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Implicit Bias, Epistemic Injustice, and Pragmatic Stereotypes

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Abstract: Members of stigmatized social groups are often treated unjustly in conversation. Fricker’s influential work on epistemic injustice addresses this topic, according to which the unjust treatment is (in part) described as the way a speaker’s utterance might be assigned less (or no) credibility because of a prejudiced stereotype about her social identity held by the listener. In this paper, I offer an account of one of the mechanisms that drive instances of epistemic injustice where the interlocutors speak and behave in conversation as if they accept a prejudiced stereotype that contradicts their explicitly endorsed beliefs. I argue that interlocutors accept *pragmatic stereotypes* as background assumptions in conversations and that the acceptance of such stereotypes enforces epistemic injustice that is implicitly biased. I further critically assess whether interlocutors might try to challenge such stereotypes in conversation by engaging in meta-pragmatic negotiations about which stereotypes to accept.

Keywords: Implicit Bias; Epistemic Injustice; Pragmatic Stereotypes; Generics; Meta-Pragmatic Negotiation.

1. Introduction

Interlocutors sometimes express themselves or behave in ways that enforce or presuppose stereotypes about stigmatized social groups. Fricker’s influential work on epistemic injustice addresses this topic, according to which people are wronged in their capacity as knowers (partly) because their interlocutors presuppose a prejudiced stereotype about their social identity. I offer an account of the pragmatic mechanisms that covertly encourage interlocutors to behave in conversation as if they accept such a stereotype even when they do not actively endorse or believe it.

In section 2, I describe the phenomenon I set out to explain and how it relates to epistemic injustice and implicit bias. In section 3, I offer an account of pragmatic stereotypes, where such stereotypes are understood as a generally useful pragmatic tool for achieving efficient communication that has bad consequences when the stereotypes concern social identities. In section 4, I discuss the practical question of how interlocutors might try to challenge pragmatic stereotypes through counter-speech and argue that doing so can be costly and ineffective.

2. Epistemic Injustice and Implicit Bias

Imagine the following conversation taking place at the lunchroom at a workplace between two men and a woman:

(1) *Guy*: What's that novel called again, by Bret Easton Ellis; you know the one at the college?

Dude: I know which one you mean, the one that was made into a movie, right?

Woman: Do you mean Rules of Attraction?

Guy: Exactly, they made it into a movie 20 years ago or something, but I can't remember the name!

Woman: I'm pretty sure it's Rules of Attraction.

Dude: I just remembered; Rules of Attraction!

Guy: Yes! That's the one!

Consider the two following versions of the situation described in (1). In the first version, both Guy and Dude explicitly believe that Woman is unlikely to contribute to the topic of the conversation. They believe that she is probably not knowledgeable about the novel they are talking about,

perhaps because they think women do not generally read this sort of literature, or because they believe women are in general less knowledgeable than men. However, we can also conceive of a second version of the situation described, in which Guy and Dude accept feminist and progressive values and believe that women are just as knowledgeable as men. Still, we can imagine that despite their explicit beliefs and ideological commitments, they still end up ignoring the attempts from Woman to contribute to their conversation.

The treatment of Woman in (1) is a typical case of *epistemic injustice* (Fricker 2007). In particular, a *testimonial* injustice where Woman is assigned less credibility because of a prejudiced stereotype held by the listener; where the stereotype involves assumptions about the credibility of members of the social group to which the speaker belongs.¹ To illustrate the phenomenon, Fricker uses the fictional example of how Herbert Greenleaf treats Marge Sherwood in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* when she issues her (correct) suspicions about Ripley. In response to her, Greenleaf says:

(2) Marge, there's female intuition, and then there are facts.

Fricker describes this as a case when Sherwood suffers a testimonial injustice because of the gender prejudice held by Greenleaf (2007: 87–90). Similarly, Woman in (1) suffers a testimonial injustice because of a gender prejudice held by Guy and Dude.

The focus of this paper is on the second interpretation of (1), where Guy and Dude do not believe the stereotype about women to be true, but nevertheless behave in conversation as if they do. This is a case in which the prejudiced stereotype at work in the background of the conversation is not as blatant as the example in (2) from Fricker. In (2), Greenleaf explicitly expresses the belief

¹ One option is to view it as a *distributive* testimonial injustice (Lackey 2023), where the credibility is unequally and improperly distributed within a group of interlocutors (due to prejudice).

that Sherwood's testimony is untrustworthy by being a result of female intuition rather than facts. There is no plausible interpretation of this situation in which the injustice he commits is derived from his implicit, rather than explicit attitudes about women.

The phenomenon explored here is how, in the second interpretation of what happens in (1), Guy and Dude commit a testimonial injustice that is *implicitly biased*.² Implicit bias is roughly understood as the phenomenon that people who endorse anti-racist, feminist, and egalitarian beliefs behave in discriminatory ways – not just in conversation, but more generally in various kind interactions and settings. When they do, their behaviour is explained by appealing to implicit attitudes or psychological processes, rather than their explicitly endorsed beliefs.

