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Liminal Identities and Epistemic Injustice: Introduction to the Special Issue

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ABSTRACT

The concept of social identity is central to research on epistemic injustice, but what it means to belong or not to belong to a marginalized identity is often left undertheorized. After offering an overview of the state of the art in social and feminist epistemology, in this introduction we argue that liminal and interstitial identities challenge received notions and push the conversation further. We then provide a brief synopsis of the articles included in this special issue.

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Introduction

The concept of social identity is central to research on epistemic injustice, which focuses on the harms and wrongs that knowers suffer from because of their belonging to marginalized groups (Fricker 2007). What it means to belong or not to belong to a marginalized identity is often not explicitly theorized, though. It is just taken for granted that it has to do with possessing or not (or being attributed or not) certain demographic characteristics related, for instance, to gender, race, ableness, class, and similar. The articles in this special issue investigate this topic by addressing in particular *liminal* identities: mixed, nonbinary, interstitial, complex, contested, unclear identities that invite rethinking our existing categories. With this area purposely left indeterminate, our intention is to stimulate more reflection on how non-belonging, denials of belonging, or multiple and complex ways of belonging can generate prejudice, silencing, violence, and oppression, coming from multiple directions. At the same time, liminal identities can perhaps show a particular kind of resilience against oppression, because they (at least potentially) can find resources and practices of resistance in the multiple spheres that constitute them. This suggests new ways of reclaiming and practicing epistemic (testimonial and hermeneutical) justice. Examples of liminal identities include children with parents of different races or ethnicities, who are not accepted as 'real' members in either social groups; second-generation immigrants who are not welcomed and do not feel to belong in either the country in which they were born or the country of origin of their families; intersex and trans individuals who challenge the binarism and/or the immutability of the cis-classification woman/man; persons with bisexual and pansexual orientation who question the neat separation between gay and straight, often facing invisibility and erasure in both the straight and gay communities.

To be sure, the theme of identity, including liminal identities, is not a new topic in several areas of research, such as feminist philosophy, social epistemology and ontology, philosophy of race and critical race theory, gender studies, and queer epistemologies (as well as in fiction, literary theory, and other academic fields). Feminists for instance have at the same time reasserted and problematized the identity of women. While reasserting it against the alleged sexless and genderless 'subject'

of much scientific and philosophical research and the implicit oppression and silence that come with it, they (or at least some of them) have also problematized both the idea that sex and gender are binary, and the very availability of a concept that is not already also imbued with other traits such as race, ethnicity, age, class, and so forth. In fact, the employment of a seemingly unproblematic concept of 'woman' in feminist perspectives has been contested at least since Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), which has led to a deep rethinking of the nature of feminism itself. By arguing that not only gender but also sex is performative and results from interactive practices of power, Butler undermined the otherwise taken-for-granted unifying categories of 'woman' and 'female' as the basis of feminism. Similarly, Black Feminist Thought has unmasked the predominance of white thinkers in mainstream feminism and shown how it largely reflected the experiences and interests of white and middle/upper-class women (Collins 1990; Davis 1981; hooks 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) also broadened the agenda and put to the fore the necessity of looking at multilayered and complex identities, in which Black women's oppression is reinforced precisely because it comes from different directions. Additionally, notions such as the 'outsider-within', border-dwelling, mestizaje, hybridity, liminality, but also mimicry and passing, all point toward the same conceptual territory, revealing the insufficiency of monolithic notions of identity and belonging for understanding the concrete and multifarious experiences and narratives of individuals and social groups, as well as the specific forms of oppression they suffer (see for instance Alcoff 2006; Anzaldúa 1987; Collins 1986; Lugones 2006). The Foucauldian and post-structuralist heritage, likewise, has promoted a deep rethinking of the traditional categories of sexuality, showing their roots in the medicalization of sex and pathologization of sexual 'deviance', and more generally their dependency on a heteronormative and binary framework; this, together with LGBTQ activism, paved the way for queer and nonbinary perspectives (Foucault 1976; Hacking 1986; Sedgwick 1990).

