

Take the Mask Off? Autistic Masking as a Response to Epistemic Injustice

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The neurodivergence movement has recently drawn attention to the phenomenon of masking as an aspect of oppression faced by Autistics in social settings. Masking has been theorized across disability studies as an important facet of oppression that is deserving of significant attention. However, current theorizations of masking emphasize the pervasive social aspects, leaving out important epistemic dimensions. In this paper, I examine the phenomenon of masking through the lens of epistemic injustice, illustrating the ways in which masking takes place within the context of knowledge production and dissemination. Employing the framework of epistemic injustice, I argue that Autistics, faced with neuronormative pressure to conceal their Autistic identity traits within the context of epistemic spaces, experience forms of testimonial, participatory, and hermeneutical injustices.

Introduction

Over the course of the past few decades, growing access to online communication platforms and social networking sites has led to new avenues for advocacy (Leadbitter et al., 2021). Emerging out of larger civil rights movements, a number of coalition movements founded on shared marginalized identities emerged on these platforms to challenge various facets of oppression in modern society. Along with well-known movements like #BlackLivesMatter, disability advocates formed their own liberatory platforms aimed at highlighting aspects of oppression within the disability community. These advocacy groups surfaced following years of coalition building within disability rights movements. Within this context, the neurodiversity movement surfaced, advocating for an appreciation of different neurotypes as natural variations of human neurological functioning/development and challenging the dominant medicalized paradigm for disability (Jaarsma and Welin, 2012; Leadbitter et al., 2021). Prompted by shifts in disability rights and advocacy coupled with a greater prevalence of Autism diagnoses in recent history, the neurodivergence movement has evolved as a response to calls for greater inclusion in educational spaces and calls for greater acknowledgement and representation for Autistics in society. Disability advocacy has shifted in the recent past to center these issues as dimensions of a growing call for acceptance of neurodivergence.

In 2018, within the greater neurodivergence movement and this online social movement context, a group of neurodiversity advocates established an online campaign labelled #TakeTheMaskOff which aimed to bring attention to the social stigma experienced by neurodivergent individuals in social settings (especially Autistics¹). This movement was led by Autistic people and aimed to illuminate the ways in

¹ A note on the use of Autistic: I use the term Autistic here rather than individual with Autism to denote that I consider Autism an inherently inseparable aspect of an individual's identity.

which Autistics are marginalized when they express their neurodivergent ways of being. Central to this campaign was the shared social phenomenon of masking (and camouflaging),² which some neurodivergent researchers describe as: “the processes through which Autistic people conceal their Autistic traits in social settings dominated by Neurotypical norms” (Radulski, 2021, p. 113). Masking has been theorized in disability studies using many different lenses. Using classical social theory, some have articulated masking as a social response to the deficit narrative around Autism (Pearson & Rose, 2021). While others, adopting a more medicalized frame of reference, characterize masking as a protective response to social trauma (Cleary et al., 2023).

Theorizations of masking in disability studies understand the phenomenon primarily as a form of exclusion that prohibits Autistic individuals from experiencing belonging within social groups (Radulski, 2021). Grounded in critical theories, many of these conceptions of masking emphasize the ways in which Autistic individuals face stigmatization and silencing through the normative force exerted by neurotypical social norms. As I will articulate throughout this paper, these views offer a strong base for continued theorizing about how masking operates in social settings. However, it remains undertheorized how masking impacts Autistics within the context of epistemic spaces (in their capacity as knowers).

Utilizing an empirically engaged philosophical approach³ (Wilson and Santoro, 2015), I take up the question of how Autistics are harmed in their capacities as knowers through epistemic oppression (Dotson, 2012).⁴ In the context of philosophy, theories of epistemic injustice emphasize understanding oppressions that occur to individuals in their capacities as knowers, including those that occur within the context of testimonial exchange (Fricker, 2007). By situating the phenomenon of masking within the context of epistemic injustice, I aim to illustrate the ways in which masking takes place within the context of communicative exchange and in the context of knowledge production and dissemination. Employing the framework of epistemic injustice, I argue that Autistics, faced with neuronormative pressure to conceal their Autistic identity traits within the context of epistemic spaces, experience forms of testimonial, participatory, and hermeneutical injustices. Examining specific aspects of masking in the context of these forms of injustice, I conclude that Autistics engage in self-silencing through masking in response to neuronormative expectations. In the end, I examine the ways in which neurotypical ignorance plays an integral role in creating and sustaining the conditions under which masking occurs.

