

Narrativas performativas del trauma: recuerdos imperfectos y daños epistémicos

Performative Trauma Narratives: Imperfect Memories and Epistemic Harms

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Resumen

En este artículo, sugiero que las personas que sufren traumas a menudo se ven obligadas a reproducirlos verbalmente debido a una potencial ganancia material. Después de señalar las características clave de lo que defino como 'narrativas de trauma performativas', argumento que los entornos en los que se cuentan estas narrativas imponen cargas epistémicas indebidas a las víctimas y no tienen en cuenta la comprensión diferencial de los oyentes y las dificultades para transmitir con precisión e integridad las características descriptivas y normativas. Sostengo que esto resulta en dos formas específicas de injusticia epistémica: 'injusticia testimonial estructuralmente precaria' e 'injusticia hermenéutica binaria'. A continuación, sugiero que estas cargas epistémicas impiden la curación del trauma al provocar que las víctimas se disocien normativamente de su experiencia traumática y que no integren adecuadamente sus recuerdos en su concepción de sí mismas.

Palabras clave: injusticia epistémica, recuento, violencia epistémica, veracidad, testimonio.

Abstract

In this paper, I suggest that individuals who suffer trauma are often forced to reproduce that for material gain. After noting the key features of what I define as 'performing trauma narratives', I argue that the environments in which these narratives are told place undue epistemic



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burdens on the victims and fail to account for the differential understanding of listeners and the difficulties in conveying the descriptive and normative features with accuracy and integrity. I argue that this results in two specific forms of epistemic injustice: 'structurally precarious testimonial injustice' and 'binary hermeneutical injustice'. I go on to suggest that these epistemic burdens prevent the healing from the traumatic experience in virtue of causing victims to normatively dissociate from their traumatic experience causing victims to not appropriately integrate their memories into their conception of self.

Keywords: epistemic injustice, retelling, epistemic violence, truthfulness, testimony.

1. Introduction

In April of 2021, an investigative sub-committee for the Rhodes' Trust recommended that Mackenzie Fierceton's scholarship be rescinded. The Rhodes' Trust is known for its prestigious scholarship opportunities. One of their most well-known scholarships awards American college students the opportunity to do a funded master's degree at Oxford University in England. The process for selection is rigorous, requiring at least seven recommendation letters and several interviews. Out of thousands of applications, only thirty-two college students receive the prestigious award (The selection criteria - Rhodes Trust. (n.d.)). Needless to say, winning a Rhodes' Scholarship is rare, but losing one is even rarer. It is very unusual that the Rhodes' Trust would establish a special sub-committee to investigate the application of one student, yet the Trust believed that it had a valid reason to be concerned. After she was announced as one of the scholarship winners in November of 2022, the University of Pennsylvania, which Fierceton attended, received an anonymous tip that her application was misleading. The tipster claimed that, despite Fierceton claiming to grow up in foster care, she in fact grew up in an upper-middle-class household and attended a prestigious private school. On the basis of these claims, Rhodes' investigated Fierceton's application to several other programs that she had applied to since leaving secondary school along with their own. They found that she had willfully misrepresented herself on a number of documents and hence rescinded her scholarship (Aviv, 2022).

At first glance, Fierceton's case seems like that tale of a spoiled rich girl who found her hand caught in the cookie jar. This is likely why the story garnered international attention when it first came to light. However, the details of the situation are more complex. Despite difficulties, there are a number of facts that all parties in this dispute agree upon. Fierceton was removed from her mother's care at the age of seventeen due to an incident that left her hospitalized for several weeks. Afterward, she was placed in foster care for a year until she



requested to leave the system around the time she turned eighteen.¹ Once she entered college, she did not speak to her mother nor receive any financial support from her. However, other details remain more in dispute. Fierceton claims her mother attacked her which resulted in her hospitalization. Her mother claims that Fierceton fell down the stairs and went to the hospital as a result of this accident. Fierceton claims that she was forced to leave the foster system early due to a lack of resources and the greater needs of other children. Her foster agency claims that Fierceton wanted to leave the system early so that she would be eligible for more scholarships. Fierceton claimed in her applications to colleges, summer programs, and eventually to Rhodes to be a student with a great financial need. The general public questions the extent to which this is true (Aviv, 2022).

Furthermore, the dispute itself is riddled with semantic problems. In many of her applications, Fierceton identified herself as a first-generation college student. While Fierceton's mother did attend college, in a legal sense, Fierceton was no longer her mother's daughter when she began applying to college. Likewise, although she grew up financially secure, she was not after her eighteenth birthday. Terms like 'low-income' and 'first-generation college student' can vary a great deal between opportunities and institutions. For instance, several Ivy League universities consider any student whose parent has never attended an Ivy League university to be a first-generation college student (Bartlett, 2022). Likewise, some colleges might view someone who came from a family with an income level two hundred percent above the poverty line to be low-income while others would not. Most of these universities would also likely not have a clear definition that could apply to Fierceton's situation. As a result, throughout her academic career, her case remained difficult to categorize. One can argue that Fierceton often chose to explain her situation in a manner that was overly charitable to herself. However, one can also argue that Fierceton had no one else to advocate for her and that her complex situation did not properly fit into the boxes on most application forms.

In light of this information, the Rhodes' Trust's decision to revoke Fierceton's scholarship has remained a controversial one. While the Rhodes' subcommittee was able to find several instances where Fierceton misrepresented herself, many have pointed out that it is unlikely that Fierceton's applications contained an abnormal number of exaggerations when compared to most other college applications (Bartlett, 2022). However, the goal of this paper is not to analyze whether Fierceton's scholarship should have been revoked. Rather, I wish to use the Fierceton case to explore the epistemic difficulties in conveying trauma for the pur-

¹ Although the age of legal adulthood in the United States is eighteen, foster care systems in many states allow young adults to remain in the system until their early twenties so they can get additional resources.

