

# Anticipation, Smothering, and Education

A Reply to Lee and Bayruns García  
on Anticipatory Epistemic Injustice

Trystan S. Goetze

Harvard University

## 1. Introduction

When you expect something bad to happen, you take action to avoid it. That is the principle of action that underlies J. Y. Lee’s recent paper (Lee forthcoming), which presents a new form of epistemic injustice that arises from anticipating negative consequences for testifying. In this brief reply article occasioned by Lee’s essay, I make two main contributions to the discussion of this idea. The first (§§2–3) is an intervention in the discussion between Lee and Eric Bayruns García regarding the relationship between anticipatory epistemic injustice and Kristie Dotson’s concept of testimonial smothering. The second (§§4–5) is to expand the concept of anticipatory epistemic injustice into the educational context, and to illuminate yet another form of anticipatory epistemic injustice, which I call anticipatory zetetic injustice. §6 concludes.

## 2. Anticipatory Epistemic Injustice as Testimonial Smothering

Lee’s account outlines a class of epistemic injustices that arise when one refrains from providing, distorts, or truncates one’s testimony because one anticipates – correctly or incorrectly – that to testify honestly and fully would lead to some negative consequence, such as disbelief, shame, or punishment. To qualify as an *injustice*, the source of this anticipation must be not merely a mental health condition that distorts one’s anticipations (such as anxiety) or an epistemic vice that discourages offering testimony (such as epistemic timidity). Rather, the anticipation of negative consequences for testifying must be *reasonable* given the social patterns of uptake that testimony from people at the speaker’s social location tends to receive. Or, as Lee puts it, the anticipation of negative consequence for testifying must be a result of one’s marginalization (Lee forthcoming, 9).

The epistemic harms of anticipatory epistemic injustice are similar to those of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007). Anticipatory epistemic injustice harms the speaker in their capacity as a knower – and thereby qualifies as an *epistemic* injustice – by depriving them of their status as a sharer of knowledge. And, in some cases, it may also undermine the speaker’s self-knowledge and contribute to the development of epistemic vices.

For example, Lee describes an LGBTQIA+ individual who does not come out to their close social communities “due to anticipation of negative backlash” (Lee forthcoming, 3). Lee draws on a study of lesbians in Hong Kong (Chow and Cheng 2010), pointing out that internalized shame regarding one’s queer identity and knowledge of the marginalized status of queer folks in one’s society can lead one to refrain from speaking about one’s identity, even if one is surrounded by supportive friends and family. Feelings of shame and fear of negative consequences keep one from speaking one’s truth.

Lee notes that anticipatory epistemic injustice bears some similarities to Kristie Dotson’s account of testimonial smothering. According to Dotson, testimonial smothering occurs when a speaker from a marginalized social location withholds or truncates their testimony because it poses a risk to the speaker if it is misunderstood, and the speaker detects that their audience has testimonial incompetence due to “pernicious ignorance” (Dotson 2011, 244). To have testimonial incompetence is to fail “to demonstrate to the speaker that [one] will find proffered testimony accurately intelligible” (245).

Lee attempts to distinguish anticipatory epistemic injustice from testimonial smothering in terms of the *causes* of each injustice. While testimonial smothering occurs because the speaker senses the hearer’s ignorance-sustained testimonial incompetence with regard to the subject of one’s would-be testimony, anticipatory epistemic injustice need not be due to the hearer’s perceived testimonial incompetence. Anticipatory epistemic injustice has many potential causes, and may even arise when the hearer is testimonially competent, not perniciously ignorant, and sympathetic to the speaker’s message.

In another reply article in this collective, Eric Bayruns García argues that this attempt to distinguish the two phenomena fails. He starts by noting two similarities between testimonial smothering and anticipatory epistemic injustice. The first similarity is in terms of how the two injustices are caused by structural features of society: “In both testimonial smothering and anticipatory-epistemic injustice, society’s structure depresses the likelihood that ... non-dominant

subjects' audiences will properly receive their testimony" (Bayruns García 2021, **EDITOR: INSERT PAGE NUMBER**). The second similarity is in terms of how the speaker changes the content of their testimony: "both of these phenomena involve that a subject either refrains from issuing testimony or truncates the content of her testimony" (**EDITOR: INSERT PAGE NUMBER**). In addition, Bayruns García argues that even when the hearer in fact has testimonial competence, the social structures and context may still signal to the speaker that there is a significant likelihood that the hearer is testimonially incompetent due to pernicious ignorance. Furthermore, he notes that Dotson never requires the speaker's judgement that the hearer is testimonially incompetent be accurate. What's more, both injustices have similar epistemic harms. Taken together, Bayruns García concludes, these reasons should lead us to the conclusion that the cases Lee describes are in fact just cases of testimonial smothering. The two injustices are not as distinct as they might have seemed.