Situating Masking in the Context of Epistemic Justice

Central to my argument in this paper is that Autistics not only face epistemic injustice in their capacities as knowers in everyday exchanges but even more so in the context of epistemic spaces. I take educational spaces to be inherently epistemic spaces as knowledge and learning are part of the purpose of education. In this section, I situate masking as a form of epistemic injustice. In order to do so I unpack two distinct theoretical lenses that lend themselves to understanding how masking is distinctly epistemic. Emerging from literature in disability studies and research on Autism, a broad theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon of masking suggests that masking is a response to social settings dominated by neurotypical social norms. This framework establishes a basis for conceptualizing the phenomenon of masking (and the broader phenomenon of camouflaging) as aspects of the Autistic social experience. In addition, to better understand how masking impacts Autistics as knowers, I employ the philosophical framework of epistemic injustice to describe the nuances of testimonial exchange and epistemic participation in the context of knowledge production. In what follows, I provide a broad theoretical overview of masking stemming from the literature in disability studies and Autism research before turning to the philosophical literature on epistemic injustice.

² Many theorists distinguish between masking and camouflaging as distinct phenomenon, in the next section I describe these distinctions in more detail.

Passing as Non-Autistic: Theorizing Masking

There are varying definitions of masking across the literature, but many agree that the phenomenon is a response to social settings dominated by neurotypical norms where neurodivergent individuals aim to disguise or suppress traits that reveal their difference (Cook et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2020; Miller, Rees, & Pearson, 2021; Radulski, 2021). Theorists have suggested that masking includes the deliberate use of tactics that conceal Autistic traits including monitoring one's own outward expressions and speech, developing social scripts to manage social engagements, and engaging in compulsory eye contact during social interactions (Cook et al., 2021). Recent research suggests that Autistics engage in masking as a means for managing stigma associated with their Autistic traits (Miller, Rees, & Pearson, 2021) and that Autistic masking can vary in expression based on gender, age, and setting (Cook et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2020). Much of the literature uses the terms masking and camouflaging to describe the same phenomenon, however some researchers suggest that the two are different practices that have two separate and distinct purposes. Radulski (2021) draws a distinction between the two suggesting that camouflaging refers to a broader body of actions that conceal neurodivergent identity (including making “normal” eye contact and changing one's tone of voice to include more emotive responses), articulating masking as only those actions which are aimed at suppressing common neurodivergent traits (e.g. rocking, hand flapping). Others note that there are many varying terms for masking and behaviors adjacent to masking, opting for a broader term like “passing as non-autistic” to encompass all of these behaviors (Libsack et al., 2021). For the purpose of this paper, I use the term masking to refer the aforementioned aspects of masking as well as the broader phenomenon of camouflaging that all embody practices aimed at passing as non-Autistic.³ In these cases, I am primarily interested in both acts of suppression as well as adoption of alternatives as a means for gaining credibility and participating in educational/epistemic contexts.

Masking has been examined empirically at length and research suggests that there are severe, detrimental impacts for Autistics due to the regular practice of masking (Libsack et al., 2021). For example, some research links masking to the prevalence of comorbid mental health disorders (e.g. Depression, Anxiety, etc.) experienced by Autistics (Cook et al., 2021) as well as previous experiences of interpersonal past trauma necessitating the development of masking strategies (Evans, Krumrei-Mancuso, & Rouse, 2023). Qualitative studies have provided some greater insight into the phenomenon, suggesting that experiences of marginalization, stigmatization, and oppression are the underlying cause of mental health issues arising from Autistic masking (Chapman et al., 2022). In addition, research centering the experiences of Autistics suggests that masking is an externalized and internalized response to interpersonal victimization and violence in social settings (Pearson, Rose, and Rees, 2023). Pearson, Rose, and Reese (2023), found within a large qualitative interview study with Autistics that Autistics perceive masking to be an expected reality of living with Autism, and essential for survival. In addition, they note that the persistent lack of hermeneutical resources around masking makes understanding the phenomenon especially challenging.

In what follows, I offer the framework of epistemic injustice as a launching point for understanding the phenomenon of masking as both social and epistemic. By offering a multitude of tools from the literature on epistemic injustice and oppression, I theorize multiple avenues for understanding the experience of Autistics as knowers in educational settings.

³ I make this choice in terminology in order to make myself legible to Autistics in the wider community who largely prefer and employ the term masking to broadly characterize their experiences.

