



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Early-career scholars and scholarship: A social justice perspective

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the concept of social (in)justice to examine and discuss some of the areas in the production and dissemination of knowledge in which the issue of social justice is significant and should be applied and considered. More specifically, it explores and advocates for some of the ways in which participation in, and contribution to, global scholarship can become a more socially just practice for academics, especially novice scholars and early-career researchers in the field of Applied Linguistics. It also highlights the role and agentic engagement of both established and junior members of academic communities as an important factor in demonopolizing and democratizing academic discourses and practices and making the mobilization of scholarship more diverse, inclusive, multivocal, and transformative.

Societies in the twenty-first century have become extensively heterogenous in terms of race, class, gender, faith, and ideologies as a result of (im)migration, diasporization, transnationalization, and deterritorialization. In this sociocultural hodgepodge of a world over the past few years, several shocking events happened in North America, the corner of the globe where I live and work, that had major ripple effects in other continents and countries.

The first events were Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein's sexual assault convictions and the consequent rekindling of the "Me Too" movement across the world. The next event concerned the disgraceful murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, U.S., and the consequent return of the "Black Lives Matter" movement in different countries. Following that was the Catholic residential schools tragedy in which graves of many indigenous children were discovered across Canada foregrounding the Truth and Reconciliation process. And finally, I would like to briefly talk about an event that is different in nature and context from the previous ones but has similar implications at global scale and has rocked our world. Over the past two years, the apocalyptic impact of COVID-19 pandemic has threatened and also devastated different aspects of human civilization. Millions of people have lost their loved ones, jobs, futures, and hopes. Some rich countries have hoarded the bulk of COVID-19 vaccines, many of which go to waste as a result of expiration and vaccine hesitancy, and economically weak countries either live in the hope of the mercy of the rich or crumble under different pressures.

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In mentioning these tragic events, I am definitely not doing justice to the many other atrocities and injustices that are happening around the world in the form of (un)systematic (civil) wars, massacres, genocides, rapes, etc. However, they serve to foreground a number of points. First, I am showcasing only some horrible events that involve marginalized and underrepresented demographics, namely women, children, and racialized communities. Second, I am using these examples to highlight that here we are not talking about a remote area in an uncharted part of the world in which human rights is an unheard of (or unfamiliar) concept. We are talking about incidents in countries that pride themselves on equity, human rights, and civility. In other words, I mean to underline the deep-rootedness and seriousness of these issues. Third, I mean to underscore this terrifying, yet taken for granted, fact and growing understanding that we are living in an unbelievably unjust world. A world that even Carl Marx and the most pessimist (Neo)Marxist theoreticians and apostles could not have imagined or theorized. Most importantly, what these events highlight for us as a global community is the exigency for ever-increasing attention to the concept of Social Justice (SJ hereafter) in today's world and the communal responsibility for the promotion and instillation of SJ values in different spheres of our sociocultural existence.

There is no doubt that this also includes and applies to elite strata and intelligentsia. In this respect, academia as a key player can serve two intertwined purposes. On the one hand, it can adopt an etic perspective where academics conceptualize and theorize SJ, present and critique competing discourses of SJ, and explore and investigate the role of different social structures and institutions in (re)producing (counter)hegemonic discourses regarding social (in)justice. On the other hand, academia can take an emic approach where it turns the *gaze* (to use Foucauldian parlance) on itself as an institution and analyzes how SJ as a discourse and ideal social value prevails or (does not) within the structures of the academic society and among academics themselves. This insider approach can help academics to see whether and to what extent they practice what they preach to others, engage themselves in a reflective and hopefully reflexive and transformative practice, and, ultimately, make academia an equitable and better place for academics and others. It is this second aspect that I am focusing on in this paper. By the same token, I will be looking at and advocating for some of the ways in which I think participation in and contribution to global knowledge can become a more socially just practice for academics, especially novice scholars. What I am presenting are merely my personal observations and understanding as an early-career scholar, an academic journal editor/reviewer, and a researcher in the field of English for research publication purposes (ERPP). In other words, this is more of a heuristic in which I will be raising questions rather than providing solutions.