The thought that there is an interesting relationship between implicit bias and epistemic injustice has been discussed elsewhere. Holroyd and Puddifoot (2020) argue that 'Implicit bias might be one of the mechanisms involved in perpetuating epistemic and other forms of injustice' (2020: 119) and helpfully describe how implicit bias appears to be involved in various forms of epistemic injustice, including (but not limited to) testimonial injustice.³ Moreover, Fricker also contends that the prejudiced stereotypes held by interlocutors should not be understood doxastically, since doing so would lead to an underestimation of how frequently testimonial injustices happen. As she argues:

Many instances of testimonial injustice [...] will be owing not to prejudiced beliefs at all but only to stealthier, residual prejudices, whose content may even be flatly inconsistent with the beliefs actually held by the subject. Certainly we may

² For early work on implicit bias, see (Banaji, Hardin & Rothman 1993; Greenwald & Banaji 1995; Greenwald, McGhee & Schwartz 1998).

³ See also Stanley et al. {Citation} (2011) for implicit association test concerning trustworthiness assignments.

sometimes perpetrate testimonial injustice because of our beliefs; but the more philosophically intriguing prospect is that we may very frequently do it in spite of them. (Fricker 2007: 36)

Research on implicit bias has traditionally focused on *theoretical* questions concerning what implicit biases are,⁴ *empirical* question of how to measure or reveal implicit biases,⁵ and *practical*⁶ questions of what we should do about our implicit biases – and if there is anything we can do since interventions often at most have short-term effects (Lai *et al.* 2016; Forscher *et al.* 2019). Although there is much to be said about these issues, the focus of this paper lies elsewhere (although some practical considerations are raised in section 4).

The primary focus of this paper is instead on how implicit bias *works* in conversational contexts and the *structural* mechanisms that enforce them. I refrain from taking a stance on what kind of mental states or processes implicit biases are. Implicit bias will here instead be understood as the phenomenon that we want to explain – namely *that* people behave in prejudiced ways despite their explicit non-prejudiced beliefs and values. Some such explanations may be psychological (i.e. referring to mental processes and tendencies). My aim is to instead focus on language: to identify and analyse a linguistic mechanism that fosters implicitly biased behaviour in conversation, such testimonial injustice. This does not conflict with psychological explanations of implicit bias (at least not necessarily) but can instead be complementary to them. We can thus

⁴ For instance, see Gendler (2008) on aliefs, (Egan 2008; Huddleston 2012) on contradictory beliefs, (Machery 2017) on traits, and (Gawronski & Bodenhausen 2006) on psychological processes.

⁵ Mainly through Implicit Association Tests (Greenwald, McGhee & Schwartz 1998).

⁶ For instance, see (Monteith 1993; Blair, Ma & Lenton 2001; Dasgupta & Greenwald 2001; Monteith *et al.* 2002; Aberson, Porter & Gaffney 2008; Dasgupta & Rivera 2008) for different such approaches.

provide a fuller picture of the mechanisms that contribute to implicitly biased behaviour by considering different sources of explanation.

The importance of structural rather than individualistic accounts of implicit bias has been emphasized by researchers both in psychology (Oswald *et al.* 2013, 2015; Lai *et al.* 2016; Payne Vuletich & Lundberg 2017; Forscher *et al.* 2019) and philosophy (Anderson 2010; Haslanger 2015; Ayala 2016; Ayala-López 2018). Moreover, it has similarly been argued that research on epistemic injustice should also focus more on the structural aspects that enforce these injustices, rather than on individuals and their flawed psychology (Vasilyeva & Ayala-López 2019; Podosky 2022: 452). As Vasilyeva and Ayala López argue, we should focus on ‘the correlations that exist in our corrupted society and are picked up by our minds as we form representations useful for navigating the world we inhabit’ (2019: 64).

The account that I present is structural in the sense that it reveals the mechanisms that govern communication between interlocutors, rather than just the beliefs or attitudes of individual speakers. I focus on the pragmatic mechanisms that enforce biased behaviour in talk exchanges even in cases when the behaviour contradicts the interlocutors’ explicitly endorsed beliefs. I account for the way interlocutors rely on stereotypes about social groups in their communicative exchanges even if no speaker believes or endorses the stereotype.

While the account particularly focuses on the mechanisms that enforce testimonial injustices, such as the case in (1), it pertains more broadly to the topic of how interlocutors behave and are treated in conversation. As such, it is related to the literature on *silencing* (Langton 1993), and *discursive injustice* (Kukla 2014; Ayala-López 2018). The way that interlocutors rely on stereotypes in conversation may play an important role in understanding various ways in which

people are disproportionately ignored, questioned, disbelieved, or in other ways mistreated in conversation.

Moreover, the hope is that the view presented might shed light on other phenomena related to testimonial injustice. For instance: Hermeneutic injustice occurs when interlocutors lack the relevant hermeneutical resources to understand and describe their experiences. Meta-linguistic or contextual injustice occurs when speakers lack the ability to determine the meanings of existing mutual hermeneutic resources (Ichikawa 2020; Podosky 2022; Björkholm 2024). Content focused epistemic injustice happens when a claim is rejected because of the things that it communicates, rather than because of the identity of the speaker (Dembroff & Whitcomb 2022). Testimonial smothering occurs when the interlocutors censors or omits saying something because her audience is perceived unwilling or unable to hear it (Dotson 2011). In addition, there are perhaps ways that a speaker's capacity as a giver of knowledge is obstructed that cannot be traced back to the prejudice of the hearer (Perrine 2023). It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully evaluate the ways that the account presented relates to these different forms of injustices, but it is a topic well-worth exploring for further research.