pose of securing greater opportunity. As I believe the case highlights, individuals with traumatic experiences are often expected to reproduce their experiences in order to justify securing benefits. For instance, in a circumstance where a young adult had to leave their family due to trauma, they may require additional resources to thrive. In some cases, acquiring these additional resources will require them to relate their trauma to some authority or group with the power to help them. An individual's motivation for explaining their trauma in these cases would likely be more related to securing an external reward rather than an attempt at internal healing. While using traumatic testimony to obtain certain opportunities is often an unfortunate necessity, it often comes with the expectation by governing bodies that such testimony be more truthful than can be expected given the institutional setting.² I wish to argue that a standard of truthfulness regarding traumatic events is too high in most colloquial settings and I will suggest that the truthfulness involving complex trauma may be impossible in some cases. To be clear, my analysis of performative trauma narratives does not suggest that it is morally permissible for an individual to make up a fictitious account of trauma for the purpose of receiving an award nor does it suggest that individuals who give traumatic testimony should not attempt to be as truthful as possible. It does suggest that the epistemic burden placed on individuals who have undergone traumatic experiences is unnecessarily high and suggests that opportunities that require trauma reproduction fail to give individuals the resources to reproduce it both safely and accurately. As a result, these sites of trauma reproduction often further degrade the memories of individuals who have had a traumatic experience. As there are many different accounts of trauma, this analysis wishes to be inconclusive of which experiences might constitute a traumatic narrative and applies to both short term and long term trauma. First, I will discuss the epistemology of testimony and how its mechanics for determining truth make traumatic truths particularly difficult to establish and highlight two specific types of epistemic injustice: 'structurally precarious testimonial injustice' and 'binary hermeneutical injustice'. Then, I will explore how these epistemic and linguistic demands can impact and transform the memory of victims. Finally, I will consider how institutions can make structural changes to better correct for the epistemic difficulties of these discussions.

2. The Epistemic Demands of Trauma

² By truthfulness, I mean narratives that are descriptively and normatively accurate. The next section will discuss this idea in more detail.

Although the process of giving an account of one's trauma may be therapeutic, in many contexts, the function of traumatic language serves multiple and at times contradictory purposes. My analysis of trauma narratives will focus on 'performative trauma narratives' which I define as follows:

Performative trauma narrative: A narrative given by a victim of trauma that must convey the descriptive and normative weight of trauma for the purposes of securing opportunity or benefit from a system that might not otherwise provide it.³

The term 'performative' is not meant to convey that these utterances have no linguistic truth value as performative utterances are defined in Austin's work (Austin, 2014). Rather, the 'performative' aspect of these narratives comes from the fact that an individual must correctly perform their trauma in order for the meaning of their narrative to be conveyed, believed, and understood by their audience. Trauma itself is a thick concept that requires any testimony to effectively convey both descriptive and normative utterances in order for the impact of the trauma to be understood. As defined by Williams (2006), thick concepts are phrases such as 'bitch' which both convey a linguistic meaning and imply that normative weight. Although not exactly the same distinction, Sue Campell suggests that reconstructive memoirs have two separate but related conditions that make them truthful. The first is accuracy which Campell notes is distinct from level of detail as some details, such as the color of someone's shoes, might not be relevant to what the memory is meant to convey. The second condition is integrity which describes one's ability to convey, either to oneself or another, a memory's normative value or emotional weight. For instance, recounting going hunting for the first time may have a number of different normative values conveyed depending on telling and audience (Campell, 2014).

In the case of trauma, a testifier must accurately convey both the descriptive events with accuracy and normative badness of trauma with integrity. While in some cases the badness of linguistic sentences such as 'I was mugged' may appear obvious to their audiences, a lot of the time the normative weight of prolonged trauma is not immediately understood by the audience. For instance, workplace sexual harassment was not recognized as bad until recently (Fricker, 2007, pp. 147–175). As a result, in order for the normative weight of trauma to be believed, victims of trauma must not only relay the descriptive facts of trauma but effectively convey the normative weight of trauma. As a result, for the victim, the success of a good performative trauma narrative has two related but sometimes competing conditions. The audience must both have an accurate descriptive account of conditions and understand the

³ Some people prefer the word 'survivor' to 'victim'. Others do not. I have chosen to use the word victim for this paper as not all victims of trauma consider themselves 'survivors'.

trauma's normative weight in order for the trauma retelling to maintain both accuracy and integrity. These competing conditions can often be in tension with each other, and it is difficult to convey both effectively. We can see this even in non-traumatic cases where phrases such as 'my head is on fire' may effectively convey the normative weight of how one feels while not being entirely descriptively accurate. While individuals will likely feel the need to convey both descriptive accuracy and normative weight of their trauma in most circumstances, the need for 'performativity' defined as the need to keep an account as accurate as possible while adding rhetorical flourishing to convey normative weight is especially high in some institutional environments. Generally, in therapy, there is not an expectation to convey information accurately. Likewise, since courtrooms focus most on descriptive testimony, there may be less pressure on victims to convey the normative weight of actions as the law has already decided whether the act, if it occurred, is bad.⁴ However, when victims do things like apply to college, make a human resource report, or use their narrative to advocate for social change, then their trauma narrative likely has a high degree of performativity.

Performative trauma narratives are often needed so that individuals who have undergone trauma can secure equal treatment and navigate spaces in a manner that allows them and others to feel secure. Common examples of actors who use this narrative framing are teenagers who need to secure funding for college after leaving an abusive family, employees who need to make reports to their human resources office in order to get inappropriate actions to stop, and activists who are attempting to make structural changes to policy by using their personal experiences to advocate for a better world. While all three of these examples describe different circumstances, they share the four features that force a testifier to 'perform' their trauma, and I wish to argue lead to an epistemic injustice. First, in each case, the testifier's reason for speaking is not entirely therapeutic or for the purpose of self-healing. People in these situations want to gain something specific by sharing their stories. Second, each of these cases involves some sort of resource conflict for which the individual's trauma narrative is being used as a negotiation tool. The person who has undergone a traumatic experience wants something and they are using their narrative to help them get it. Whether an individual wants