Epistemic Injustice, Hermeneutical Resources, and Enduring Social Stigma

Originating in theories of social and feminist epistemologies, theories of epistemic injustice aim to describe how individuals can be harmed in their capacity as knowers within the context of knowledge-making and sharing (Dotson, 2012; Fricker, 2007). Understanding epistemic spaces as both socially situated and interdependent, social epistemologists aim to understand the ways in which positionality and social hierarchy play a role in knowledge formation and dissemination (Anderson, 2012). Miranda Fricker (2007) has offered a substantial account of epistemic justice, contributing two primary ways in which individuals are harmed as epistemic agents. Highlighting the importance of testimonial exchange in the sharing of knowledge, Fricker identifies testimonial injustice as a form of injustice where one is harmed in their sharing of knowledge due to their perceived lack of credibility (Fricker, 2007). The theory of testimonial justice illuminates the ways in which social stigmas and prejudice play an important role in obstructing marginalized knowers in their attempts to contribute to knowledge exchange and production. Fricker (2007) also postulates hermeneutical injustice as a form of injustice that results from a lack of epistemic resources that relate to or describe the experiences of marginalized groups. Fricker's work has been taken up by many philosophers who offer additional forms of epistemic injustice and ways of characterizing the harms posed to knowers through forms of epistemic marginalization.

Continued work in the area of epistemic injustice has elucidated other forms of epistemic oppression that take into consideration additional aspects of epistemic engagement. For example, Christopher Hookway (2010) postulates the existence of a form of participant-based injustice, which conceives of epistemic injustice outside of the context of testimonial exchange. Hookway's concept of participant-based injustice articulates dimensions of oppression stemming from an agent's ability to participate in knowledge production based on other's understanding of their competency in engaging in all aspects of epistemic tasks. This broadens conceptions of epistemic injustice to include instances of oppression that occur outside of testimonial exchange and encompass many educational scenarios where individuals engage in cooperative groups, raise questions in the context of learning, and carry out other educational activities within epistemic environments. For example, in schooling students often engage in cooperative tasks like group assignments and discussions where being perceived as a credible knower is a central aspect of engaging in the learning task.

Similarly, Kristie Dotson (2012) notes the existence of epistemic oppression that describes the ways in which epistemic exclusions result in significant hermeneutical gaps for marginalized groups. This formulation of silencing is the result of what Dotson terms epistemic exclusion, or an infringement upon epistemic agency resulting in the limitation of an agent's ability to participate in epistemic environments and communities (Dotson, 2012). Similarly, Medina (2012) contributes the important notion of self-silencing to discourse around epistemic exclusion that describes the ways in which marginalized knowers selectively opt to silence themselves in epistemic environments where they perceive that their testimony will not be welcomed. In educational spaces, this kind of self-silencing can look like choosing not to take part in certain learning activities for fear that our contributions will not be welcomed.

However, Autism has only just emerged as a topic of interest for philosophers and theorists of epistemic injustice. Applying theories of injustice to individuals with disabilities, Josh Dohman (2016) articulates the broad applicability of epistemic injustice for individuals with mental disabilities. Arguing that those with mental disabilities are an important and interesting case of disability, Dohman (2016) suggests:

What makes these disabilities problematic in the context of this chapter is that they seem to hinder or bar the possibility of participating in the knowledge pooling practices with which Fricker is concerned. In other words, mental disability may be a feature that inherently hinders one's epistemic capabilities such that taking it into account when we assess epistemic competence may be warranted, and this is unlike gender, race, physical disability, or other identities discussed in the epistemic injustice literature (p. 676).

In this case, Dohman concludes that the hermeneutical resources required for individuals with mental disabilities might not align or even be recognizable for neurotypicals. This suggests that there is a significant and pervasive epistemic issue underlying communication between those with mental disabilities and neurotypical peers. However, Dohman articulates the pervasive resistance towards attributing credibility to those with mental disabilities as forms of injustice. In addition, Dohman articulates an additional form of epistemic injustice termed “intimate hermeneutical injustice” that aims to capture the close interpersonal interactions between individuals where failure to interpret another’s experiences (not testimony) is at stake. Similarly, Janette Dinishak (2021) notes the pervasive and substantive gaps in hermeneutical resources for describing the experience of Autistics. Following Ian Hacking, Dinishak articulates this gap as significant and fundamental, arguing that neurotypicals have generations of resource development to rely upon while Autistics have only just begun to articulate their own lived experiences as Autistics.⁴

Furthering the problem of production of hermeneutical resources, Monique Botha (2021) describes her experience as an Autistic researcher of Autism and the challenges she faced in coming up against “scientific” and “objective” accounts of Autism that were “dehumanizing, objectifying and violent” (p. 1). Botha’s reflection suggests that hermeneutical resources offered by Autistics in the context of psychological research are often undermined when they challenge the accepted “scientific” paradigm of Autism, resulting in the persistence of hermeneutical gaps for Autistics. Also noting the significance and magnitude of the problem of epistemic injustice for Autistics, Catala, Faucher, and Porier (2021) articulate the many ways in which Autistics face testimonial, hermeneutical, and contributory injustices in their interactions with neurotypical peers. Rooting the issue in the set of neurotypical assumptions present in social settings, Catala Faucher and Porier suggest that neurodivergent ways of expressing being are regarded as atypical and maladaptive in the context of these expectations. Postulating neurotypical ignorance, a form of ignorance akin to Mills’ (2007). White ignorance, they suggest that the neuronormative structure of the social environment makes the experiences of Autistics invisible to neurotypical peers. In addition, Catala, Faucher, and Porier (2021) offer a substantive description of how Autistics face persistent and systematic testimonial injustice in the context of epistemic environments.