### 3. Testimonial Smothering as Anticipatory Epistemic Injustice

I don't find Bayruns García's argument entirely convincing. We may grant that testimonial smothering can occur due to the speaker making a reasonable, yet false, judgement that their audience lacks (or is likely to lack) testimonial competence due to pernicious ignorance. But the speaker might instead anticipate *other* potential problems with providing their testimony.

For example, the speaker may judge that the hearer is likely to perfectly accurately understand the meaning of their testimony, but that as a result, the hearer will take action that is likely to cause harm. Consider one reason that some survivors of sexual assault choose not to report the crime: namely, some survivors have no interest in subjecting their assailants to the criminal justice system. For example, one interviewee who spoke to West Coast LEAF, a Canadian gender equality-focused non-profit legal society, noted that it would be enough for her if her assailant recognized what he had done wrong and offered to make amends, particularly since she was concerned that the criminal justice system would treat him, a man of colour, unfairly:

To put another guy behind bars or have to deal with probation and parole and all that stuff, you know, another [man of colour], put him behind bars, I didn't want to have to be the one. If I can get an apology out of that and like a, you know, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have, or I took it too far," that would have been enough for me. (Prochuk 2018, 34)

The reasons why a survivor might feel this way, and thus choose not to report the assault – that is to say, to choose to withhold, distort, or truncate their testimony – are many. But one potential reason is that the survivor believes that even if their testimony is believed, accurately and intelligibly, the process that such testimony will launch will be unfair and harmful to the perpetrator, not to mention would force her, the survivor, to commit to potentially years of legal proceedings that will force her to relive the assault in the combative arena of the courtroom over and over. There is no testimonial incompetence in this case. Rather, the incompetence the speaker detects is procedural, and permeates the criminal justice system. The problems anticipated by the self-silencing survivor are not in how their testimony will be *received* at an epistemic level, but in what their audience will *do* with their testimony.

Given that anticipatory epistemic injustice can arise without *any* anticipation of testimonial incompetence – probable or actual, accurate or inaccurate – I submit that there are instances where testimonial smothering and anticipatory epistemic injustice come apart after all. But the distinction is not a clean break. For on my view, the distinction between anticipatory epistemic injustice and testimonial smothering is one of *genus and species*. In anticipatory epistemic injustice, the self-silencing speaker anticipates negative consequences from the reception of their testimony, owing to their identity as a member of a marginalized group. Those anticipated negative consequences could be primarily *ethical*, as in the case of the self-silencing survivor, above. Or they may be primarily *epistemic*, as in cases where the speaker anticipates the audience's testimonial incompetence. This is not to say that in testimonial smothering the speaker does not anticipate negative ethical consequences. The point is that, in testimonial smothering, the negative epistemic consequence – that the audience will fail to accurately and intelligibly understand the speaker's testimony – is *prior* to the ethical consequences which follow. By contrast, in the example of the self-silencing survivor, the ethical consequences are the negative consequences of first concern. Indeed, these negative ethical consequences depend on the hearer accurately and intelligibly interpreting the speaker's meaning.

Bayruns García is correct that testimonial smothering and anticipatory epistemic injustice overlap in many respects. But I think a more promising way of understanding these similarities is to say that *testimonial smothering is a species of anticipatory epistemic injustice*. To wit, in testimonial smothering, the anticipated negative consequence is the audience's failure to properly understand the speaker's testimony due to their perniciously ignorant testimonial incompetence. But this is

only one specific thing that a speaker might anticipate and consequently adjust their testimony – or forego testifying altogether – so anticipatory epistemic injustice is indeed a broader phenomenon. The two phenomena not quite distinct, as Lee argues, but nor are they the same, as Bayruns García suggests.