⁴ I do not doubt many still feel obligated to convey the normative weight of their trauma in court. Courtrooms should attempt to separate the normative badness of the crime (which has already been decided by the law) from the descriptive events that took place. Likewise, courts should explicate with their questioning of victims in a manner that allows for less opaqueness than in the cases I will describe. However, I recognize that, in practice, normative appeals sometimes sway judges and lawyers often both intentionally and unintentionally ask opaque questions. Thus, some of the epistemic harm that occurs in other trauma performances likely occurs in courtrooms as well. However, court cases in particular present more demanding truth conditions as well as other additional epistemic barriers (see Lackey, 2023). I've chosen not to analyze those conditions or barriers here, but if the reader wishes, they may reflect on how my arguments might apply to courtroom testimony.

a college scholarship, a dangerous individual to no longer work with them, or systemic changes, they are asking for support that impacts other people who might not get a scholarship, be fired from their job, or be asked to do work changing a policy. Accounts might vary on when it is morally acceptable to grant such requests. While most people would agree that an employee who sexually harasses a co-worker should be fired, cases like college scholarships might be less clear-cut. However, regardless of their moral status, each speech act still serves to produce a certain result that will impact others. Third, due to the demands of the request, speakers in these environments are likely to feel a strain to prove themselves. Unlike in private therapy where their testimony would not normally be questioned, the testifier's circumstances are likely to place them under additional scrutiny given the purpose and impact of their testimony. Fourth, the audience in all of these cases expects the testifier to be recounting true events with as much accuracy as possible. This is not a circumstance like a comedy show or a dinner party where the audience might expect some embellishments. In these examples, the testifier is meant to relate primarily factual information.

The first three of these background conditions place pressure on individuals to 'perform' as they seek a certain resource and are often uncertain of their audience's ability to grasp the descriptive and normative weight of their account. The fourth background condition details that an audience expects these accounts to be largely accurate in their assessment of events, but are unclear on which elements of the account are important. As such, I believe that these background conditions for trauma narratives are distinct from the legal, social, and private settings explored by Goldwasser and Springle (2023). These conditions combined create a structural environment where victim's testimony can sometimes not be effective due to both the structural difficulties in conveying the descriptive and normative weight of trauma in these contexts as well as the underlying assumption in this context that the audiences environment is a neutral site in which such testimony can occur. As such, trauma victims in performative settings experience a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) that is distinct from speaker attitudes. While Goldwasser and Springle explore the injustice assumptions that an individual might use to discount a trauma narrative, this analysis focuses on the structural injustices that are in place when an individual feels that they must perform their trauma. In this section, I will look at the structural difficulties that these performative environments create and how those environments interact with the pressure that many victims feel to relate both the descriptive and normative elements of trauma.

While the environment conditions highlighted above may seem like a neutral site for trauma narratives to occur, such conditions ignore both the difficulties that even an assumed environment imposes as well as the structural and psychological difficulties with relaying testimony accurately. As Dotson notes, "the success of a speaker's attempt to communicate

ultimately depends upon audiences” (2012, p. 38). The extent to which a speaker is able to make an audience understand depends not only on their effectiveness as a speaker but also on the capacity and limitations of the audience. More obvious cases of this are circumstances where the audience simply lacks the ability to understand the claim of the speaker. For instance, it would be impossible to teach immigration law to three-year-old children.⁵ For more complex cases, Hornsby suggests that a specific kind of reciprocity is needed for linguistic exchanges to be successful between speaker and audiences. She notes:

I give the name “reciprocity” to the condition that provides for the particular way in which successful illocutionary acts can be performed. When there is reciprocity among people, they recognize one another’s speech as it is meant to be taken: An audience who participates reciprocally does not merely (1) understand the speaker’s words but also, in (2) taking the words as they are meant to be taken, satisfies a condition for the speaker’s having done the communicative thing she intended. (Hornsby, 1995)

Hence, the audience often has a powerful role in the success or failure of a speaker’s testimony. This often leaves the speaker in a vulnerable position. The success of a speaker’s testimony often depends on them having a willing audience that will interpret their claims somewhat charitably. There have been many cases where these types of audiences have been systematically denied to certain speakers, and those who are attempting to relay traumatic experiences often fall into this category. In the case of trauma narratives, one reason why victims feel the need to ‘perform’ their trauma rather than simply convey factual information is because, due to the structure of their environments, they cannot be certain that the person hearing their HR report or reading their college applications will have the appropriate normative framing to recognize the trauma that occurred, nor can they be certain of which details of their account will be needed to maintain accuracy. They cannot simply relate descriptive facts, they must perform and the performance may emphasize the normative over the descriptive or relate the wrong descriptive facts. Hence, the structural environment in which these trauma narratives occur does not always provide a space in which the testimony of a trauma victim can be fully understood.

This lack of certainty about the descriptive and normative assumptions about the testimony of the audience creates an environment for victims that is epistemically violent. Dotson

⁵ Judge Jack. H. Weil famously claimed that this was possible when defending the lack of legal representation for children brought to the United States illegally. Thus far, there has been no indication that he was correct in his assessment as there have been no cases of three-year-old children successfully representing themselves in court.

defines epistemic violence as “a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance” (2012, p. 38). She considers pernicious ignorance to be any ignorance that contributes to the practice of silencing in which that silencing would have harmful effects. Although Dotson typically considers epistemic violence to be a condition of listeners rather than environments, I would suggest that this account does not necessarily attribute this harm to audience culpability and could instead point to a harmful environment in which testimony occurs. For instance, a three-year-old child who is forced to represent themselves in court would face harmful effects if they do not pay attention to the judge’s explanation of immigration law. However, in such a case, the cause of the epistemic violence would be the laws that forced the three-year-old child to represent themselves in court rather than the three-year-old child’s ignorance about immigration law even if it was willful. Likewise, when individuals are describing their trauma, it is possible the audience receiving it is entirely sympathetic yet the system in which the testimony takes place may still generate epistemic confusion due to the fact that the trauma victim cannot be certain of that sympathy or ability to comprehend its normative weight. Dotson suggests that epistemic violence often occurs when a speaker realizes that their audience lacks epistemic competence due to their pernicious ignorance. This can certainly occur in cases of trauma. For instance, if an audience fails to understand the normative badness of catcalling, then a speaker who had a traumatic experience involving catcalling cannot effectively convey it. However, it can also occur when the environment in which testimony occurs suggests that the audience might merely only be ignorant.