In the next section, I build upon this work by examining in more depth the phenomenon of masking through the multiple lenses of hermeneutical injustice (both structural and intimate), testimonial injustice, and participant-based injustice. Moreover, I examine the ways in which neurotypical ignorance plays a significant role in the sustaining of masking practices in educational settings. In the end, I suggest that greater attention needs to be paid to the lived experience of Autistics themselves who engage in masking and often face neurotypical ignorance in order to fully understand the intersecting forms of epistemic oppression that they endure in educational settings.

Masking, Self-preservation, and Neurotypical Ignorance

In what follows, I examine several facets of masking more deeply, engaging the framework of epistemic injustice using examples. In this section I examine masking as a form of epistemic oppression that happens in educational spaces. I understand masking as an epistemic phenomenon because it occurs in the context of educational spaces and has serious impacts on learning for Autistic students. I make the case that the act of masking, when required of Autistics in educational contexts, consumes significant

⁴ It is worth noting that there may be many resources provided by Autistics that are not identified as such, but these resources are underrecognized as offering information about the experience of Autistics.

cognitive resources and places students in a position to choose credibility in the classroom context over authentic forms of Autistic engagement.

In this section, I illustrate several subsets of behaviors and ways of being that fall into the broad category of masking to offer analysis of where and how epistemic injustice occurs for Autistics. Moreover, I suggest that the broader framework of neurotypical ignorance is illuminating in contextualizing the need for Autistics to engage in these behaviors in greater society. Modifications of Autistic behavior both are necessitated by neurotypical ignorance, which sustains the need for masking, and simultaneously reinforce neurotypical ignorance by shielding neurotypicals from Autistic traits (thereby, making them invisible in communicative exchange and collaborative spaces). The fact that Autistics feel the normative pressure to mask further makes it difficult for neurotypicals to understand the extent to which these traits and behaviors are shielded from view in everyday educational settings.

Below I outline the four sets of masked behaviors that I will engage with in this section:

Suppression of Autistic Behaviors and Body Language Norms⁵

- **Suppression of self-soothing and stimulatory behaviors:** One aspect of masking that I identify here is the act of self-silencing behaviors like hand-flapping, rocking, tapping, leg bouncing, clapping, and hair twisting (to name a few). This can be noted in conjunction with the social pressure to self-silence these behaviors in public settings.
- **Forced eye contact and adoption of neurotypical body language:** The expectation that all discourse will include eye contact is a reoccurring issue for Autistics who often experience distress in making eye contact. Encouraging, or even requiring, students to engage in eye contact to demonstrate engagement is a regularly occurring expectation within schools. Instruction in this way in early educational settings can result in compulsory eye contact for students and the self-silencing of neurodivergent preferences.

Avoidance of Autistic Communication Norms⁶

- **Avoidance of literal and repetitive forms of speech:** Autistics often communicate in more direct, literal, and (at times) repetitive ways. These communication norms are often misunderstood and/or misrepresented in the context of neuronormative communication spaces.
- **Avoidance of “info dumping” or special interest sharing:** Autistics may share extensive information about their special interests as a means of forming social bonds and/or communicating their experiences. This is often perceived as inappropriate in social settings and discouraged in group settings. Often framed in educational settings as “sharing the airtime,” Autistics are encouraged to limit the detail and frequency of their discussions about their special interest topics. This is potentially another form of self-silencing required of Autistics who are limited in forming social bonds in educational settings in the ways that make most sense to them.

Understanding the Suppression of Autistic Behaviors and Body Language Norms as Forms of Epistemic Oppression

There are multiple vantage points from which we can understand limitations on self-soothing and stimulatory behaviors in the context of epistemic spaces. These behaviors are common aspects of Autistic engagement that arise in the context of educational spaces as a response to regulating emotions

⁵ The masking characteristics outlined in the following subsection are extracted from a variety of empirical studies on masking. For examples, please see Alaghband-rad et al. (2023) and Radulski (2021).

⁶ While there is some research on Autistic communication norms and styles (for example see, Cummins, Pellicano, & Crane, 2020), much the information around Autistic communication norms presented here has been obtained from Autistic advocates themselves (for example, see NeuroWild and Autistic Not Weird). It is clear that there is a divergence in the way that Autism researchers and Autistic advocates perceive Autistic communication norms (the former characterizing these norms as maladaptive obstacles and the latter recognizing these differences as simply another style of communication).

and sensory needs. I understand these behaviors as epistemic insofar as they are essential for Autistic engagement in learning and classroom participation (self-regulating is essential for any person within a social setting but is often more essential for Autistics who may have challenges with sensory differences and over/under stimulation in the context of educational spaces).