The main aim of the paper is to offer a new perspective on the relationship between testimonial injustice and implicit bias by providing linguistic resources for how to think of prejudiced stereotypes in conversation and how they work. The proposal presented thus accounts for a phenomenon that has been described elsewhere but offers new theoretical tools for how to understand it. I provide an account of the pragmatic stereotypes implicitly accepted in conversation, starting with describing the background pragmatics in section 3.1. and applying it to social identity stereotypes in section 3.2.

3. Implicit Bias and Pragmatic Stereotypes

3.1. The I-Heuristic and Stereotypes in the Discourse Structure

Dynamic pragmatics provides a framework for understanding stereotypes in conversation. The central idea is that interlocutors of a conversation make assumptions about the background context of their communicative exchange. One of the most influential versions of this is Stalnaker's view that interlocutors make *pragmatic presuppositions* about what is mutually believed.⁷ The set of propositions that are mutually accepted to be common belief form the *common ground*. Interlocutors aim to update the common ground when they utter sentences, and their utterances will be interpreted against the background of the information contained in this body of shared information.

In more recent work in dynamic pragmatics, the conversational background – or, the *discourse structure*, as I call it – is thought to include not only the common ground, but also a *question set* (Roberts 2006, 2012) and a *to-do list function* (Portner 2004, 2007). The question set is a list of *questions under discussion* that the interlocutors all accept that they aim to resolve, and the to-do list function assigns properties onto each interlocutor's to-do list, representing the actions that they are expected to perform. This way of modelling the discourse context can be understood as a rational reconstruction of what happens in conversations that keeps track not only of common belief, but also common inquiry and behavioural commitments.

The content of the discourse structure does not necessarily represent the beliefs, inquiries and commitments that are *actually* shared among interlocutors. When a proposition is included in the common ground (for instance), the proposition is accepted as common belief, but an interlocutor might do so without actually believing it. As Stalnaker puts it:

⁷ Cf. Lewis (1979b) on conversational score.

Presupposing is thus not a mental attitude like believing, but is rather a linguistic disposition—a disposition to behave in one's use of language as if one had certain beliefs, or were making certain assumptions [...] A proposition is presupposed if the speaker is disposed to act as if he assumes or believes that the proposition is true, and as if he assumes or believes that his audience assumes or believes that it is true as well. (Stalnaker 1999: 52, 58).

Hence, 'acceptance' is a socio-linguistic disposition to speak and behave in conversation as if the proposition is mutually believed to be true. Interlocutors need not believe all the propositions that are included in the common ground. But they can still accept these propositions *for the sake of conversation*, in which case they will be expected to adjust their behaviour in accordance with the contents in the discourse structure. The same thing goes for the question set and to-do list. A speaker might promise to attend a party and yet have no intention of going, in which case she has committed to having the act of attending the party on her to-do list. Insofar as the other interlocutors are concerned, she is expected to attend, and all interlocutors will be disposed to behave in conversation as if this is her intention.

An interlocutor can add content to the discourse context, either by asserting it or by presupposing it. When an interlocutor utters a sentence which carries a pragmatic presupposition, she speaks *as if* the presupposed content is already part of the common ground even though it has not already previously been added. For instance, a speaker might say 'Even Jenny passed the test' presupposing that Jenny was unlikely to do so. The other interlocutors may *accommodate* this presupposed content as part of the common ground, or they might try to block it from entering –

for instance, by saying something like ‘What do you mean *even* Jenny?’ (Lewis 1979a; von Fintel 2008).

In most conversations, the interlocutors are likely to take some things for granted (Clark 1992). For instance, in most conversations, it will be common ground that gravity exists, that the Earth is round, and that France is in Europe. But there is no need for any of the interlocutors to explicitly assert these sentences or even say something that presupposes it. Such general world knowledge constitutes *default presuppositions* in the discourse structure. Interlocutors might similarly accept questions in the question set and actions on to-do lists by default. For instance, pragmatic guidelines such as Gricean maxims can be understood as items assigned by default to each interlocutor’s to-do list.⁸

A central assumption of the view presented here is that the discourse structure also includes *stereotypes* as default presuppositions in the discourse context. Generally, stereotypes are a useful linguistic tool for communicating efficiently. As Levinson (2000) argues, phonetic articulation is a ‘bottleneck’ since our ability to cognitively infer is much quicker than our ability to utter words – ‘inference is cheap, articulation expensive’, as he puts it (2000: 29). Interlocutors must therefore find shortcuts to be able to convey more than is literally said by an utterance. According to Levinson, this is achieved by the interlocutors adhering to general *heuristics*. One of these is the *I-Heuristic*, saying ‘What is expressed is stereotypically exemplified’ (Levinson 2000: 37). It is inspired by Grice’s second Maxim of Quantity ‘Do not say more than you must’. The thought is that since interlocutors take for granted that they all follow this heuristic, they infer that unless an interlocutor suggests otherwise, the situation described by an utterance is stereotypically

⁸ Cf. (Roberts 2006: 215–216).

instantiated. They therefore need not spend valuable time articulating the stereotypical features of the situation described.

To illustrate, suppose you are planning tonight's dinner and want your partner to buy yellow tomatoes for a dish you are preparing. In this case, it would be insufficient for you to ask your partner to buy *tomatoes*. You would need to specify that you require *yellow tomatoes*. By contrast, if you wanted red tomatoes, then you would not need to specify the colour. The reason is that you can rely on the fact that both of you follow the I-heuristic and, as I will now argue, that you both accept a stereotype about tomatoes according to which they are red and.