### Social Justice

Social (in)justice is both an easy and yet complicated concept, as it can denote, connotate, and inspire a number of different meanings, ideas, and feelings, such as human rights, fairness, equity, equality, access, distribution, recognition, diversity, inclusivity, domination, (anti)oppression, exploitation, marginalization, racism, ethnicism, sexism, biases, privileges, advantages, violence and so on and so forth. Rawls (1971/1999) argues that “[j]ustice is the first virtue of social institutions, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (p. 7). In spite of justice being a virtue, we all know that realistically it does not prevail in

different spheres of our local and global communities and social structures, and it is not necessarily a social norm as the aforementioned examples indicate. However, it does not mean that this is our predetermined destiny to which we must succumb. Social (in)justice is a cultural product and process situated within social institutions and structures (e.g., judicial system, religion, academia, to name a few) and their dominant ideologies and discourses; and the prevalence of social (in)equalities is anchored in our social contracts, relationships, and interactions. In other words, as Rawls argues “deep inequalities [are] not an unchangeable order beyond human control but a pattern of human action” (1971/1999, p. 102), and we should bear it in mind that we do not live in “a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform [...] Through their continuing praxis, men and women simultaneously create history and become historical-social beings” (Freire, 1970, pp. 31, 82).

Social injustice can be broadly understood and analyzed from two perspectives: socioeconomic and cultural or symbolic (Fraser, 1997). Socioeconomic injustice is “rooted in the political-economic structure of society” (1997, p. 13) and concerns access and distribution of material and economic capital and resources. Fraser enumerates *exploitation*, *economic marginalization*, and *deprivation* as examples of this form of injustice. In contrast, cultural or symbolic injustice, Fraser maintains:

is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. Examples include cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one’s own); nonrecognition (being rendered invisible by means of the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one’s culture); and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypical public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions). (Fraser 1997, p. 14)

By the same token, Fraser conceptualizes *redistribution* and *recognition* as two solutions for socioeconomic and cultural (symbolic) social injustice respectively. She argues that “[t]he remedy for economic injustice is political-economic restructuring of some sort. This might involve redistributing income, reorganizing the division of labor, subjecting investment to democratic decision making, or transforming other basic economic structures” (Fraser 1997, p. 15). She further argues that the solution for the cultural and symbolic injustice requires “some sort of cultural or symbolic change” (Fraser 1997, p. 15) crystallized through a number of strategies including:

- upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups
- recognizing and positively valorizing cultural diversity
- wholesale transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication in ways that would change *everybody’s* [emphasis in the original] sense of self (Fraser 1997, p. 15)

Although the issue of social justice goes beyond specific contexts or populations, here I focus on this topic in relation to novice scholars. Accordingly, I will be using this general lens and formulation to look at junior scholars and their participation in, and contribution to, the construction and dissemination of knowledge.

### Social (In)Justice and Scholarship

Talking about social justice in the neoliberal atmosphere dominating the current academia sounds somewhat awkward. Neoliberalism and academic capitalist knowledge order value competition and distinction, stratify individual scholars and academic institutions through different ranking and measuring regimes, and consequently promote social injustice within and beyond academia. One of the cornerstones of ERPP scholarship is the issue of “inequalities” within and across different geolinguistic contexts and the status and contribution of academics in those contexts to global knowledge economy. In that respect, ERPP has investigated mainly discursive but also nondiscursive challenges that are rooted in inequalities between core (Anglosphere) and (semi)peripheral academic spheres (e.g., Habibie, 2016, 2021; see Flowerdew & Habibie, 2022 for details).

Junior scholars do not usually occupy a high social position on the stratification structure of their academic community due to their novice and peripheral “status-set,” “role set,” and “status sequence” (Merton & Sztompka, 1996). In other words, as emerging scholars, they play a marginal role in the discourses of their communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as they are not yet fully socialized into the *Discourse* (hegemonic ways of being, living, thinking, and valuing) (Gee, 2015) of their academic communities. Therefore, they rely on established members for initiation, socialization, and survival. *Idealistically*, they are expected to engage purposefully and dedicatedly in the practices of their community and develop the required literacies under the mentorship of seasoned members through the sociocultural process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In what follows, I will be talking about some social injustices facing junior scholars at the stage of sociocultural initiation. For that, I will be looking at two dimensions along which social structures of academic communities are developed and organized: the opportunity aspect and the normative aspect (Merton & Sztompka, 1996).