Moreover, these environments in which victims feel pressure to perform not only create difficulties by creating audience uncertainty. These environments also create deeper linguistic difficulties by forcing individuals to place binary labels on a non-binary experience. It makes it more difficult for individuals to convey their trauma accurately. As many scholars of disability note, most of the understanding of an individual’s experience which is unlike our own is done through the use of paradigms or paradigm cases. For instance, Tom Shakespeare talks about the ‘common sense’ notion of disability through which disability is something that must only be accommodated at low costs (Shakespeare, 2006). Under this common-sense paradigm, the disabilities that require the least complex costs to accommodate often tend to be the most visible and well-understood. Hence, an otherwise healthy person in a wheelchair is presented as the paradigm of common-sense disability. As a result, an otherwise healthy person in a wheelchair is a lot more likely to be understood when describing their disability than someone who has brain damage due to a series of open-heart surgeries when they were young. Likewise, individuals who perform their trauma may be met with similar expectations that obfuscate their testimony. This can even be true in the circumstances of a paradigm case of that which a listener might consider as a traumatic experience. As Susan Brison notes, “we

are not taught to empathize with victims” (2002, p. 10). She describes her own experience after being assaulted:

Where facts appeared incontrovertible, denial takes the shape of attempts to explain the assault in ways that leave the observer's world unscathed. Even those who acknowledge the existence of violence attempt to protect themselves from the realization that the world in which it occurs is their own world and so they find it hard to identify with the victim. They cannot allow themselves to imagine the victim's life shattered or else their safety and control over their own lives might begin to crumble. (Brison, 2002, p. 9)

This self-protection often goes beyond the simple refusal to recognize that traumatic events happen. It is baked into the language we create surrounding traumatic narratives. While it is possible to describe traumatic events, as Brison notes, the emotional (and possibly normative) impact of those events is often lost on others. Further, the methods by which these traumatic narratives must be described often further obscures their meaning and places additional labor on the testifier. Most institutions simply were not built with trauma in mind as something that might need accommodation. Consider the act of taking a sick day off work after experiencing a traumatic event. While most would likely not consider an agent who opts to take a sick day in such circumstances to be doing something either unethical or dishonest, the term ‘sick day’ does not correctly describe the agent's reasons for needing time away from work. In this case, the agent would need to provide additional information in order for their need to take time to be fully understood whereas someone who had the flu would not need to provide information. Of course, it can be argued that in such circumstances employers should not require any additional specification on how their employees may use their sick days but advocating that would still likely require the use of trauma narratives in order to implement institutional change and those narratives would still be subject to the same limiting framework.

Moreover, due to the complexity of long-term trauma, easy explanations are not always available to testifiers when the language fails to fit their situation. Consider the case of Fierceton who identified herself as a first-generation college student. She had an abusive mother who no longer financially supported her. Hence, whether or not she classified as a first-generation college student might vary depending upon interpretation, yet as the lawsuit indicates, the responsibility falls on Fierceton to understand the terms of her condition and explain them to others. This assumes that the responsibility is on the speaker to ensure that their claims are true rather than ensuring that the speaker's environment is conducive towards the truth of such claims. While Fierceton's situation might seem like an extreme example, these linguistic difficulties can be common in an individual's attempt to convey traumatic

experiences. In Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*, she describes her life growing up in an abusive household that failed to allow her any formal education until she entered college. While her book became a New York Times bestseller, she has also been met with criticism about the accuracy of her portrayal of her childhood as lacking education. As some reviews point out, Westover seemed to learn to read at a typical age and was able to score well on the standardized testing needed for admittance into college in the United States. As one commenter describes it, "[Westover's] subsequent academic success proves that either her education at home was far more substantial than she admits or that grade school education is unnecessary" (Freire, 2019). Such a view places Westover in a double bind where she can either succeed in higher education with the caveat that her trauma must not have impacted her success or she can fail in which case she would likely lack the requisite knowledge to be able to testify about her experience. Neither option affords Westover the language needed to describe her experience. The term 'education' itself is so vague that it becomes nearly impossible to use regarding specific situations. The phrase 'I never had any formal education' could be taken to imply many different things. Yet, the need to constantly clarify the meaning also serves to detract from the purpose of conveying the information in the first place. Phrases such as 'I can read although I lack formal education' or 'Although I can read, I still lack formal education' serve to increase the statement's potential accuracy, but at the risk of getting the listener to misunderstand the meaning of the speech act and thereby the gravity of the trauma involved.

Many issues involving complex trauma are difficult to convey in such a manner. Oftentimes, abuse comes in the form of emotional manipulation and emotional insecurity which is not easily described to others (Rus & Gálbează, 2013; Onega & Ganteau, 2014). Consider Stephanie Land's account of calling the police on her boyfriend after his continual emotional abuse finally became physical:

After a year of abuse, threats, and screaming insults thrown at me, that question came with much relief. Most of Jamie's rage had been invisible. It didn't leave bruises or red marks. But this—this I could point to. I could ask someone to look at it. I could say, "He did this. He did this to us." And they could look at it, nod, and tell me, "I see that. I see that he did this to you." The police report the officer left was a validation that I wasn't crazy. I carried it in my purse for months like a certificate. (Land, 2019, pp. 24–25)

The complexities of abuse are neither easy to understand nor convey. Even a question as simple as 'were you abused?' can place a large amount of burden on a victim of abuse to be able to answer. Often, the testifier's environment will be opaque as to how it defines terms like 'abuse', either descriptively or normatively, and it will be up to the testifier to determine

the correct meaning in order to convey their trauma. For instance, in the case of someone trying to report harassment by a co-worker, the term ‘harassment’ is vague enough that the testifier may be uncertain about whether it is appropriate to use it to describe their experience. As a result, the testifier may be forced to describe a series of instances that took place over the course of years and allow HR to make a determination of whether or not such complex actions count as harassment.