Of course, Bayruns García's discussion of Lee's ideas is in service of a broader point that making precise conceptual distinctions between the growing number of genera and species of epistemic injustices in the literature is less important than developing the conceptual tools needed to tackle epistemic injustices and other forms of epistemic violence. To that end, it doesn't matter so much where we draw the lines around testimonial smothering, anticipatory epistemic injustice, and other harms and wrongs in epistemic practice, so long as, no matter where the conceptual lines are drawn in any one account, what we do in the theoretical literature helps to develop practical, pro-justice solutions. In this spirit, I'd like to turn to consider some further instances of anticipatory epistemic injustice that arise in an educational context – and which are not, I think, always cases of testimonial smothering.

#### 4. Anticipatory Epistemic Injustice in Education

One place where we would expect to find anticipatory epistemic injustice is in the classroom. Students often refrain from speaking up, which can make discussion activities sources of dread, especially for inexperienced instructors (Frederick 1981). They do not ask questions when they have them. They do not answer questions when they are asked. They do not volunteer opinions when they are solicited. By refraining from participating in the classroom discussion, students deprive themselves of an opportunity to further both their own learning and that of their peers. For unless all we philosophy teachers are seriously mistaken, it is by asking and answering questions, and by offering one's own opinions and reasons for them, that one learns philosophical material and how to formulate and defend one's own philosophical views.

Education has been a site of discussion in the epistemic injustice literature before. However, the focus of these essays has typically been on how teachers can epistemically disadvantage students and their development as knowers (Nikolaidis 2021), or how the education system or individual teachers can commit well-recognized epistemic injustices towards their students (Kotzee 2013, 2017). By contrast, Lee's concept of anticipatory epistemic injustice – as well as the subcategory of testimonial smothering introduced earlier by Dotson – can help us to discover

another range of epistemic injustices in the classroom related to students' decisions not to participate in learning activities.

One reason why students may refrain from participating in class is a fear of negative consequences. If there is a logic problem on the board and the professor is looking for the next step in the proof, perhaps the student fears making a mistake in front of their peers. Or, in a small group exercise, perhaps the student refrains from adding their input to the activity from an anxious fear of leading the whole group astray from the direction established by a more confident group member, which could risk making the whole group seem foolish. Or, if the class is discussing the ethics of abortion, perhaps the student chooses to soften or truncate the opinions they express for fear of reprisal for holding a conservative view, or of being judged unfairly by their peers for drawing on a personal experience to explain a liberal view.

While each of these cases involves the truncation or silencing of one's own testimony in the classroom due to the anticipation of negative consequences, not all of them are instances of anticipatory epistemic injustice. A lack of confidence in one's ability to solve a logic problem does not suffice to make failing to speak up an injustice. Nor is failure to speak up in discussion due to a mental health condition such as anxiety, or a vice such as timidity, necessarily an injustice. Nor again is the reticence of the conservative student: despite recent populist rhetoric to the contrary, conservatives are hardly a marginalized group.

But the testimony-truncating student in the same ethics class who softens their testimony about abortion due to fear of negative consequences for sharing their personal experience of abortion *is* plausibly a subject of anticipatory epistemic injustice. There may, of course, be perfectly good reasons to withhold some or all of what one has to say about abortion in a class discussion: one may simply wish to keep one's personal experience private. But if the student wants very much to participate in the discussion by offering their full opinion of and experience with abortion, yet refrains due to anticipation of negative consequences, they may suffer from anticipatory epistemic injustice, if that anticipation is rooted in their marginalization.

For instance, the student may be a cis woman, who anticipates negative consequences given the ways in which women's experiences of abortion are sometimes used as ammunition for personal attacks on grounds of, for example, promiscuity. Or, the student may be a trans man, who reasonably anticipates that the pernicious ignorance of some of his peers may make them testimonially incompetent with respect to his experience of having an abortion. In the first case,

should the cis woman student truncate her testimony due to this anticipation of negative consequences, she would suffer an anticipatory epistemic injustice. In the second case, should the trans man student truncate his testimony due to his reasonable anticipation of the testimonial incompetence of his peers, he would suffer from testimonial smothering in particular.