First, there are both testimonial and participatory aspects of these suppressions. In the context of testimonial exchange, Autistics are sensitive to the fact that they face stigma and discrimination when they are perceived as Autistic. For this reason, Autistics may suppress behaviors that make them visibly Autistic in educational settings for the purpose of maintaining the credibility associated with being neurotypical. Stated another way, Autistics doubt that they will be believed by their neurotypical peers if it is discovered that they are Autistic, so they make attempts to avoid detection. Similarly, this might extend to all activities within an educational setting (like group work, asking questions, putting together projects, being placed on a team in gym class), suggesting that Autistics suppress their traits as a means of avoiding participant-based injustices as well. Understanding that they may face distrust within the context of classroom activities, Autistics attempt to conceal their traits as a means of remaining a worthy member of classroom discourse and participation. This results in significant limitations in how Autistics participate authentically in epistemic spaces as they spend a significant number of cognitive resources attempting to maintain their own credibility in order to gain access to epistemic goods (like participation in certain activities). Moreover, it is worth noting that masking requires a significant amount of attention resources that must be devoted to keeping up with neuronormative social demands. These attention demands likely have a significant impact on an individual's ability to focus in classroom environments and detract from the important learning that is central to the endeavor of education.

There are additional structural and social requirements that reinforce these dimensions of epistemic oppression. In classroom settings where the explicit norms require suppression of Autistic ways of being, students are both confronted with the paradox of either participating inauthentically but competently (in the eyes of teachers and peers) or engaging authentically but being deemed lacking in credibility. For example, a student may want to participate in a classroom discussion where their mode of engagement is speaking quickly and with excitement while rocking their body, but they may recognize that if they behave in such a way that they may be perceived as neurodivergent which may result in losing credibility with their peers. Under these conditions, the student may choose to participate inauthentically by controlling their body in order to maintain credibility. It is, in part, these explicit classroom norms that position the Autistic knower as someone lacking in credibility in the first place. This underlying and pervasive form of ablism makes it possible for Autistics to be positioned as lacking credibility in epistemic spaces when they attempt to engage as their authentic selves.

In these cases, Autistics often face hermeneutical injustice as well when they are unable to express the extent of their needs or communicate the reasons for their behavior in social and epistemic settings. In many cases, it may be difficult for Autistics to either identify the purposes of their behavior and their underlying need to engage in self-soothing and stimulatory behaviors or explain to others the reasons that they might have for these particular behaviors. In this way, Autistics face hermeneutical injustice insofar as they lack the resources to make legible their needs to neurotypical peers and teachers. Moreover, because their needs are so regularly occluded from view, given that they are suppressed in public settings, Autistics face pervasive obstacles to sharing their need to engage in self-soothing or self-stimulatory behaviors when restrictions are enforced in educational settings. For example, the strong urge to flap one's hands during a moment of distress is difficult to both convey and understand without the resources available to describe how flapping helps alleviate internal anxiety. Moreover, pressure to conceal these behaviors causes additional distress for which Autistics face the additional obstacle of communicating without any easily accessible hermeneutical resources to describe said distress.⁷

⁷ There are additional important obstacles for nonverbal Autistics in participating in the creation and sharing of hermeneutical resources. Due to space constraints, I won't elaborate further on the specific challenges faced by nonverbal Autistics in these contexts.

Similarly, norms around the adoption of neurotypical forms of body language can be articulated as aspects of epistemic oppression. Often encouraged in early childhood classrooms, norms of neurotypical body language become essential for accepted communication. Teachers, classroom aids, school personnel, and peers require students to make eye contact, shake hands or fist bump, and sit in particular configurations in order to engage in school activities.⁸ These norms of engagement are a prerequisite for student participation in classroom spaces and are often framed by teachers as a way of “showing that you are ready to learn.” This makes compliance in the form of engagement in neurotypical forms of body language an aspect of learning that is sought out by teachers and peers before knowledge sharing can begin. When considered from this angle, it is clear that Autistics contend with significant pressures to mask their own preferred modes of body language in order to participate in epistemic environments.

Adoption of body language, as was true for suppression of self-regulatory and stimulation behaviors, can be examined through the lenses of testimonial and participant-based injustice. Because students are often asked to comply with specific body language directives in order to participate in classroom exchanges, those aspects of body language become a prerequisite for establishing credibility and entering into classroom structures of participation. When used in these ways, students are marked as unworthy of participation if they are unable or unwilling to adopt neurotypical forms of body language. This suggests for Autistics that they must engage in compulsory masking in order to be considered eligible for classroom participation and viewed as credible in their classroom interactions.