Further, in the context of self-advocacy, the need to accurately describe the experience of trauma in a manner that conveys both the normative and descriptive facts can sometimes be linguistically impossible. When trauma victims are able, where they can self-advocate for their needs, they have generally already come to recognize that the badness of their trauma is located outside themselves. They can also recognize that, in order to get what they need, they need to convey the badness of what happened to them to others. In this case, in order for their speech to be effective, they need to make sure that the normative weight of their trauma is understood by others. This is more important for the testifier than ensuring that the audience understands the descriptive specifics of what occurred. For instance, in Fierceton’s case, in order to explain the adversity, she’s had to overcome, she needs her audience to understand the badness of years of abuse and living without familial support. The exact specifics of when she entered foster care are less important than conveying the normativity of her situation.

Of course, it can be argued that one should be both descriptively and normatively accurate whenever possible. However, oftentimes, it is not linguistically possible to convey both the descriptive facts and normative weight of trauma. Given that no one can properly convey every event in their life to another person even given enough time, the ability to synthesize facts in a way that makes their normativity clear is a major linguistic challenge. This is especially true if the badness of one’s circumstances are not something that is commonly thought of as bad. For instance, the sentence ‘my father never sent me to school’ might read as bad in an academic setting, but conveying its normative weight to a group of farmers might be more challenging. Hence, given the limited time frame in which most advocacy occurs, many individuals will choose to highlight aspects of their narrative that best convey its normative badness even at the risk of oversimplifying some factive details. For instance, if one is trying to convey the badness of not going to school to a group of farmers, they may spend more time establishing its normative weight rather than bringing up the fact that they actually attended school for three days over the course of twelve years.

Hence, the speakers of traumatic narratives are often forced to speak in environments that are not conducive to conveying the accuracy or integrity of their experience. In addition to any actual bad epistemic or ethical views held by individual audience members, individuals who perform their trauma must also face the structural uncertainty of not knowing their

audience which impacts their integrity and the linguistic difficulty of not having the appropriate terminology to convey the badness of their experience which impact their accuracy. This creates a unique barrier in terms of traumatic retellings. In Fricker's original framing of epistemic injustice, she draws a distinction between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (2007). Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's testimony is not given the proper credibility whereas hermeneutical injustice occurs when a speaker unfairly lacks the relevant linguistic or conceptual resources to convey their experiences to others or even have a just internal understanding of those experiences. The injustice that individuals with trauma face in performative environments is both testimonial and hermeneutical. When individual's perform their trauma, they experience testimonial injustice due to their uncertainty of their audience's ability to understand the descriptive facts and normative weight of their experience. As described, this experience of testimonial injustice is notably distinct from Fricker's initial conception of testimonial injustice. Fricker views testimonial injustice as something that occurs due to the attitudes of agents rather than from the perceived attitudes of agents in a given environment. As argued above, individuals performing trauma may be wronged even if the actual members of the audience are appropriately empathic due to the precariousness of their structural environment. While this type of testimonial wronging is a bit of a departure from Fricker's original framing, Elizabeth Anderson notes that testimonial injustice can be structural, such as on occasions where one's environment does not allow one to speak at all (Anderson, 2012). While structural precarity is not one of the forms of structural testimonial injustice that Anderson considers, I believe that this precarity can still be properly conceptualized as a form of testimonial injustice as it does not directly impact a testifiers conception of their trauma, as would be the case with hermetical injustice, but does directly and unjustly impact the success of their testimony.⁶ Since this type of epistemic injustice seems distinct from other types of epistemic injustice, I would coin a new term to describe it: 'structurally precarious testimonial injustice'. However, the difficulties that come from performing trauma are also hermeneutical. The environment in which this testimony occurs often provides binary categorizations that do not properly fit a trauma victim's lived experience. Moreover, in keeping with Fricker's conception, the impact of these unjust environments has the

⁶ Fricker (2007) notably does not think that all of Anderson's (2012) instances of structural testimonial injustice are properly classified as testimonial. Moreover, one could argue that the difficulty individuals have in performing trauma narratives is not testimonial injustice at all since testifiers do not always experience discrimination, rather simply discomfort and difficulty conveying information. However, Fricker does consider silencing to be a form of testimonial injustice despite no testimony being given in those cases. Hence, I do not view it as outside of the possibility that structural conditions effecting a speaker's ability to convey information to also be a form of testimonial injustice. It is, at the very least, a type of epistemic injustice. For my purposes, the exact type of epistemic injustice is likely a semantic concern.

potential to degrade one's self understanding of trauma events. This framing of hermeneutical injustice is also distinct from other forms of hermeneutical injustice as it does not require conceptions to be fully obscured from victims nor outside of linguistic understanding. In these cases, terms such as trauma or abuse are available to the victim. The epistemic injustice comes from the fact that victims remain uncertain of how to convey the extent to which the labels descriptively and normatively apply to them. I term this form of hermeneutical injustice as 'binary hermeneutical injustice' and suggest it occurs in circumstances where individuals are forced to apply binary labels on a non-binary experience.⁷

3. Trauma, Memory, and the Impacts of Retelling

Most modern accounts of trauma suggest that trauma, whether it occurs in a single instance or is prolonged over the course of decades, involves some type of disruption to self-identity (Beck et al., 1979; Brewin, 2006; Horowitz, 1997). While most of these accounts focus more on the psychological distance one might feel from their present self after a traumatic event, Brison (2002) suggests a more direct philosophical interpretation of this emotional experience. She notes that the memory of a traumatic experience is often so distinct that it feels as though it breaks the Lockean stream of conscious connection between the past and present selves.⁸ We can see this in how trauma memory has often been described. Some trauma victims experience traumatic memories as 'flashbacks' which can be defined as highly emotionally intense dissociative reliving's of past events (Brewin, 2015).⁹ In her work, Brison highlights Jonathan Shay's studies on combat trauma:

Traumatic memory is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory re-play of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments. These fragments may

⁷ The idea of binary hermeneutical injustice has been somewhat suggested in works that explore the epistemic injustice currently faced by people with intersexed gender identities (Ziemińska, 2022). However, these concepts tend to be more in-keeping with Fricker's original conception of hermeneutical injustice as the conception of intersex people are third options being obscured by a two-gender system. In cases of trauma, there is no third option being obscured. The people who experienced trauma truly did experience it. However, the binary labels which they're forced to place on their experience limits their understanding of its complexity. The problem is not a lack of additional options or obscured resources. It is a misunderstanding of trauma as something with a binary definition. A similar case might ask someone to label themselves as autistic when their behavior and skillset do not clearly fit into any clear autistic or non-autistic pattern.