Therefore, in broad terms, research on identities has already been present in the philosophical debate for quite some time. However, in our view, its relevance, especially with reference to liminal identities and the complexities of belonging, still has to be fully taken into account in social epistemology, and in the area of epistemic injustice in particular. This special issue of *Social Epistemology* is a contribution in this direction. Although Fricker and others have occasionally taken into consideration aspects of the problem, examining for instance the specific injustices faced by trans people (Fricker and Katharine 2017), it is the bearings that these reflections can have on the very concepts of identity, belonging, and identity prejudice, as cornerstones of research on epistemic injustice, that deserve more investigation. Is there something that characterizes specifically these situations, marked (or unmarked!) by an identity which is often perceived as unclear, blurred, confusing, or in the making? Is the conceptual apparatus of research on epistemic injustice helpful in making sense of the harms suffered by these individuals as epistemic agents? Or conversely, could a deeper and more nuanced understanding of liminal identities and complex ways of belonging help sharpen the epistemic analysis of prejudice and injustice?

The invited and submitted articles that comprise this special issue testify to the fertility of this area of research.¹ While the issue of gender, and of trans and nonbinary gender identities in particular, has center stage, the idea of liminality is addressed from a multiplicity of perspectives including disability, ethnic identities, stigma, language, trauma, and aesthetics. The dialogue between José Medina and María del Rosario Acosta López opens the conversation with a reflection that is at the same time epistemological (in a broad sense) and meta-theoretical. Both articles address the possibility of radical forms of listening that act on our very sensibilities (both in the aesthetic and the moral sense) to make room for what is or was formerly inaudible: impossible to hear, and unheard of. This amounts to imagining a new way of doing critical epistemology, exercising what Medina (2013) has labelled 'epistemic resistance' – the use of epistemic resources to subvert the cognitive and affective functioning supporting oppressive practices – but doing so by privileging the aesthetic dimension, that is, the capacity of perceiving and feeling with our senses and of attuning our sensibility. What needs to be listened to or

perceived and allowed expression is what is normally undetected because underneath the radar of perception. The liminality here is what is radically outside the dominant horizons of intelligibility, and the means through which such liminality gains space is the enlargement of the listener's capacities for aesthetic attention: hence the focus on art as the environment where a radical reeducation of sensibility can finally take place.

Another way of addressing the unintelligibility of the liminal and interstitial comes from Ásta's perspective, which focuses on how social categories are 'conferred' to individuals (Ásta 2018). According to conferralism, society values certain features (for instance bodily features one is taken to have) over others, and people get conferred statuses accordingly. The salience of such features varies depending on the contexts and on the 'social maps' that are operative in them, as well as the interests and values of the individuals who participate in those contexts. What is interesting in this framework and helps illuminate the case of liminality is the dialectic between the objective social identity – the place one stably occupies on a social map – and the subjective social identity – the place on the social map one identifies with –, and how it plays out especially when the dominant social framework is strongly dualistic (male or female, Black or White, gay or straight, ...). This is the subject of Ásta's 'Interstitial injustice'. In certain contexts, she argues, one is forced into a status that does not ring true to them, and individuals who do not identify as either A or B are left socially invisible, unintelligible, and subject to various forms of injustice. What the conferralist picture suggests is that to overcome these injustices we need to pay closer attention to how the social categories we live by develop, why they are the way they are, and how we might want to limit their power. This is a way of reflecting on the very nature of our concepts and their social underpinnings.

Applying a different framework, namely, a Wittgensteinian, family resemblance approach to concepts, Annalisa Coliva's paper ('WOMAN. Concept, Prototype, and Stereotype') is a proposal that goes in a similar direction, taking the concept *WOMAN* as the main case study. According to a family resemblance account, a concept is not identified by a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, but, roughly, by different *criteria*. This helps understand better the relationship between concepts, prototypes, and stereotypes, how they contribute to hermeneutical injustice, but also how it is possible, in time, to foster changes in the prototype and stereotypes associated with a concept – in the case at hand, changes that would do justice to the lived experience of trans women and of individuals who self-identify as such, but which would also help to 'queer the center', by dismantling patriarchal stereotypes of 'femininity'.