In addition, students are often unable to understand and express why and how these forms of body language are distressing and problematic for them. For example, the student who feels distress when being asked to sit in STAR formation may struggle to articulate which aspects of this formation cause distress and, in feeling dysregulated, may resort to fleeing from the room or yelling at a peer. This points to a potential lack in hermeneutical resources that allow the student to understand their own bodily distress and communicate their needs to their teacher and peers. Moreover, lacking hermeneutical resources around body language norms are problematic for both Autistics and neurotypicals because they make it difficult to describe the dimensions of experience that make neurotypical body language norms disorienting and dysregulating for Autistics. And subsequently, because students are forced into compliance, hermeneutical resources that offer neurotypicals experiences with Autistic ways of being are removed from the epistemic environment and result in lacking resources for everyone involved. This ultimately serves to reinforce neurotypical ignorance as many are lacking the epistemic resources to recognize that these patterns of behavior are unnatural for Autistic students.

In the worst cases, students are not just discouraged from engaging in particular behaviors and adhering to neuronormative body language expectations, but they are punished for behaving in ways that are perceived as disruptive. This can be connected to disproportionate disciplinary rates for disabled students, who often face greater interactions with school disciplinary apparatus beginning at very young ages (Williams, 2022). Considering the detrimental ramifications of interactions with school disciplinary apparatus (and potentially school police), this is an obvious form of oppression. One might consider that this has important epistemic dimensions as well, as interactions with school disciplinary apparatus often lead to exclusions from school activities (which is a participatory injustice). In addition, students who may be labelled as disruptive due to their neurodivergence may also face additional testimonial injustices linked to being perceived as an irresponsible or unreliable student.⁹

⁸ For example, STAR, which stands for Sit up tall, Track the speaker, Ask and answer questions, and Respect those around you is a common way of asking students to mold their bodies and behaviors in order to participate in classroom activities.

⁹ I want to note that this is a complex and multifaceted issue that deserves much more attention than I can devote to it here. I believe that this is a potentially fruitful direction for further research that should be explored at greater length.

Avoidance of Autistic Communication Norms

Differing styles of verbal communication often pose significant challenges for Autistics in the context of testimonial exchange. This issue emerges bi-directionally both in attempts to make sense of what others communicate and in Autistics' ability to be understood. Often preferring literal forms of language and direct styles of communication, Autistics may struggle to make meaning out of the neurotypical forms of communication that rely on figurative language and innuendo. Similarly, neurotypicals may struggle to understand Autistics in communicative exchange when Autistics rely on overly literal forms of speech and repetition to communicate. In these cases, there are clear testimonial impacts when hearers may assume that Autistics are unable to communicate in ways that make sense to them. This erosion of credibility may result in unwillingness on the listener's part to engage with the content of Autistics' testimony or result in the listener concluding that the Autistic speaker is unworthy of listening to altogether. This may also result in participant-based injustices where the speaker is labelled "annoying" for repeating themselves or "dumb" for misunderstanding the content of neurotypical speech, inhibiting Autistics from participating in cooperative learning structures within epistemic settings. These two forms of epistemic injustice may be preventative of Autistics fairly accessing epistemic goods like educational content, socio-emotional resources, or even appropriate access to educational spaces. Yet, these forms of injustice are undertheorized and underappreciated by educators who often narrowly consider the oppression experienced by Autistics to be social in nature.

Similarly, Autistic predispositions for deep engagements in special interests may be challenging for neurotypicals to interpret and understand. While sharing extensive information about topics of interest is often viewed in the Autistic community as a way of expressing caring for another, it may be viewed as self-centered or annoying for neurotypicals who consider it rude to speak at length about your own interests. This has the similar impact of disrupting access to participatory epistemic structures where credibility, social capital, and others' perceptions of competence play a role in mediating individuals' ability to engage effectively. As a result, mentors and peers might encourage Autistics to avoid speaking at length about special interests in ways that have the overall impact of silencing Autistic interlocutors. There is a significant relationship between the social dimensions of epistemic spaces and the ways in which access is granted to cooperative and participatory forms of educational goods. When Autistics have their access to these goods obstructed there is more than just a social harm that occurs, but rather, an important epistemic harm that impacts them as a participant in knowledge making.

