cuts to the social programs which might ameliorate that poverty."<sup>102</sup> This is an epistemic failing in addition to an ethical one. This frame leads to an interpretive structure in which correlations between race and poverty are *normal*—they require no further explanation beyond racial difference itself; and they are *natural*—the interpretive structure encodes counterfactual predictions that attempts to ameliorate these inequalities would be futile because they arise from non-socially contingent individual failings.

The ways in which misinterpretive frames may distort reality are thus central to analyzing their role in injustice. When these misinterpretive resource naturalize and normalize injustice and thereby lead agents to interpret contingent social arrangements as inevitable, they perpetuate the injustice they obscure.

<sup>101</sup> Begby, *Prejudice*.

<sup>102</sup> Bell, "Just the Facts," 376.

Ideological misinterpretive frames thereby contaminate evidence of injustice in ways that sustain it.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I have analyzed how certain 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*. One misunderstands when one grasps a flawed way of organizing information, getting wrong relationships of explanation and dependence, paying attention to irrelevant factors while neglecting central ones, and so on. I highlighted the way in which misinterpretive frames (1) conceal epistemic incompetence and (2) contaminate other epistemic resources. These two harms lead to negative consequences in the epistemic domain and beyond.

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 socially significant experiences of marginalized agents may be maintained. When we have apparent understanding of some target, it obscures our failure to successfully understand. I have argued that these misinterpretive frames may sustain pernicious epistemic harms, which may uphold unjust social practices. Misinterpretive frames may epistemically contaminate our other resources by producing distorted interpretations of accurate information. In such cases, these distortions prove robust, as would-be counterevidence is distorted by the frames it ought to challenge. Furthermore, these misinterpretive frames serve a powerful ideological function when their distortions sustain unjust social practices. Ideological frames may naturalize and normalize oppression by transforming evidence of socially contingent injustice into a rationale for that very unjust arrangement. Doing so not only makes this misunderstanding resilient in the face of (would-be) counterevidence but is also central to sustaining unjust social practices.<sup>103</sup>

Cardiff University  
wilson15@cardiff.ac.uk

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