The case of trans and nonbinary gender identities is also at the center of other contributions in this special issue. Salla Aldrin Salskov and Ryan Manhire, in 'On Testimonial and Hermeneutical (In)justices in Bedrock Gender', deal with another Wittgenstein-inspired approach, namely, Danièle Moyal-Sharrock and Constantine Sandis' notion of 'bedrock gender' as addressed in their paper bearing the same title (2023), and more extensively in their newly published volume (2024). Through an analysis of this proposal, the authors bring out some of the difficulties and challenges involved in the attempt to do epistemic justice to trans testimonies. In their view, using the testimonies of trans individuals for furthering a philosophical account of gender and consequently speaking of gender in terms of bedrock certainty, although helpful in some respects, risks privileging those testimonies of trans people that confirm such an account and overlooking the multiplicity of voices, as well as the moral and existential aspects involved in these conversations.

Siiri Porkkala's 'Hermeneutical injustice, nonbinary gender identities, and category invalidation' focuses instead on nonbinary identities: while nonbinary people are marginalized as a gender group in a similar manner to binary trans individuals, there are specific forms of hermeneutical injustice that nonbinary people face *specifically* as nonbinary. One such form is category invalidation, which occurs when someone tries to claim membership to a social category, but others deny the existence of that category. This involves harms at multiple levels: at the first-personal level, with diminished resources for self-understanding and diminished capability for social modeling; at the interpersonal level, with nonbinary people's claims about their gender as a category constantly denied or silenced, and the side-effect that also dominantly situated knowers are resistant to bettering their own epistemic

resources; and at the societal level, with institutions and governments not recognizing third-gender options.

Two other papers deal with trans and nonbinary identities by focusing on language. In 'The Triviality Worry about Gender Terms and Epistemic Injustice', Stina Björkholm raises the (apparent) concern that a contextualist perspective on language, while allowing for trans-including claims to be true, also allows that trans-excluding claims can be true; in fact, according to contextualism, terms have different extensions depending on the context of utterance, and what is true in one context might be false in another. In the author's view, contextualists can respond to this worry by showing that trans-excluding claims, even in a context in which they are true, can be offensive or inappropriate, because the practice of using trans-excluding gender terms is part of a broader epistemic injustice against trans individuals.

In 'Linguistic Hermeneutical Injustice', Martina Rosola instead addresses the hermeneutical injustices that arise for nonbinary people in countries that have grammatical gendered languages, such that nouns, adjectives, and pronouns are marked by gender. Taking Italian as an example, the author argues that this is a case of 'structural' (as opposed to 'usage') discrepancy between a term and its referent's gender because it does not depend on how individuals use or misuse language but on its structural features. The lack of a specific grammatical gender puts nonbinary individuals at an unfair disadvantage in making sense of their experiences, showing all the hallmarks of hermeneutical injustice.

Trans and nonbinary identities however do not exhaust the examples of liminal identities addressed in this special issue: two cases that have received less attention in the literature are disability and complex ethnic identities. Regarding the former, Avram Hiller ('The Testimonial Double Bind for Disabled People') argues that the possibility of a unified disability identity is challenged by a 'testimonial double bind' that the disabled person faces. In fact, in offering a testimony about their condition, they can either give an entirely positive testimony or some negative testimony. In the former case, they risk not being believed (as the literature has already shown). In the latter, even when they are believed, they nevertheless often end up smothering their testimony (Dotson 2011), reinforcing problematic stereotypes, or damaging the movement for disability rights, in that acknowledging limitations contradicts the image of autonomy that activists want to promote. Hence, there are competing interests and needs when it comes to giving testimony of one's condition. The way forward, the author suggests, is to find and strengthen solidarity precisely on the grounds that ableist stereotypes cause this double bind.