Inferences made from the I-heuristic thus require that there are *pragmatic stereotypes* accepted by default in the discourse structure. We can communicate more efficiently because we implicitly assume both that we all follow the I-heuristic that we share these stereotypes – and we rely on our mutual acceptance of them when we make utterances.

A pragmatic stereotype is a *generic* proposition (or set of propositions) in the common ground accepted by default. Generics are sentences that associate a group of objects or individuals with some property without using any specific quantifier (e.g. all, most, some). These include sentences such as 'Ducks lay eggs' and 'Mosquitos carry the West Nile Virus'. Such sentences associate a property (e.g. laying eggs or carrying the West Nile Virus) with a group of individuals or objects (e.g. Ducks or Mosquitos). But there is no general rule for how many members of the kind must instantiate the property for a generic to be true. For instance, 'Ducks lay eggs' is intuitively true but 'Ducks are female' is not, although both laying eggs and being female are properties instantiated by roughly 50% of ducks. Moreover, generics can be true even if a majority

of the members of the kind do not instantiate the property; for instance, it is true that Mosquitos carry the West Nile Virus, even though only a small percentage of mosquitos do so.⁹

In short, pragmatic stereotypes can be characterized as follows:

Pragmatic Stereotype: A (set of) generic proposition(s) in the common ground that represents the members of a group of objects or individuals as possessing a (set of) characteristic(s).

Understood this way, pragmatic stereotypes are a natural part of the discourse structure and serve an important function in making communication more efficient. For instance, ‘Tomatoes are red’ is a pragmatic stereotype presupposed by default in the common ground in most conversational contexts. It allows interlocutors to make inferences from the I-heuristic. They can communicate more efficiently because they need not mention the stereotypical property when they describe an object that instantiates the stereotype (such as a red tomato).

To sum up, I have argued that the stereotypes assumed in Levinson’s I-heuristic should be represented as default presupposition in the discourse structure. An interlocutor will therefore infer from the utterance ‘Buy tomatoes’ that the speaker wants red tomatoes because she assumes that she and her interlocutor both follow the I-heuristic and accept a stereotype that tomatoes are red. I now argue that while this pragmatic tool is generally useful, it has unwanted effects when the pragmatic stereotypes are about social groups.

⁹ There is significant disagreement over how to understand the semantic contents of generics. See for instance, (Geurts 1985; Heyer 1985; Declerck 1986; Cohen 1999, 2004; Nickel 2008, 2016).

3.2. Social Identity Stereotypes, Epistemic Injustice, and Implicit Bias

The main claim that I argue for in this section is that while the reliance on stereotypes and the I-heuristic is generally useful for efficient communication, it can have unwanted effects. When the pragmatic stereotypes are about members of social groups, relying on them in conversation can lead to testimonial injustice, and perhaps also other forms of epistemic and discursive injustices.

To see how, let us start by considering an example of how such stereotypes are often implicit in conversation:

(3) *Lady*: I cut my finger badly yesterday and had to go to the emergency room. It was awful, the doctor was so rude.

Dame: You can never trust a man in a white coat to treat you decently.

Lady: Actually, she wore scrubs.

This is a case in which Dame infers two things that go beyond what Lady explicitly says. Dame infers both that the doctor wore a white coat and that the doctor was male. This way that listeners (or readers) infer the gender of an individual from information about their profession (e.g. ‘doctor’ ‘electrician’, ‘florist’ ‘nurse’) has also been investigated empirically by measuring things such as eye-movements and reading time (Duffy & Keir 2004; Kreiner Sturt & Garrod 2008; Guerra *et al.* 2021).

There are also other illustrative examples of how interlocutors rely on social identity stereotypes in conversation. For instance, just consider relatively common phrases such as ‘*strong* woman’ or ‘*intelligent* woman’. These signal that there is a need to specify the strength or

intelligence of women since it diverges from the stereotype of what women are like – in much the same way as speakers might be inclined to say, ‘*male* nurse’ or ‘*female* doctor’.

Moreover, I argue elsewhere that utterances containing standard triggers of conventional implicature such as ‘but’ and ‘even’, can presume prejudiced stereotypes (Björkholm 2024). For example, a sentence such as ‘Even a woman could solve this equation’ presupposes a stereotype according to which women are bad at mathematics (Björkholm 2024: 8). To take another related example, consider a mother who, on her first day back to work after her parental leave, encounters one of her colleagues, who says:

(4) Are you back from parental leave already?

The speaker’s use of ‘already’ implicates that the mother is finishing her parental leave earlier than is customary – that this diverges from what she is expected to do. The utterance presupposes a stereotype according to which mothers stay home a certain amount of time after the child is born.

There are interesting differences between the way that interlocutors infer stereotype properties about inanimate objects (such as the colour of tomatoes or the clothing of doctors), and the way that they infer properties of social groups (such as the gender of doctors or the appropriate time for parental leave). While generic propositions such as ‘Ducks lay eggs’, ‘Tomatoes are red’ or ‘Doctors wear white coats’ are of *semantic* interest, generic propositions about social identity groups, such as ‘Boys don’t cry’, ‘Women are nurturing’ and ‘Immigrants bring crime’ are also of *political* and *ethical* interest – and many have argued that there is an intimate connection between generics and stereotyping (Haslanger 2012; Langton Haslanger & Anderson 2012; Beeghly 2015; Wodak, Leslie & Rhodes 2015; Leslie 2017; Wodak & Leslie 2017; Bosse 2022).