### Socioeconomic (In)Justice and Opportunity Structures

There is no doubt that networks of support and their constituent nodes—such as course instructors, supervisors, editors, and expert peers—can play a pivotal role in the socialization of novice scholars into the *Discourse* of their academic community. However, I used the modifier “idealistically” in italics above to highlight that the social and economic opportunity structure of academic communities does not necessarily (re)distribute possibilities of legitimate peripheral participation in a socially just and equitable way. More importantly, there is an explicit or implicit power imbalance within intelligentsia (i.e., between established and novice members) depending on the dominant academic culture and the ways in which the culture conceptualizes, classifies, and distributes power. Legitimate peripheral participation opportunities depend on a network of institutional, social, and individual variables, which can facilitate or hinder academic socialization in scholarly publication for many junior scholars. The availability and (dys)functional status of institutional support policies and practices, the willingness, investment, and (meta)discursive expertise of academic mentors, as well as the tendency and agentic initiative of junior scholars themselves in seeking and availing themselves of those opportunities are some of the actors that play a key role in the socialization process (see Habibie, 2019; Habibie & Burgess, forthcoming). That is why there is significant variation among novice scholars in terms of access to those networks of support, irrespective of their geolinguistic background.

Additionally, logistical resources and nondiscursive support—such as well-resourced libraries, technological infrastructure, research funding, and time—are some of the critical issues that impact one's participation in global scholarship. Importantly, they are not distributed in an equitable way either (see Canagarajah, 2002), and, in spite of many developments over recent decades, material injustices still persist in different academic contexts.

Redistribution as a solution for socioeconomic injustices (Fraser, 1997) can materialize in the form of developing structured (inter)national and institutional policies and practices as well as human and material support networks that can scaffold academic literacy development, visibility, and survival of junior scholars. There is no doubt that technological innovations can be a key player in reaching out to (semi)peripheral scholars, engaging them in ongoing knowledge discourses, collaborating with them on different projects, and redistributing intellectual resources. In sum, knowledge economies are related to and intertwined with broader financial economies. Therefore, redistribution of wealth and capital in global monetary economies can help and improve social justice in knowledge economies and for their stakeholders.

## Cultural (Symbolic) Social (In)Justice and Normative Structures

### *Linguistic (In)Justice*

One of the major issues that ERPP has extensively debated is the linguistic dominance/prevalence of English as the default medium of scholarly publication, its implications for multilingual scholars, and, therefore, the disadvantaged (socially unjust) status of these scholars in the sociopolitics of the global knowledge economy.

From an SJ perspective (Fraser, 1997), the status of English in today's world *can* be considered as an example of symbolic and cultural injustice in that one language has gained hegemonic recognition as the global currency of academic exchange at the expense of *devalorizing* linguistic diversity and diminishing the recognition of other languages. The output in academic English is also recognized and valued more than that produced in other less recognized or vernacular languages. I am using the modal verb *can* as this topic is still an open, debatable, and contradictory question in both ERPP and the broader discipline of applied linguistics (see Habibie & Hyland, 2019) as to when, where, why, and how the dominance/prevalence of English started (see Flowerdew & Habibie, 2022). However, the role of English, as an academic *lingua franca*, can also be considered as an example of social justice and social empowerment in the sense that English also affords many scholars, both Anglophone and multilingual, and especially novice scholars, the possibility to conjure up imagined academic communities and thought collectives beyond their spatiotemporal borders, to have their voices heard beyond disciplinary and cultural boundaries, and to disseminate their scholarship to a global intelligentsia.

This also raises the question as to how and in what ways we can alleviate this social injustice. Can we value and (re)recognize other languages such as Spanish, Chinese, French, German, etc. as media of academic discourse at the global level on par with English? The fact of the matter is that some of them were in the position in which English is now and lost their linguistic hegemony for different sociopolitical and economic reasons which are beyond the scope of this paper. Some of them like Chinese and Spanish are already the default languages of other knowledge economies, like knowledge hubs formed in Latin America, Iberia-America, and East Asia (see Demeter, 2020) and are challenging the hegemonic status of English.