⁸ It is unclear whether Brison views this loss of identity as a metaphysical claim in addition to a psychological one, but either reading works for my purpose.

⁹ Brewin notes flashbacks are still poorly understood and defined differently by different authors.

be inexplicable rage, terror, uncontrollable crying, or disconnected body states and sensations. (Shay, 1994, p. 172)

Hence, the experience of the traumatic event is sometimes considered unlike most memories that come either before or after it. One of the major psychological projects of a trauma victim is attempting to integrate their past and present selves into a coherent individual again. From a psychological perspective, some studies suggest that we fragment self-understanding between the actual self (the person whom we understand ourselves to be currently) and our idealized self (the person whom we aspire to be). While most people can recognize that these two versions of ourselves are not identical, most still find it alienating when there is a high degree of separation between our idea of who we are and our idea of whom we wish to become. Hence, we tend to not properly integrate memories that are not in keeping with our concept of our idealized self (Ono & Devilly, 2013). Thus, under some views, we are less likely to view traumatic experiences as part of our self-understanding. Some trauma studies suggest that at least some trauma victims do not view their traumatic experience as fragmented from their sense of self. However, these studies also note that, although some individuals do consider their trauma to be a part of their selfhood, this does not necessarily mean that their realization of trauma as part of their identity is necessarily healthy or normative integrated in the appropriate manner (Barlow et al., 2017; Berntsen et al., 2003; Jittayuthd, 2022). Berntsen et al. note that trauma memory integration is often dysfunctional and that “having a traumatic memory as a central component of the life-story and personal identity may simply be harmful to a person’s well-being. The traumatic memory may be too dominant in the organization of the life-story and in the attribution of meaning to old and new, non-traumatic experiences” (Berntsen et al., 2003, p. 690). In any case, all studies cited note the significance of traumatic memory to self-identity and view memory integration as important to healing.

As a result, regardless of the degree of fragmentation that may occur, the integration of trauma into one’s self-concept is important not only for recovery from a traumatic event but also for a trauma victim’s ability to endure in the world (Brown et al., 2016; Ehlers & Clarke, 2000). Brison considers trauma narratives to be essential to this self-conceptualization process because they allow victims to gain control and mastery over their trauma. Likewise, McDonald (2012) suggests that narrative is an important tool for adapting to trauma. Yet, when a traumatic narrative is told for the purpose of some material gain, it can complicate the retelling process. In therapeutic environments, the function of a traumatic narrative is to allow the victim to process and heal from the traumatic event. In other contexts, retelling a traumatic narrative serves to convey descriptive and normative information for the purposes of securing a benefit. While a testifier can recognize the difference between these two contexts, in the

second type of situation, they will often feel more tension between competing functions of language. This is because the need for their narrative to serve its healing function is rarely gone. Even in circumstances where testifiers are trying to secure opportunities, they will still require the audience to recognize the traumatic experience in order to maintain their conception of self in these circumstances. Brison describes it as follows:

It may be that the performative, healing aspect of trauma testimonies is distinct from their functioning as reports of historical fact. That is, the same utterance could be (at least) two kinds of speech act: one of bearing witness (describing events as they occurred) and one narrating or working through (and thus transforming) traumatic memories. The latter might have a performative aspect not shared by the former. One speech act might succeed, even if the other one does not. The description might succeed in describing the world as it was, even if the performative fails because of infelicitous condition. Or vice versa. (Brison, 2002, p. 72)

Yet, the environment in which this testimony occurs is not often conducive to these therapeutic intentions. In many cases, they give nothing back to the testifier as a means of legitimating their circumstance. College application essays are given nothing more than a confirmation or denial many months later. Human resource complaints are often pushed through Kafkaesque bureaucratic mazes. The changes an advocate sees are often slow and not directly related to their testimony. As a result, even if a testifier's speech serves its material function, the environment will not allow it to serve its therapeutic function. The systems in place often focus on how an experience should be labeled rather than acknowledging the complexity and emotions of the testifier. As a result, the testifier fails to get the appropriate feedback needed to integrate the traumatic event into their self-understanding.

The effect of this can go beyond emotional upheaval and impact the testifier's understanding of the traumatic event. The conceptualization of the traumatic event by others can impact how the testifier remembers the events. Consider Brison's analysis of her own rape and attempted murder:

I recall first experiencing my assault as an incomprehensible random event, surely a nightmare (a reversal of the epistemological crisis provoked by Descartes' question 'What if I'm dreaming?' Instead, I asked myself in desperation, 'What if I'm awake?'). When the sexual nature of the assault became apparent, I experienced it as a rape ('Oh, so *that's* what this is') and tried to recall all I'd heard about what one is supposed to do in such a situation. When, after I 'woke up', subsequent to being strangled into unconsciousness, and I realized that I was being treated as a corpse (my assailant was dragging me by my feet to a creek bed at the bottom of a steep ravine), I redescribed the event as 'a murder-in-progress'. Each new categorization of the assault affected

my perception of my assailant and my strategies of defense. And each one inflects how I remember and would now describe the ‘event: ‘I felt a sudden blow from behind, like being hit by a car’, ‘I was a victim of gender-motivated sexual violence’, ‘I survived a near-fatal murder attempt’. (Brison, 2002, pp. 31–32, emphasis original)

While Brison’s perception of events changed simply in virtue of her own mind recategorizing the event, these categorizations can also be influenced by labels ascribed to the event by others. As Tonkin observes, “Contents or evoked messages of memory are ineluctably social insofar they are acquired in the social world and can be coded in symbol systems which are culturally familiar” (1995, p. 112). The labels the world gives to victims of trauma often impact how they remember traumatic events. For instance, several scholars note instances of hermeneutical injustice where a victim cannot describe their experience because their society has yet to define terms such as ‘emotional abuse’ or ‘sexual harassment’ (Fricker, 2006; Goetze, 2018; Mason, 2021). Likewise, internal recognition of the badness of a memory can help a trauma victim normatively place the memory.