There are two aspects of generics about social identities that are inherited by pragmatic stereotypes about social groups. These make them potentially pernicious when they are relied on in conversation. First, according to Leslie (2015), we tend to think of social kinds as *essentialized* which means that we attribute to them a shared underlying nature. Haslanger (2012) builds on this idea from Leslie and argues that generics such as ‘Women are submissive’ or ‘Boys don’t cry’ carry implicatures about the *nature* or *essence* of women and boys. They implicate that there is something about the nature of women that make them submissive and something about the nature of boys that make them prone not to cry.

The way that generics essentialize social groups can be preserved in the pragmatic stereotype which consists of generic propositions. This means that while there is a reading of the stereotype that merely states something statistically true of some group of individuals, it may also be read as saying something about the way this group is by their nature or essence. To exemplify, consider the example in (4) of the mother returning from parental leave. The colleague’s utterance indicates that they presuppose a mutually accepted pragmatic stereotype of how much parental leave women take (which will, of course, be culturally determined). While there is a reading of the stereotype that states a mere statistical fact about how long mothers stay home on average, the property of staying home the average time can also be interpreted as something about what is natural for mothers to do. Moreover, it might be further intertwined with a more complex stereotype according to which women nurture children rather than focus on their career or provide economically for the family, where this can be interpreted as a fact about the nature or essence of women.

The second feature of generics about social groups that can be preserved when they occur as the content of pragmatic stereotypes is that they can have a *normative* force (Burton-Roberts

1977; Cohen 2001; McConnell-Ginet 2012; Leslie 2015). Roughly, the thought is that a generic such as ‘Boys don’t cry’ says something about how boys *ought* to behave, not only how they *do* behave. One way to understand a claim such as ‘Boys don’t cry’ is that it invokes a normative reading of the term ‘boy’, where this term is understood as a *dual character* concept that has a descriptive and a normative reading (Knobe, Prasada & Newman 2013; Leslie 2015). The normative reading says something about what ‘real’ or ‘true’ boys are like, characterizing an ideal of how boys behave. According to Leslie, the normative force associated with generics stem from the *social roles* that we associate with some social kinds and that members of this social kind have a *prima facie* obligation to possess the features that are constitutive of the social role (Leslie 2015: 130). Utterances such as ‘Boys don’t cry’ can have an imperative-like force.

If a parent utters “boys don’t cry” to her weeping son, she is chastising him—suggesting that he is not a real boy, but also assuming that he *should* be a real boy, and therefore should stop crying (Leslie, 2015, pp. 123–124).

The normative force of generics about social identity groups affects the nature of pragmatic stereotypes about them and makes their content distinctive from other pragmatic stereotypes. To see how, recall that the discourse structure includes a to-do list function, which is primarily updated by utterances of imperatives. For instance, by saying ‘Close the window!’ the speaker aims to add the act of closing the window onto the addressee’s to-do list. To-do lists can also have properties by default. As I argue elsewhere, we can think of conversational and social norms as (sets of) default items on to-do lists (Björkholm forthcoming).¹⁰

¹⁰ Roberts similarly argues that pragmatic norms such as Gricean maxims are ‘meta-presuppositions’ (Roberts, 2006, p. 215)

The normative dimension of social identity stereotypes can be represented on to-do lists as the acts that are considered appropriate or even obligatory for a member of that group to perform. In a conversational context where the interlocutors accept the social identity stereotype that boys do not cry, the property of *not crying* will be assigned by default to the to-do list of boys that enter that conversational context. In other cases, the stereotype not only adds properties onto the to-do list of the members of the group, but it also includes properties about the group to which the stereotype applies on other interlocutor's to-do lists. For instance, the stereotype that women are less knowledgeable than men assign a property *about women* onto the interlocutors' to-do lists, rather than (merely) a property on women's to-do lists.

The normative dimension of social identity stereotypes sets them apart from other pragmatic stereotypes since they affect not only the common ground, but also the to-do list function. Social identity stereotypes can be characterized as follows:

Pragmatic Social Identity Stereotype:

- (i) a (set of) generic proposition(s) in the common ground that represent the members of a group of individuals who share social identity as possessing a certain (set of) characteristic(s), and,
- (ii) a property (or set of properties) assigned by default to the to-do lists of members of the group of individuals to which the generic proposition applies, or about the members of this group to the other interlocutors' to-do lists.

The thought that stereotypes are normative (or prescriptive) is also discussed by Munroe (2016), who argues that a prescriptive understanding of stereotypes should be part of our understanding of testimonial injustices.

Traditionally, stereotypes have been characterized in purely descriptive terms, but in light of recent literature a prescriptive aspect to stereotypes has been theorized to play an important role in attitudes toward women and other social groups [...] some stereotypes are thought to embody not merely generalizations about how certain social groups are but views about how members of those social groups should be. (Munroe, 2016, p. 932)

This normative dimension of pragmatic stereotypes might explain their relation to some acts of *stereotyping*, that is, acts of applying a stereotype onto individuals who are perceived to be members of the group to which the stereotype applies (Puddifoot, 2021, p. 3). Since social identity stereotypes include items on to-do lists, they affect how interlocutors expect others to behave based on their social identities. If an individual acts in a way that diverges from these expectations, she will be considered to act inappropriately or at least surprisingly. For instance, if the discourse structure includes the stereotype that women are submissive, then *being submissive* will be assigned by default onto female interlocutors' to-do lists. If a woman behaves dominantly in this context, she will act in opposition with how she is expected according to the content of the discourse structure.