In sum, the question of linguistic (in)justice is complicated and should not be dealt with as a stand-alone issue. It needs to be analyzed within the broader framework of global knowledge economies and the competition among them. That is, the status of any language at a global scale should be looked at within social, economic, and political structures and institutions that constitute each specific knowledge economy. More importantly, knowledge economies are dynamic entities because their underlying socio-economic and political bases are always in a state of flux and change. In other words, in the near future we may be having a new academic *lingua franca* (let us say Chinese) and may be facing the same complicated question: Who is (dis)advantaged and where is SJ? Whether we will/can have a global knowledge economy where multilingualism is recognized and valorized is an open question. However, it seems that current and future technological advancement, especially in artificial intelligence, can make scholarly products more multilingually accessible, hence alleviating many of the concerns and issues that revolve around linguistic social justice.

### *Intellectual Monism and Scholarly Hygiene*

Another form of injustice that is related to the discourse of linguistic injustice is epistemic ethnocentrism. Apart from the fact that any language (including English) can serve as a global academic *lingua franca* and thereby facilitate intercultural and transnational discourse, there is no doubt that language is not merely a neutral medium for mirroring the world and the knowledge about it. Language is anchored in social structures, institutions, and relationships. It bears, constitutes, and is dynamically constituted by ideologies and discourses (Fairclough, 2015). It performs, promotes, and validates certain world views; and, consequently, it excludes, marginalizes, discredits and devalorizes others. Therefore, using a specific language (English in this case) as the default medium of academic discourse definitely valorizes not only the language and exalts its speakers but, more importantly, hegemonizes specific epistemes and ideologies as global thought and knowledge systems and models. On the other hand, the process of parochialization and otherization demotes and predatorizes other competing or alternative epistemes, discourses, and problematics as well as their subscribers.

This situation deprives global scholarship from diverse worldviews and plural knowledge-seeking paradigms eventuating in the impoverishment of the global knowledge base. This kind of injustice has been alluded to in the epistemic monopoly of the West on *standard* knowledge, knowledge-seeking models, and knowledge problematics and the devalorization of non-Western and indigenous epistemologies and research problems. Critical scholars have warned against the negative outcomes of such epistemicide (Bennett, 2007; Canagarajah, 2002) and the consequent lost knowledge, together with the fact that such an injustice puts academics at the risk of what Hanafi calls “publish globally and perish locally, or [...] publish locally and perish globally” (2011, p. 291). In short, it seems that this is a serious problem even much more significant than linguistic injustice in today’s global knowledge economy, and it is also a key factor in explaining why an exponential amount of criticism is leveled at English.

Interestingly, this epistemic ethnocentrism is not merely limited to the ways in which Western scholarly paradigm derecognizes and devalorizes other nonwestern paradigms, though. It is also common within disciplinary boundaries and academic communities irrespective of their geolinguistic characteristics and epistemological orientations, as academic tribes and disciplines are thought regimes laden with power, stratification, and competition. An emic view of the inner workings of academic communities and

their epistemic opportunity structures can help understand this issue better. Academic communities are inherently normative and generally conservative social entities. This means that newcomers to those communities are expected to engage in certain valued discourses in order to, first, be initiated into the thought collective and, second, maintain their membership. That is, membership is a constant iterative process of allegiance and legitimation. One has to be loyal to the *Discourse* of one's community in order to be considered a legitimate member. This begs the question of how much discursive and epistemic deviation or innovation is allowed and tolerated in the ideological normative structure of the community and by its gatekeeping mechanism. In other words, how much recognition do novice scholars possess in/against the overall structure of their academic communities and in their relationships with other established members and the custodians of disciplinary boundaries? (see Habibie et al., *forthcoming*).

Although we cannot figure out a tangible quantitative measure for such a cultural value, it goes without saying that the power dynamics within the social structure of academic communities offer very limited possibilities of discursive and especially epistemic deviation, or innovation to junior scholars. In other words, nonconformist behaviors are generally deemed as a form of dysfunction on the part of the (rogue) incumbent, which can additionally undermine their legitimacy as a peripheral member as well as threaten the epistemic integrity of the whole system (a.k.a., those in power). In short, oftentimes, there is minimal accommodation for alternative ways and means of imagination (such as interdisciplinarity) and an extensive insistence on inbreeding. Epistemic deviations and innovations are derecognized and academically punished and a sort of insiderism and epistemic conformation is promoted, recognized, and rewarded. It also goes without saying that many times not "playing by the rules" and established norms can be the code that established members use, which in fact means that the novice member is saying something that they do not understand so cannot accept, or that the novice member is trespassing on their established territory—their "epistemic turf." This institutionalized tendency for intellectual monism and scholarly hygiene implemented mostly by established members and gatekeepers can be a form of social injustice facing junior scholars that can impact their scholarly practices to a great extent. In other words, many times, novice scholars are involved in situations in which their epistemic funds and capitals are underestimated, undervalued, and derecognized in disciplinary interactions and exchanges, including scholarly publication under the pretext of novicity, peripherality, or deemed as nonconformist discourses and practices.

