

“It’s All in Your Head”: Epistemic Injustice, Prejudice, and Power in the Modern Healthcare System

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Abstract : Epistemic injustice, an injustice done to a person specifically in their capacity as a “knower”, is a subtle form of discrimination, yet its effects can be as dehumanizing and damaging as more overt forms of discrimination. The lens of epistemic injustice has, in recent years, been fruitfully applied to the field of healthcare, examining questions of agency, power, credibility and belief in doctor-patient interactions. Contested illness patients (e.g., those with illnesses lacking scientific consensus such as fibromyalgia (FM), Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS) and Long Covid) face higher levels of scrutiny than other patient groups and are often disbelieved or dismissed when their ailments cannot be easily imaged or tested for- often encapsulated by the expression “it’s all in your head”. Using the case study of FM, the trials of contested illness patients in healthcare can be conceptualized in terms of epistemic injustice, and what is going wrong in these doctor-patient relationships can be effectively diagnosed. This case study also helps reveal epistemic dysfunction (structural epistemic issues embedded in the healthcare system), how this relates to stigma identity-based prejudice, and how the healthcare system upholds existing societal hierarchies and disenfranchises the most vulnerable. In the modern landscape, where cases of these chronic illnesses are not only on the rise but future pandemics threaten to add to their number, this conversation is crucial for the well-being of patients and providers. This presentation will cover what epistemic injustice is and how it can be applied to the politics of the doctor-patient interaction on a micro level and the politics of the healthcare system more broadly. Contested illnesses will be explored in terms of how the “contested” label causes the patient to experience disease stigma and lowers their credibility in healthcare and across other aspects of life. This will be explored in tandem with a discussion of existing identity-based prejudice in the healthcare system and how social identities (such as those of gender, race, and socioeconomic status) intersect with the contested illness label. The effects of epistemic injustice, which include worsening patients’ symptoms of mental health and potentially disenfranchising them from the healthcare system altogether, will be presented alongside the potential ethical quandaries this poses for providers. Finally, issues with the way healthcare appointments and the modern NHS function will be explored in terms of epistemic injustice and solutions to improve doctor-patient communication and patient care will be discussed. The relationship between contested illness patients and healthcare providers is notoriously poor, and while this can mean frustration or feelings of unfulfillment in providers, the negative effects for patients are much more severe. The purpose of this research, then, is to highlight these issues and suggest ways in which to improve the healthcare experience for these patients, along with improving doctor-patient communication and mending the doctor-patient relationship in a tangible and realistic way. This research also aims to provoke important conversations about belief and hierarchy in medical settings and how these aspects intersect with identity prejudices.

Keywords : epistemic injustice, fibromyalgia, contested illnesses, chronic illnesses, doctor-patient relationships, philosophy of medicine

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