To sum up the account so far, I have argued that the I-heuristic generally works as a useful pragmatic tool for achieving efficient communication and that it presupposes that the interlocutors

mutually accept certain stereotypes from which the inferences of the heuristic are made. I then argued that speakers make inferences about social groups. Interlocutors accept, as default presuppositions in the discourse structure, stereotypes about objects and members of groups. I then argued that social identity stereotypes are especially problematic because they inherit the essentializing and normative dimensions of social identity generics.

I now turn to consider how pragmatic stereotypes relate to testimonial injustice. In (1), Woman is treated unjustly in her capacity as a knower because Guy and Dude behave in accordance with a pragmatic stereotype about the credibility of women that is accepted in the discourse structure. Moreover, the normative aspect of social identity stereotypes can also have an important role to play in the assignment of credibility. Munroe argues that a credibility deficit can come as a backlash from normative aspects of stereotypes. Roughly, the thought is that speakers who come across as likeable often have more influence in a conversation. But women who diverge from the female stereotype of being agreeable and caring – and who instead display assertiveness – might be perceived as unlikeable. Therefore, they have less influence in conversation. As Munroe puts it ‘prescriptive credibility deficits arise from a backlash effect in which the speaker is punished by being assigned a lower level of credibility than deserved in virtue of flouting a relevant prescriptive stereotype’ (Munroe, 2016, p. 936). This can be explained partly by virtue of the way social identity stereotypes assign by default properties on to-do lists.

So far, the account presented has been silent about the way pragmatic stereotypes explain testimonial injustice that is implicitly biased. It is important to note that while I focus on cases of implicit bias in conversation, the pragmatic mechanisms described are also at work in cases when interlocutors simply endorse prejudiced beliefs and stereotypes – such as Fricker’s case in (2). While the view presented applies to these cases too, I find them less interesting to focus on than

the cases in which interlocutors who oppose these stereotypes nevertheless behave in conversation as if they accept them. I use the pragmatic tools that have been presented to provide a story of how linguistic mechanisms enforce implicitly biased testimonial injustice.

The hypothesis presented here is that interlocutors who endorse progressive values and beliefs might nevertheless behave biased in conversation, where this is a result of their implicit acceptance of pragmatic stereotypes about social groups. Recall that to ‘accept’ content into the discourse structure is to have a (socio-)linguistic disposition to behave in accordance with it in conversation. To accept a social identity stereotype in the discourse structure is for the interlocutors to speak and behave in conversation as if this stereotype is true. But the interlocutors need not actually believe that it is.

In (1), we can understand the behaviour of Guy and Dude to reflect that they accept (but do not believe) a social identity stereotype that women are less knowledgeable (and perhaps also that they act softly, silently, or in other ways are unassertive). This means that they possess a socio-linguistic disposition to listen less to women. Again, this need not entail that they ignore Woman on purpose; but it means that they behave in accordance with the default assumption that she will not contribute to the topic of the ongoing conversation and is therefore not expected to say anything. When she nevertheless makes an utterance, Guy and Dude do not even register it. In this case, they act on their implicit bias, which is understood as a result of a social identity stereotype about women that is implicitly accepted by Guy and Dude as part of the discourse structure.

3.2.1. A Worry about Acceptance

One might object that, normally, when an interlocutor accepts something into the discourse structure, this means that they do so *deliberately*. While this does not mean that they must believe

the accepted content, they *know* that they have accepted it. For instance, a parent might go along with a friendly stranger saying ‘What a pretty girl’ about their baby boy, not bothering to correct the mistake. But this is a deliberate decision to accept the proposition that the baby is a girl into the common ground. Since the notion of ‘acceptance’ is a deliberate conversational move, it appears ill-suited to account for implicit bias in conversation.

In response to this objection, we can distinguish between different ways of accepting content into the discourse structure. At a general level, to accept something in the discourse structure, just is to have a disposition to act in accordance with it in conversation. In some cases, an interlocutor both accepts and believes a proposition *p*, but in other cases, she merely accepts *p* without believing it. Moreover, acceptance might be *deliberate* or *non-deliberate*. For instance, an interlocutor might *deliberately* accept *p* into the discourse structure because they cannot be bothered to block it from entering (such as the case with the parent above), or because they want to mislead, or just for the sake of an argument. But in other cases, an interlocutor might accept something without it being a deliberate move.

One might worry that stipulating this characterization of ‘acceptance’ is *ad hoc*. However, there are at least two independent reasons for stipulating it. First, many of the things that interlocutors take for granted by default do not become evident to them until it comes up in conversation. For instance, in most conversations, one will assume by default that the proposition that the earth is round is common ground – but one does not explicitly think about it in each conversation. It might become evident, even to the speaker herself, that she had assumed that it was common ground only once the shape of the Earth becomes the topic of conversation.

Second, recall that we can think of general pragmatic guidelines, such as Gricean maxims or the I-heuristic itself, as default contents of the discourse structure. But the thought behind these

pragmatic frameworks is precisely that interlocutors *implicitly* accept these guidelines, and that they act in conversation as if they all do so. The thought is not that the acceptance of these guidelines is a deliberate decision made by an interlocutor. Moreover, recall that other norms implicit in conversation (social, moral, etiquette) might also be understood as default presuppositions similar to the pragmatic guidelines (Grice, 1989, p. 28; Björkholm, forthcoming). With many such norms, it seems intuitive to think that there is an implicit and non-deliberate acceptance that goes on at a social and automatic level.