In dealing with such a challenge (and social injustice), many junior scholars resort to epistemic conformity or epistemic ritualism as survival and coping strategies. That is, they take dominant discourses and practices for granted and abide by the established behavioral norms and genres unquestioningly. Or they give lip service to hegemonic epistemic structures denying their intellectual imagining or procrastinating it at least until they obtain more power in the intellectual structure of their academic tribes. More importantly, epistemic ethnocentrism (re)produces the "Matthew effect" (Merton & Sztompka, 1996) (another form of injustice) among academic orthodoxy (conformists) and Protestants (nonconformists). That is, through conforming to the normative structure or manipulating the opportunity structure of the academic field, orthodox academics generally accumulate recognition and advantages, and the unorthodox ones get derecognized and accumulate disadvantages. This can ultimately eventuate in intellectual ambivalence or retreatism among many novice scholars or dominate an erudition (intellectual regurgitation) over a culture of praxis and



transformation. It can promote an epistemic domination, oppression, and stagnation that makes reflexivity, *unthinking the think*, and epistemic decolonization very difficult, if not impossible.

As a response to such an injustice, academic communities, their opportunity and normative structures, and gatekeeping mechanisms should afford novice scholars enough agency and provide their alternative and innovative discourses and practices necessary recognition. There is no doubt that academic expertise develops through socialization into one's discourse community and, idealistically, through mentorship from more established members. It also stands to reason that social existence and practice involves communal norms and gatekeeping mechanisms in place to ensure that those norms are highly regarded and observed. However, disciplines and their relevant discourses are socially (re)constructed. They are not static entities or consecrated territories that should be protected against "intruders" (in this case, novice scholars). Disciplinary thought systems develop and flourish through dialogic, reflective, and reflexive practices and pluralistic actions involving all members of academic communities irrespective of their geolinguistic and class positions in the structure of academic communities, crucially including junior scholars.

## Conclusion

The issue of SJ is a key topic in all social contexts, including academia. Apart from attention to social justice in relation to issues of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or language, we should also bear in mind that many times the risks and implications of social injustice are not vividly tangible or explicit. That is, in some cases, the locus of social injustice can be in intellectual discourses and practices of elite demographics such as intelligentsia. The issue of epistemic social (in)justice and novice scholars is one of those cases. It is also important to note that novicity is merely one of the aspects of junior scholars' status set (Merton & Sztopka, 1996), which mainly refers to one's position(ing) in the social structure of academic field and not necessarily to their epistemic rigor or potential. Junior scholars are the driving forces of academic disciplines and are new blood for academic communities. They not only contribute to disciplinary discourses but also, through their participation, they expand, enrich, and diversify disciplinary thought models. Their insights and contributions transform academic communities and push the boundaries of knowledge forward. As Socrates argues, "an unexamined life is not worth living." The same is true with our epistemes and thought models. Academics need to constantly reexamine their deep-rooted, consolidated, taken-for-granted epistemes, and the case of novice scholars is a good reminder and an asset in that respect. Active transformative participation of novice scholars in academic knowledge production requires that their contributions, albeit deviant and norm-breaking, be valued, recognized, critiqued, and enriched. Academic communities, their established members, and gatekeepers have an important responsibility to support novice scholars intellectually and emotionally, valorize epistemic diversity and pluralism, and allow alternative, unorthodox, nonconformist, and counter-hegemonic ways of imagining and examining the world. Otherwise, we will be reproducing the same discourses and creating our own intellectual clones. Last, but not least, novice scholars may also take the initiative to venture into uncharted epistemic territories, step beyond the seemingly safe confines of their academic communities, challenge and resist hegemonic thought regimes, and create further opportunities for more socially just academic discourse.



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