In what follows, I narrow my focus to describe the ways in which epistemic injustice can be conceived of as a unique form of injustice that occurs in educational spaces. First, I examine the ways in which these forms of epistemic injustice constitute a manner of silencing that often goes unnoticed in educational settings. In doing so, I describe the significant hermeneutical gaps that occur due to silencing and the impact that these gaps have on society at large. Next, I examine the ways in which educational spaces are unique and important spaces that deserve special attention within this discourse. Finally, I call upon educators and policy makers to better understand the impacts of epistemic injustice on Autistics and reconsider the ways in which we allow school settings to place unjust and unfair neuronormative constraints on classroom structures.

Understanding Epistemic Oppression as a Facet of Educational Justice

Hermeneutical Injustice, Self and Pre-emptive Silencing, and Autistic Communication Norms

One important facet of epistemic oppression that results from participatory, testimonial, and hermeneutical injustice is called silencing. As it is described in the epistemic injustice literature, silencing offers a fruitful tool for understanding the suppression of Autistic behaviors and communication

practices by naming the impact of these practices for individuals. I have argued that recognizing the need to conceal markers of their identity, Autistics engage in self-silencing of their behaviors such that they are able to maintain credibility and participation within educational settings. These forms of silencing occur with regularity in educational settings as Autistics direct substantive amounts of attention towards monitoring their own behaviors and forms of speech in the context of classroom engagement. During these times, Autistics are encouraged and expected to redirect their own ways of engaging such that they meet the norms of the classroom space regardless of how these forms of inauthentic interaction impact their own well-being. I have articulated the ways in which these forms of self-silencing have a significant epistemic impact on the individual as well in that the knower is barred from participating in authentic ways within the educational space. This is substantively harmful for the knower who is limited in offering their own ways of knowing and being into classroom discourse.

In addition, this form of silencing can be considered pre-emptive in that it prohibits the interlocutor from sharing before they have initiated testimony. In these cases, pre-emptive silencing occurs when interlocutors recognize that the setting or other participants in exchange have made their contributions unwelcome. In this case, rather than beginning to engage and then realizing that their contributions are unwelcome, Autistics are placed in a position to recognize that their contributions are consistently unwelcome and should be silenced (it is the classroom norm that they should avoid sharing dimensions of their experience with others). This has the damaging impact of suggesting to Autistics that their contributions have no place in educational settings which has substantive detrimental impacts on their mental health and well-being. Here I want to suggest that pre-emptive silencing results from educational settings that are dominated by neurotypical ignorance where neuronormative standards for communication establish the parameters for engagement that exclude Autistic ways of knowing and being from the norms. In these cases, it is deemed a worthy trade for Autistics to experience silencing so that their neurotypical peers can experience an educational setting that runs more effectively. However, by demarcating which behaviors are acceptable within educational settings educators often label Autistic norms for communication as unworthy and maladaptive which constitutes a substantive form of epistemic oppression.

The resulting hermeneutical gaps that emerge from this silencing have major impacts on Autistics' ability to make sense of their own experiences and be understood by society at large. Hermeneutical injustice occurs in this case both at the structural level where Autistic ways of being are suppressed from epistemic resources but also at the level of the individual. When pre-emptive silencing is a socially accepted policy for educational spaces, pervasive hermeneutical injustice occurs because Autistics are regularly unable to share important dimensions of their experience with others. This becomes a widely accepted consequence of silencing whereby no effort is made to include these experiences in shared spaces (the resulting recommendation is often creating Autistic spaces where Autistics can express themselves outside of the view of their neurotypical peers). However, when Autistics only experience the freedom to share their experiences in Autistic spaces, neurotypicals miss the opportunity to learn more about Autistic ways of knowing and being. This preserves hermeneutical gaps at the societal level where masking plays the role of keeping Autistic testimony out of view.

These hermeneutical gaps can be extremely detrimental for Autistics who are not only left out of knowledge production but experience interpersonal communication challenges due to silencing. In Dohman's terms, Autistics experience intimate hermeneutical injustice whereby they are unable to help others make sense of their lived experiences as they've been required to mask at length. The inability to either locate the resources required to make sense of your own experience or describe your experience to others can be extremely isolating and distressing. When Autistics are prevented from cultivating these resources openly within public spaces this results in lasting limitations on the creation of new sources of knowledge about Autistic life. This problem is further compounded when Autistics are barred from engaging in self-soothing behaviors in educational settings that results in significant personal discomfort. The pressure to abstain from these behaviors becomes even more challenging when one lacks the

resources to convey their experience to others who have never faced the same pressures to engage in self-silencing and suppression.

Epistemic Oppression and Educational Injustice

While the issue of epistemic injustice has a place at the societal level and includes elements of oppression that can be observed (and felt) in multiple different venues, epistemic injustice is most prevalent in educational spaces where the aims of schooling often include knowledge acquisition and production (Ben-Porath, 2022). As the school remains an institution that is centered on learning and socializing youth for their lives in adulthood, educational institutions have an important place in this discourse around epistemic oppression. In this section, I examine the special responsibilities that schools have with regard to acknowledging and rectifying their role in the epistemic oppression of Autistic people. Next, I articulate this issue as an aspect of educational justice that deserves considerable attention in its' own right. In the end, I call upon educators and policy makers to take into considerations the epistemic dimensions of structures, policies, and norms as they pertain to Autistics in educational settings.