Similarly, the thought defended here is that speakers may become aware that they have accepted a pragmatic stereotype by default, even though they, at no point, made a deliberate decision to do so. Implicit bias is not something that people go around actively thinking about, but they are instead *triggered* or *cued* in certain contexts, by images, concepts, or situations. This appears to be what happens with pragmatic stereotypes in the discourse structure. They are non-deliberately accepted by default and become triggered in certain conversational contexts.

Still, interlocutors can accept social or conversational norms deliberately too. For instance, just imagine a man who engages in ‘locker-room talk’ with his colleagues to earn a promotion. We can imagine that the man rejects the norms implicit in this interaction, such as the way that women are talked about or the macho standards conveyed about the men themselves. Still, he wants to advance in his career and therefore accepts these norms for the sake of conversation. In fact, we can even imagine a case in which the entire group of men engage in this behaviour even though none of them endorse the norms presupposed – they just act as if they do so because they think it is what is expected of them. But in addition, as I have argued, we can also think of situations in which the acceptance of such default presuppositions is non-deliberate.

In short, I have argued that pragmatic stereotypes can be used to give a structural pragmatic account of implicitly biased testimonial injustice since interlocutors often make inferences based on such stereotypes by default, even in cases when they do not outright believe the stereotype to be true. This form of testimonial injustice is understood as a kind of side-effect of the otherwise useful pragmatic tool of relying on stereotypes in conversation to achieve efficient communication.

Before I conclude, I will turn to the practical question of whether we might try to combat pragmatic stereotypes through counter-speech.

4. Obstacles for Meta-Pragmatic Negotiation as Counter-Speech

In this final section, I address the practical question of how the mechanisms behind implicitly biased behaviour in cases of testimonial injustice might be combatted. Recall that if an interlocutor disagrees with content uttered or presupposed by another interlocutor, she can block it from entering the discourse structure. This section identifies obstacles for blocking pragmatic stereotypes through counter-speech.

When a speaker tries to block a pragmatic stereotype, she engages in a *meta-pragmatic negotiation*. This be understood as a close relative to *meta-linguistic* negotiations (Plunkett and Sundell, 2013, 2021), which occur when the interlocutors of a dispute use a term in conflicting ways and prescribe different views of how that term should be used. For instance, two speakers might agree on what temperature it is outside and nevertheless disagree about whether it is cold. Understood as a meta-linguistic negotiation, their disagreement concerns whether the temperature outside should be described as ‘cold’ according to their prescribed use of the term.

In much the same way as speakers can negotiate the meanings of terms, they can negotiate about stereotypes presupposed in conversation. While the former kind of dispute is a meta-

linguistic negotiation concerning the meanings of words, the latter is a meta-pragmatic negotiation about the background assumptions and underlying pragmatic principles that are implicit in conversation. To illustrate, consider the following continuation of the conversations in (1):

(5) *Guy*: What's that novel called again, by Bret Easton Ellis; you know the one at the college?

...

Woman: HEY! I said Rules of Attraction several times. Why didn't you listen? Women know things too you know / Women read Bret Easton Ellis novels too, you know.

This illustrates a way to challenge a pragmatic stereotype by making it salient that the interlocutors relied on it. However, there are limits to and obstacles for this type of counter-speech. I start by raising a concern about whether counter-speech is worthwhile since it might not have lasting effects. I then move on to raise two concerns about the potential costs or risks of engaging in counter-speech. Finally, I raise a concern about the ability to successfully negotiate pragmatic stereotypes, given that the speaker is assigned a credibility deficit – or other undermining characteristics – because of those stereotypes.

First, an interlocutor who often engages in a meta-pragmatic negotiation might grow tired of challenging stereotypes since previous attempts might not have had long-term effects. Many of the interventions against implicit bias that have been proposed only reduce implicitly biased behaviour momentarily. Implicit bias tends to bounce back. Hence, even if Woman successfully challenges the stereotype and Guy and Dude acknowledge their behaviour, the effect is likely to be short-lived. After Woman challenges the stereotype, Guy and Dude might adjust their behaviour only for a short period of time and then fall back into the same default presuppositions again. This

tendency might make people grow tired of trying to engage in counter-speech, since the effects do not last.

Second, it might be costly or risky to try to challenge the presupposed stereotype. In some contexts, it might be welcomed by the other interlocutors to have their implicit stereotypes challenged. For instance, in conversations amongst friends who all want to avoid prejudice and disrespect, it might be customary to call each other out. However, there are many cases in which this would not be as simple. There are contexts when the interlocutors do not welcome being challenged, or when the interlocutor who challenges the stereotype is uncertain about how interlocutors will receive such criticism. For instance, at a workplace, job-interview, apartment viewing, or at dinner with one's partners' parents, one might want to come across as agreeable. In some of these cases, there are potential practical costs. The speaker might not want to jeopardize her chances of getting a promotion or signing a contract. This does not necessarily mean that the interlocutor would not be open to being challenged in these situations, but the risk might not seem worth taking.

Relatedly, someone who challenges a stereotype might risk coming across as uncharitable to their interlocutor since there are different possible interpretations of generics. It can therefore be socially risky to challenge a pragmatic stereotype if the interlocutor is uncertain about which reading of the generic was intended.