Complex national and ethnic identities are addressed by Alberto Morán Roa in 'Meanings of Basqueness: An Account from Brandomian Inferentialism on Basque Identity and its Evolution', which analyzes how the meaning of 'being Basque' and the way in which citizens of the Basque Autonomous Community identify (or not) with Basqueness have shifted through time. In the author's view, political polarization and violence influenced the inferential relations connected with Basqueness. In more recent times, the change in political climate also determined a change in the meaning of 'being Basque': from its ethnic and linguistic origins it came to be more related to feeling and doing, so much so that an increasing number of people in recent years have incorporated Basqueness in their mixed and complex identities.

Sometimes identities are rejected. Alberto Morán Roa touches on that, but ethnic and national identities are not the only cases: Alexander Edlich and Alfred Archer explore this issue in relation to stigma in the last paper, 'Rejecting Identities. Stigma and Hermeneutical Injustice'. More specifically, they address cases in which the stigma attached to certain social identities causes individuals to reject the hermeneutical resources that are available to them (so, the case is different from Fricker's classic characterization of hermeneutical injustice, where marginalization prevents one from producing and accessing such resources: here the resources are accessible but rejected). Homosexuality, alcohol addiction, and being the victim of intimate partner violence are the examples that they investigate, highlighting that stigma can ultimately make people complicit in the erasure of their own identities from the public discourse.

To conclude, liminal identities seem to be typically problematic to perceive by individuals, and their experiences seem to be typically hard to make sense of and communicate to others, in ways that require us to complicate the picture of hermeneutical injustice as Fricker originally described it. Indeed, the epistemic marginalization at the origins of it in some cases is so radical, with denials and erasure coming from multiple directions, that – to go back to the exchange between Medina and Acosta Lopez where we started – novel forms of education or reeducation of our sensibilities are necessary. We hope that this special issue helps shed more light on the complexities of these identities and perhaps also suggests ways to move forward.

Note

1. Earlier versions of most invited papers were presented at the international conference ‘Identities and Epistemic Injustice’ jointly organized by Anna Boncompagni and Annalisa Coliva at the University of California, Irvine and held in March 2021.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Anna Boncompagni is Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy at the University of California, Irvine. She works on the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, American pragmatism, and social and feminist epistemology, with a recent focus on LGBTQ perspectives. She is particularly interested in applying notions and insights from Wittgenstein and the pragmatists to contemporary issues, such as the nature of prejudice, common-sense beliefs, conceptual change, deep disagreement, and hermeneutical injustice. Among her publication are the monograph *Wittgenstein and Pragmatism. On Certainty in the Light of Peirce and James* (2016), the Cambridge Element *Wittgenstein on Forms of Life* (2022), and the articles “Hermeneutical Injustice and Bisexuality; Towards New Conceptual Tools” (*Hypatia*, 2024) and “Prejudice in Testimonial Justification: A Hinge Account” (*Episteme*, 2021).

Annalisa Coliva is Full Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of California, Irvine. She is editor-in-chief of the *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*. She is the author (among other books) of *Singular Thoughts: Perceptual-Demonstrative and I-Thoughts* (with E. Sacchi, 2001), *Moore and Wittgenstein: Scepticism, Certainty and Common Sense* (2010), *Extended Rationality: A Hinge Epistemology* (2015), *The Varieties of Self-Knowledge* (2016), *Wittgenstein Rehinged: The Significance of On Certainty for Contemporary Epistemology* (2022), as well as of *Relativism* (with Maria Baghramian, 2020) and *Skepticism* (with Duncan Pritchard, 2022). She has published widely in epistemology, especially on ‘hinge epistemology’ (a term she coined), the history of analytic philosophy (especially G. E. Moore, L. Wittgenstein and S. Stebbing) and in philosophy of mind (first-personal and demonstrative thoughts, concepts, perceptual content, Moore’s paradox and self-knowledge). She is currently working on a monograph on *Social and Applied Hinge Epistemology*, a Cambridge Element on *Wittgenstein and Social Epistemology* and she is editing (with L. Doulas) *Analysis, Common Sense, and Public Philosophy: Themes from the Philosophy of Susan Stebbing*.

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