## 5. Anticipatory Zetetic Injustices

But testifying is not the only way of participating in class. As Christopher Hookway has noted, there is a range of epistemic injustices that arise when someone is unjustly excluded from participating in *inquiry*, that is, in the search for truth. Among these inquiry-based epistemic injustices – we might say, following Jane Friedman (2020), *zetetic* injustices – is a teacher’s misconstrual of the purpose of a student’s question:

[W]hen the student raises a question which is not a request for information, and is apparently intended as a contribution to continuing debate or discussion, then the teacher makes a presumption of irrelevance and ignores the question or takes things over and construes the question as a request for information that is loosely related to the question asked. In this case, the student is not treated as a potential participant in discussion but just as someone who can ask for and provide information. And this is based upon a stereotypical view of the value of student contributions to debate... Due to prejudice, the teacher fails to respect the student as a potential contributor to discussion (or participant in discussion)... The result is that the student can no longer think of herself as a participant in inquiry and discussion. What is important in this case is that the [teacher] *fails to take the student’s questions seriously*. (Hookway 2010, 155, emphasis his)

Given cases like these, where teachers prejudicially misconstrue students’ questions and thereby exclude them from participating in inquiry, we might expect some students to willfully refrain from asking such questions in class. Indeed, they may so refrain because they *anticipate* that their questions will be misconstrued, and they will be left unable to participate in the discussion. Or perhaps they anticipate that by asking such questions, they will be seen by their peers as bogging down the class’s time with their own interests instead of allowing the instructor to carry on covering what is important for the upcoming test. If such anticipations are rooted in the student’s marginalization, they appear to suffer an anticipatory epistemic injustice.

But, as Hookway emphasizes, asking questions is not the same speech act as giving testimony. When one asks a question to further the discussion – asking, for example, into what a historical philosopher might think about a modern-day ethical problem – one is not offering a

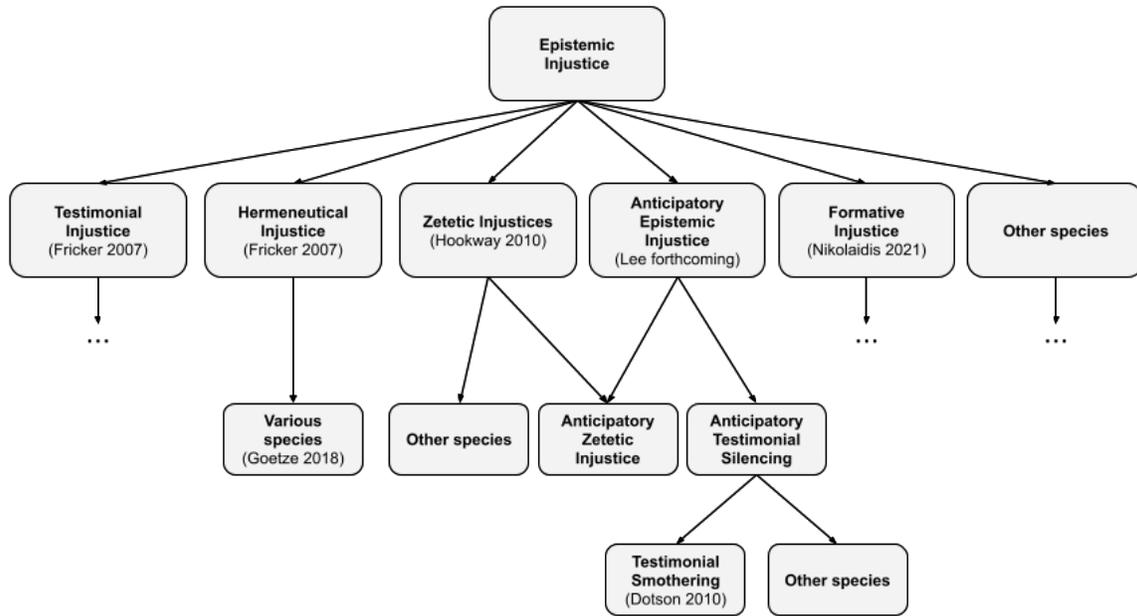


Figure 1. An incomplete map of epistemic injustices.

piece of knowledge or opinion. Rather, one is attempting to move the discussion down some particular line of inquiry to see what results. Given that Lee’s account of anticipatory epistemic injustice is centred on testimony, it does not quite capture this kind of case.

We could find space for cases like these by recognizing a parallel category of *anticipatory zetetic injustice*, where an agent refrains from participating in or truncates their participation within discussion or inquiry, due to anticipation of negative consequences for their full participation, owing to their marginalization. To fit this alongside the other epistemic injustices that have been distinguished, we could add another clade, recognizing that anticipatory epistemic injustice is a *family* of epistemic injustices. Within this family are two genera: anticipatory testimonial silencing, which comprises testimonial smothering and the other cases discussed by Lee, and anticipatory zetetic injustice. Figure 1 summarizes the various categories of epistemic injustices as I have presented them. Interestingly – and unlike in biological clades – the case of anticipatory zetetic injustice shows that in the tree of epistemic injustices, leaves may belong to multiple stems.