To clarify, some argue that the meaning of a generic varies from case to case. For instance, according to Sterken's (2015) view about the semantic content of generics, they are context-variant on several levels. The thought is that the correct semantic interpretation of a generic can vary in its *quantificational* force (does the generic concern all, many, some of the objects/individuals of the category described?), its *lexical* domain (does the generic concern actual members, or normal

members of the objects/individuals of the category described?), and in other contextual restrictions. Sterken, Plunkett and Sundell (2023) argue that this makes generics especially apt for meta-linguistic negotiation about which semantic interpretation of a generic is appropriate at a context.

However, this feature of generics also makes them difficult to challenge. The reason is that an interlocutor might risk calling someone out on invoking a reading of generic that they did not actually intend to begin with. For instance, consider again the case with the colleague in (4), but in which the mother challenges the stereotype presupposed:

(6) *Colleague*: Are back from your parental leave already?

Mother: What do you mean ‘already’?

Colleague: I just meant that statistically, women usually stay home longer. But I applaud you for breaking the norm!

Colleague distances herself from the essentializing and normative readings of the stereotype about how long women are on parental leave. The problem is that this type of interaction might make Mother come across as uncharitable and confrontative, even though it would successfully negotiate the pragmatic stereotype to a non-essentializing reading. A speaker might therefore choose to abstain from counter-speech, because she does not want to come across as misinterpreting their interlocutors’ intentions in an uncharitable way.

Lastly, there are power dynamics that might constitute obstacles for successful meta-pragmatic negotiations. According to Podosky, speakers can have more or less control over the process of pairing words with contents in meta-linguistic negotiations. In some cases, the

inequality in this control is justified (e.g. because of expertise), but in some cases it is not. Inequalities in meta-linguistic control can be derived from illegitimate power dynamics. As Podosky puts it:

[U]nequal control in metalinguistic negotiation is often a function of being situated in unjust systems of dominance and subordination, such as hierarchical relations between members of certain identity groups (e.g., White/Black). When one has greater control in the joint activity of pairing contents with words *in virtue of* belonging to an identity group in a position of unjust dominance over the identity group of an interlocutor, then this control is illegitimate. (Podosky, 2022, p. 453)

The type of prejudice involved in epistemic injustice affect a speaker's ability to engage in a meta-linguistic negotiation (Podosky, 2022). Podosky relates this to *hermeneutic* injustices, i.e. when an interlocutor lacks the relevant terminology to properly describe, communicate, and understand her experiences. This is exemplified by the way that the expression 'sexual harassment' enabled women to understand and express their experiences in a way that had not been possible prior to its introduction (Fricker, 2007, pp. 150–151). While testimonial and hermeneutic injustice are different kinds of epistemic injustice, they are closely connected. Members of a social group may lack the adequate terminology for describing and understanding their experiences because their history of suffering testimonial injustice has precluded them from introducing new terminology (Fricker and Jenkins, 2017, pp. 270–271). This might not only affect whether a speaker can introduce *new* terminology, but it also affects her ability to determine the meanings of the *existing* shared linguistic resources (Podosky 2022; Björkholm 2024). To see how, consider the following example from Podosky:

(7) *Woman*: You brushed up against my butt, that's sexual harassment!

Man: Don't be so sensitive, that's way too trivial to count.

Podosky argues that the dispute between Woman and Man in (7) can be interpreted as being about whether the term 'sexual harassment' is appropriate to use in the context. The thought from Podosky is that men often have an advantage over women in meta-linguistic negotiations because of social identity stereotypes about men and women, such as men being trustworthy and women being irrational and unreliable (Podosky 2022: 454). Identity prejudice thus affects what an interlocutor can achieve in meta-linguistic negotiations.

Meta-pragmatic negotiations can, in much the same way, be sensitive to these forms of power dynamics. Members of stigmatized social groups may be unable to successfully challenge a pragmatic stereotype – and might even be unable to get their interlocutor to recognise that they acted upon such a stereotype to begin with. Especially if, as I have been assuming, Guy and Dude are not aware of their behaviour and view themselves as abiding feminists, Woman's attempt in (5) might be unsuccessful since it clashes with the interlocutors' view of themselves and their experience of the situation. They might therefore instead think that Woman is overreacting or misrepresenting what happened. Since Guy and Dude do not ignore Woman purposefully, her attempt at a meta-pragmatic negotiation might come across as confrontative and overly sensitive. After all, anyone can be ignored in conversation every once in a while – and it might only be noticeable from the perspective of the victim that this is an instance of a broader trend of injustice.

In such cases, there is a feedback loop in the pragmatic system: Guy and Dude might be inclined to distrust that they behaved in accordance with a pragmatic stereotype about women and

interpret Woman as being overly sensitive – which, in turn, is derived from a stereotype about women being sensitive and unreliable. This can be taken as a reason for thinking that the burden of engaging in counter-speech should often fall upon third parties, rather than the person whose credibility is questioned by the pragmatic stereotypes. But, as I claimed above, a problem about this is that the experiences highlighted here might be difficult to notice for those who are not subjected to the injustice.

In short, I have argued that interlocutors might try to challenge pragmatic stereotypes in conversation through counter-speech. However, I argued that there are limits and costs to such attempts.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that pragmatic stereotypes are a generally useful linguistic tool for making communication more efficient. When pragmatic stereotypes are formed about groups of people who share a social identity, they often inherit the *essentializing* and *normative* dimensions of generics. Since pragmatic stereotypes are part of the discourse structure by default, they should be treated as shared sociolinguistic dispositions rather than individual mental states. They therefore provide an important tool in giving a structural account of conversational implicit bias.¹¹

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