However, in most performative traumatic retellings, the labels are provided because otherwise such testimony would be impossible. The labels simply remain incomplete. Prolonged abuse in particular rarely offers such simple naming conventions. Abusers are not consistently awful at all times. Yet, to be able to talk about abuse in the limited context needed to inform for the purpose of gaining something, a testifier will often be encouraged to paint their testimony in this light. As a result, the testifiers’ own understanding of their trauma may begin to shift based on the labels that they have been encouraged to adopt. For instance, consider Fierceton’s description of herself as a ‘foster youth’. While Fierceton can easily remember the fact that she entered the foster system at the age of seventeen, she had to label herself ‘foster youth’ on her college applications in order to ensure that she could obtain money for college. She had to continue to explain this aspect of her identity in order to ensure she had essentials like summer housing, safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, and food. Thus, the ‘foster youth’ aspect of her identity remained highly salient in her identity as well as in her understanding of her trauma. She emphasized this time period in her life because it had more impact on her current situation than the sixteen years prior. In her attempt to integrate her trauma into her autobiographical memory, Fierceton may feel the need to emphasize this time period in her life in order to appropriately integrate it into her conception of self.

In cases like these, the exact impact that the retelling environment has on traumatic memory is complex. As Goldwasser and Springle note, trauma does not often alter one’s ability to remember trauma events, but reflection on those traumatic events and process of retelling can alter how the trauma experience is encoded (Goldwasser & Springle, 2023). The

act of retelling often changes normative framing through which people who have experienced trauma come to understand it. As Campbell notes, reconstructive memory and the act of telling allows us to gain new ways of conceptualizing the past (Campbell, 2014). For example, many victims of childhood abuse do not come to recognize their upbringing as abusive until much later in life (Ono & Devilly, 2013). Hence, while their testimony of childhood events might not change, they may come to label that experience as ‘abusive’. However, this normative labeling can lead to difficulties in accessing the realities of traumatic memory. Some accounts of traumatic memory suggest that it has these two related normative features:

1. A deep recognition of badness occurring
 2. Some type of confusion over where that badness is located
- (Brison, 2002; Stolorow, 2007).

These accounts comment on the need to engage in self-blame in order to make sense of the badness of a traumatic event. Stolorow (2007) describes it in cases of child abuse as follows:

One consequence of developmental trauma, relationally conceived, is that affect states take on enduring, crushing meanings. From recurring experiences of malattunement, the child acquires the unconscious conviction that unmet developmental yearnings and reactive painful feeling states are manifestations of a loathsome defect or of an inherent inner badness. A defensive self-ideal is often established, representing a self-image purified of the offending affect states that were perceived to be unwelcome or damaging to caregivers. (Stolorow, 2007, p. 4)

This inward focus of badness can last for years even if one is unable to locate any reason why they ‘deserved’ to suffer. Brison (2002) suggests that the project of traumatic narratives can help an individual relocate the badness of trauma from themselves onto the individual or event which made them suffer (see Niwa et al., 2022; Tissue et al., 2023). Hence, the labels which others give to their trauma encourages those whose suffer to recognize that the badness of their situation is external to them. Terms like ‘abuse’, ‘harassment’, ‘assault’ all allow victims of these acts to correctly place blame and coherently speak about their trauma.

Yet, these concepts remain thick and often normatively confused. While the previous section focused on the epistemic difficulties that this vagueness provided the testifier, here I wish to suggest that it also provides a deeper normative difficulty that impacts how traumatic memories affect self-conception. Campbell notes that integrity is not just a condition for truthful retellings. It is needed to appropriately normatively place the traumatic memory. She notes:

The integrity with which we remember has to do both with how we understand our own past in ways that contribute to self-knowledge, identity, and the shape of personal responsibilities and possibilities, and also with whether others can rely on our memories not only for what they do not know but also as a contribution to a social grasp of the significance of a shared past. (Campbell, 2014, p. 45)

Hence, the need for integrity is important to reflect blame away from the self and onto the appropriate sources.

Yet, integrity sometimes requires an audience. Trauma can be complex and the process of understanding its normativity is not linear. According to Brison:

In order to recover, a trauma victim needs to be able to establish greater control over traumatic memories and other intrusive symptoms of PTSD...Whether these achievements occur depends...on other people. By constructing and telling a narrative of the trauma endured, and with the help of understanding listeners, the victims begin not only to integrate the traumatic episode into a life with a before and an after, but also to gain control over the occurrences of intrusive memories. (Brison, 2002, p. 71)

Yet, the process by which others can phenomenologically process trauma is limited as they have not personally gone through the experience. While a trained mental health professional may be able to provide an environment that can effectively get a victim to understand the normativity of their situation, this is not the type or reason that a victim may choose to testify. Hence, the understanding that the audience will use to transform the speaker's story does not always map appropriately onto the trauma victim's lived experience. For example, Stolorow's concept of absolutism is useful for understanding how this occurs in the case of losing a loved one. He writes:

I began to think about the role such absolutisms unconsciously play in everyday life. When a person says to a friend, "I'll see you later" or a parent says to a child at bedtime, "I'll see you in the morning", these are statements, like delusions, whose validity is not open for discussion. Such absolutisms are the basis for a kind of naive realism and optimism that allow one to function in the world, experienced as stable and predictable. It is in the essence of emotional trauma that it shatters these absolutisms, a catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one's sense of being-in-the-world. Massive deconstruction of the absolutisms. (Stolorow, 2007, p. 16)

While on an intellectual level most adults can recognize that the promise of 'seeing someone later' is never guaranteed, the normative precarity of such claims is often not immediately recognized and understood unless one has had a traumatic experience that challenges their

world's absolutism. More simply, for someone who has not experienced a recent loss, they are less likely to believe that there is truly any danger that they will not 'see someone later'. As a result, when hearing about a traumatic event, the audience often fails to relate back to the speaker the true precarity of their situation in a manner that allows the speaker to recognize that their precarity was real and can be jointly understood. As a result, their fear appears to them as an irrational emotion associated with an irrational memory. While not all trauma involves losing a loved one, trauma can often involve experiences whose exact badness, such as the fear of losing someone else in life, cannot be easily communicated simply by telling an accurate story. It cannot be translated into a narrative form and maintain its normative weight. Brison describes trauma's absurdity:

My current view of trauma is that it introduces a 'surd'-a nonsensical entry-into the series of events in one's life, making it seem impossible to carry on with the series. This account of trauma draws on both senses of surd-the mathematical sense (from the Greek *alogos*) of an irrational number or quantity, not expressible by an ordinary fraction, but only by an infinite series, and the linguistic sense of a voiceless sound or a sound dampened or deadened by a mute. (Brison, 2002, p. 103)

Trauma remains a concept that illudes a narrative framing. Its descriptive elements are vague and amorous. Its normative elements depend on conceptions beyond 'badness' and may not be easily understood by those that did not experience trauma. Especially outside of therapeutic settings, the victim's environment does not provide them with the necessary understanding for them to self-reflect to the point where this more complex normativity may be realized. Hence, the speaker may have an entirely accurate perception of the events of their memory but prescribe an inaccurate normative assessment to these events. Terms like 'abuse' or 'harassment' often make phenomenologically salient their badness, but not the complexity of fear and confusion that a victim may be experiencing. Hence, even with an accurate description of a traumatic event, the normative weight may be unavailable for the speaker to describe even with the limited framing the audience can provide. Further, the descriptive details of these events may further obscure their normative weight. While Brison does not directly consider this possibility, she does note the following regarding her own trauma:

Still, there was something deadening about the requirement for the truth. The snapshots preserved the image of my physical wounds, with no effort on my part, but only I could retain the memory of how I experienced the assault. Our conventions of justice require that a witness be viewed as presenting something as close to a snapshot as possible-a detached, objective observer. Although some accounts of traumatic

memories associate the involuntariness of such memories with their (alleged) veridicality, in my case, it took some conscious effect to *will* the *true* story to stay straight in order to reproduce it. (Brison, 2002, p. 109)

While I will not speculate on Brison's personal reasons for feeling this way, it can be noted that the needs of descriptive understanding often come at the expense of normative understanding. This is not only true for the listener, but also the speaker.

In order to move away from conceptions of self-blame, a speaker has the important project of prescribing normative weight to the appropriate source of their trauma. This project and the descriptive project of merely explaining their trauma are often at odds with each other. For this reason, the descriptive sentence 'I entered foster care at the age of seventeen' and the normative weight of the sentence 'I grew up in foster care' exist without conflict in the mind of someone who entered the foster care system at the age of seventeen. While this person would not believe that she grew up in the foster system, she would need to use phrases like 'I grew up in foster care' to convey the normative weight of her trauma both to herself and to others. The idea behind such a linguistic shift is not for her to change what happened, but to attempt to use the only tools available to her to make sense of the fact there is a gap between her descriptive understanding of events and her normative understanding of events. While a phrase like 'I grew up in foster care' might be considered misleading, it does not directly contradict the phrase 'I entered foster care at the age of seventeen'. The former sentence likely does do a better job of generating an understanding of the normativity of one's trauma. Sentences like 'I was abused' or 'I was harassed' are often attempts to explain and understand the normative precarity of one's circumstances even if these accounts do not meet an institution's exact definitions of these words. To some extent, these more extreme phrases are needed in order for the victim's memory to begin making sense, and denial of them by an environment can impact the normativity of the memories of trauma victims.

4. Ethical Conclusions

Most victims of trauma will likely experience difficulty conveying their narrative with integrity and accuracy. Fierceton was likely aware that claiming that she 'grew up in foster care' would give people the wrong impression. Whether or not she or other trauma victims are morally wrong for misleading people in these circumstances likely depends on the circumstance. However, the expectation that trauma victims must always be accurate in their accounts would undermine the normative weight of claims both to themselves and others. Speaking about trauma is never an easy task even at the best of times and many victims are

often not believed. Hence, the exact extent one should be blamed for misattributing their trauma will vary, especially when considering the impact of their environment.

In the majority of cases, the victim's structural environment should be considered more blameworthy for causing the type of miscommunication due to the structurally precarious testimonial injustice and binary hermeneutical injustice often faced in these locations. Institutions often expect trauma victims to be able to testify quickly and accurately about their trauma in order to gain equal opportunity. As this paper argues, this is often both epistemically and phenomenologically difficult. These requirements are epistemically unjust in three ways. First, they force victims to convey knowledge to an audience that is often unfit to hear it. In addition to being a waste of their testimony, some suggest that this process disrespects individuals' dignity (Taylor, 2022). Second, these environments make it impossible for such testimony to occur even if the audience was fit to hear it. The focus on rigid definitions that cannot be applied to complex trauma and the lack of available normative descriptors make the task of conveying both the descriptive and ethical weight of trauma impossible. Third, the demands which these environments make can actively contribute to victims' misunderstanding of their own trauma. Without any better normative descriptors, victims will be forced to understand their memories through a normative lens that is descriptively inaccurate.

Hence, if we want trauma victims to be better testifiers, the focus should be primarily on resolving the injustice that these victims face. One solution might be to no longer make such testimony essential to securing equal opportunity. While this might be possible in some circumstances, it likely is not realistic for every situation. In the case of college admission, as long as colleges continue to be competitive opportunities, trauma victims would likely need to explain discrepancies in their applications. Likewise, if one wanted to advocate for change to these policies in the first place, they somewhat paradoxically would need to show through their narrative how trauma narratives harm trauma victims. Hence, a more realistic solution, at least in the short term, might be to recognize this injustice will impact the accuracy of most trauma narratives and not hold it against the victims. Importantly, this does not mean we should underestimate the normative weight or integrity of victim's accounts as this would likely exacerbate the problem. Instead, we should recognize that the descriptive details of these accounts are not as important as their normative weight. We should consider phrases like 'I grew up in foster care' charitably, taking in the normative precarity of the sentences with less focus on the specifics of how many years of foster care the claim might have entailed. Both in and outside of academic circles, language is rich in its thickness and opaque in its vagueness. Hence, when we have evidence that trauma occurred, our expectations for its

narrative frame must be met with the recognition that its normative truth is often far beyond what can be described.

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