However, to return to Bayrún García’s insight, the way we map these injustices in conceptual space is perhaps less important than what these distinctions help us to *do* in order to alleviate and prevent epistemic injustices from occurring. And I think that calling attention to this additional category of epistemic injustices helps us do just that. For we are now in a position to

understand that a student's non- or under-participation in class may not be shyness, anxiety, lack of preparation, or discomfort with speaking in front of a large group. A student's marginalization, either due to their social location or simply *vis-à-vis* the way the power differential between student and teacher is constructed in a particular class, may lead them to reasonably truncate or withhold their testimony or discussion-driving questions. Techniques for fostering a healthy discussion space in the classroom take on a renewed importance in this light: they are not just about improving the quality of education for the class, but about alleviating and preventing epistemic injustices.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined Lee's account of anticipatory epistemic injustice, and its disputed relationship with testimonial smothering. I argued that the similarities between the two injustices are best explained by thinking of testimonial smothering as a species of anticipatory epistemic injustice. Then, I applied the concept of anticipatory epistemic injustice to classroom participation, revealing a zetetic form of the injustice that stems from truncating or withholding questions rather than testimony. I thank Lee and Bayruns García for continuing to enrich our understanding of this important family of concepts. I look forward to the next set of additions to our theoretical map of epistemic injustices, and to the praxis that these distinctions inspire.

## Author Information

Trystan S. Goetze (he/they/she) is a Postdoctoral Fellow of Embedded EthiCS™ at Harvard University. His research is on the intersections between epistemic injustice, moral responsibility, and computer ethics. In addition to their research, Trystan's current role is to develop and teach ethics lessons for computer science students, and to liaise with other institutions who are developing computer ethics curricula. Email: <[contact@trystangoetze.ca](mailto:contact@trystangoetze.ca)>.

## Works Cited

- Bayruns García, Eric. 2021. On Anticipatory-Epistemic Injustice and the Distinctness of Epistemic-Injustice Phenomena. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (7): 48–57.
- Chow, Pizza Ka Yee, and Sheung Tak Cheng. 2010. Shame, internalized heterosexism, lesbian identity, and coming out to others: A comparative study of lesbians in mainland China and Hong Kong. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 57 (1): 92–104. DOI: 10.1037/a0017930.

- Dotson, Kristie. 2011. Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing. *Hypatia* 26 (2): 236–57. DOI: 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x.
- Frederick, Peter. 1981. The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start. *Improving College and University Teaching* 29 (3): 109–114. DOI: 10.1080/00193089.1981.10533690.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Friedman, Jane. 2020. The Epistemic and the Zetetic. *Philosophical Review* 129 (4): 501–36. DOI: 10.1215/00318108-8540918.
- Goetze, Trystan S. 2018. Hermeneutical Dissent and the Species of Hermeneutical Injustice. *Hypatia* 33 (1): 73–90. DOI: 10.1111/hypa.12384.
- Hall, Roberta M., and Bernice R. Sandler. 1986. *The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?* Technical Report. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges. 22 pages.
- Hookway, Christopher. 2010. Some Varieties of Epistemic Injustice: Reflections on Fricker. *Episteme* 7 (2): 151–63. DOI: 10.3366/E1742360010000882.
- Kotzee, Ben. 2017. Education and Epistemic Injustice. In *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, eds. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. New York: Routledge. 324–335.
- . 2013. Educational Justice, Epistemic Justice, and Levelling Down. *Educational Theory* 63 (4): 331–349.
- Lee, J. Y. Forthcoming. Anticipatory Epistemic Injustice. *Social Epistemology*: 13 pages.. DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2021.1924306.
- Nikolaidis, A. C. 2021. A Third Conception of Epistemic Injustice. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 40: 381–98. DOI: 10.1007/s11217-021-09760-1.
- Prochuk, Alana. 2018. *We Are Here: Women's Experiences of the Barriers to Reporting Sexual Assault*. Technical Report. Vancouver, BC: West Coast LEAF. 66 pages. URL: <http://www.westcoastleaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/West-Coast-Leaf-dismantling-web-final.pdf>.