Compulsory schooling is widespread in many societies and is the norm in the United States. Students are required to attend educational institutions, living out many of their most important developmental years within the halls of public schools.¹⁰ Within this context, the problematic nature of epistemic oppression must be confronted, as students are required to attend institutions which have the negative impact of encouraging or requiring masking as a means for access to educational goods. While one might argue that there are certainly reasons for teaching students' skills that might include dimensions of masking for employment or socialization reasons, the fact remains that if we consider aspects of masking to be epistemically unjust, we must consider the ways in which educational institutions have a special responsibility to address these issues.

For many educational institutions, there seem to be multiple motivating factors for incentivizing or requiring masking strategies in the classroom. First, classroom teachers often rely on norms and routines in order to make classroom spaces efficient and effective spaces for most students. Under these constraints, educators might believe that asking Autistics to conform to neurotypical norms and ways of learning benefits the greatest number of students (allowing the class to flow more smoothly). Next, educational institutions might argue that they are beneficent in requiring aspects of masking in schools because they model/mimic the conditions of the workplace and prepare students for the harsh reality of the external world. Essentially, here schools might think that if Autistics aren't able to develop masking strategies, they will experience social exclusions more harmful than masking itself. However, as I've argued throughout this paper, masking poses substantial psychological harms for students and constitutes a form of epistemic injustice. As educational institutions, with distinctly epistemic aims, schools have the important responsibility of considering these harmful impacts in opposition to the perceived benefits that masking provides. Schools should first address the question of whether Autistics actually learn under conditions of masking and whether they are able to participate equitably in school contexts when masking strategies are required. Given the significant demands on student attention and the important mental health impacts, it is worth devoting resources to better understand the psychological impacts of masking in the context of education. This is an important avenue for future research in both educational research and has important philosophical implications.

Within this discourse of epistemic injustice, I have argued that in many cases students are restricted or denied educational goods based on their ability or willingness to engage in masking strategies. This restriction constitutes a form of educational injustice that is worthy of further consideration at length. As I do not have the space to develop this fully, I want to briefly suggest that

¹⁰ Obviously, some students have alternative arrangements like private schools or home schooling, but education should be acknowledged as a primary formative experience of youth.

under conditions of epistemic oppression, students are restricted not just in which epistemic resources they might access or contribute but they are also prohibited from developing in certain ways. When students are required to behave inauthentically for extended periods of time in order to gain access to educational spaces, students become restricted in their development of their own authentic ways of knowing and being. This is a substantive injustice and constitutes a significant form of oppression that educational institutions must substantively address in the context of educational justice. Further work in this area might explore how models of educational justice take up and articulate this form of oppression in greater detail.

Lastly, I want to call upon educators and policy makers to consider epistemic injustice as a substantive form of oppression that must be considered in the development of educational and public policy. Compulsory masking is prevalent not just in educational institutions but at other important levels of society. Without addressing the ways in which this harms Autistics socially and epistemically we will continue to reproduce the same harms for generations to come, further limiting the hermeneutical resources available to those follow after us. Taking up the issue of epistemic injustice in public policy requires understanding how participation in social and epistemic structures is necessary for human flourishing. These forms of injustice require greater attention as Autistics continue to reveal the significant harms that they face under pressures to continue masking.

Conclusion

In this paper, I've argued that Autistics face a variety of forms of epistemic injustice resulting from the practice of masking. Through an examination of some of the core aspects of masking, I've articulated dimensions of testimonial, participatory, and hermeneutical injustice that arise from neuronormative pressure to conform to neurotypical ways of being. Further, I've linked these pressures to an underlying neurotypical ignorance that creates the conditions for Autistic masking. In the end, I suggest that the conditions under which neurotypical ignorance produces masking are self-reinforcing because they also uphold neurotypical ignorance insofar as they eliminate hermeneutical resources from the epistemic environment. Masking has been tied to significant, detrimental impacts for Autistics who experience life-long suppression of their ways of being. Trauma resulting from masking is often tied to negative experiences in educational settings where Autistics are required to mask in order to participate with credibility in the context of learning. In the end, I've called upon educators and policy makers to evaluate the ways in which epistemic oppression is pervasive in our daily institutional lives. In rectifying these forms of oppression for Autistics we can hope to build a more just world that acknowledges and embraces the multiplicity of ways of knowing and being that can be considered flourishing in our world.

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