

Dissertation Abstract

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Epistemic infringement is a species of distinctively epistemic misconduct marked by the abuse and contravention of social and epistemic norms in a way that undermines epistemic agency. In my dissertation I show how epistemic infringement, as a conceptual resource for applied epistemologists, helps us deepen our understanding of some philosophically familiar social phenomena, like gaslighting and propaganda, as well as social phenomena that philosophers are less familiar with, particularly predatory grooming.

Forensic psychologists describe grooming as a pattern of goal-oriented abusive behaviour through which victims are manipulated or coerced into participating in their own exploitation—crucially, without understanding it as such. The most familiar examples of predatory grooming involve high-profile cases of sexual predation, as with Jerry Sandusky or Larry Nassar. In these cases, spanning years and dozens of victims, the obvious question is *how was this possible?* While psychologists and criminologists primarily theorize grooming from the perspective of the perpetrator, I show that an epistemological analysis of grooming from the perspective of the groomee is crucial to answering that question. This, in turn, helps us understand the broader category of epistemic infringement, under which predatory grooming falls.

Epistemic infringement works by encroaching on a target individual's ability to marshal her epistemic resources, thereby undermining her epistemic agency. In particular, epistemic infringement works through the abuse and distortion of those social and epistemic norms that typically govern our relationships to one another, as well as to our social institutions. We rely on these norms to make sense of our social world. They explain how others behave toward us, and they feature heavily in our thinking about what to believe and how to conduct ourselves. In doctor-patient relationships, for example, these might be norms of trust and expertise. Patients should be able to trust that their physician is committed to promoting their health, and that their physician has, and practices according to, the relevant medical expertise. In grooming relationships, however, these very norms can be drawn on to legitimate exploitative conduct, as when, say, a norm of deference to expertise is invoked to explain away a feeling of unease during a medical exam. When the otherwise healthy norms governing a relationship are used as a cover for unhealthy behaviour within that relationship, I argue that this erodes the epistemic agency of the victim. A part of the abuse constitutively involves distorting her epistemic resources in order to conceal the misconduct, even from her. When it is the victim explaining why the bad behaviour might not in fact be bad, something has gone very wrong in her epistemic life. In extending a forensic psychological model of the mechanisms of predatory grooming, I argue that a distinctly epistemic analysis helps to show two things: first, why grooming works, and second, how profoundly harmful it is.

I argue that epistemic infringement strikes in particular at our epistemic agency: the ability to marshal our epistemic resources with a healthy degree of autonomy in making judgments, forming beliefs, adjudicating the evidence, and apportioning our credences. There are different ways of understanding epistemic agency. According to some philosophers, epistemic agency requires that we be able to choose our beliefs on the basis of the epistemic reasons we have. This sort of view, often

labeled *doxastic voluntarism*, has long been criticized as psychologically implausible. We do not choose our beliefs the way that we choose our projects and actions, in part because it is constitutive of belief that it aims at truth. Other philosophers have argued that epistemic agency is nothing more than the ability to direct our attention in the gathering of evidence. Critics of this sort of view have argued that this is not a particularly deep insight nor a robust form of agency. In my dissertation, I show that this objection is fundamentally incorrect. An important implication of my work on predatory grooming and epistemic infringement is that precisely this degree of agency over our epistemic lives is at stake in some especially pernicious examples of epistemic misconduct, and that when our epistemic agency is undermined, we may suffer tremendously. The picture of epistemic agency that I defend is not particularly psychologically demanding. Nevertheless, we ought not overlook the vital role that epistemic agency plays in our human flourishing.

Understanding phenomena like grooming, gaslighting, and propaganda as epistemic infringement allows us to see what is normative about each, which helps us better understand the full nature of the harms incurred to its victims. This, in turn, helps us to better understand what healing might require: perhaps a re-evaluation of the norms that give rise to potentially dangerous power asymmetries; perhaps a critical assessment of the ways in which victims of infringement can be restored to a position of epistemic autonomy, by strengthening their capacity for self-trust and shoring up their understanding of what the social and epistemic norms do (and should) permit. Understanding not just how epistemic infringement works, but how its victims are harmed, points us in the direction of responding to it and healing from it. That is a way in which epistemology can make a material difference to the lives of real people.