

**The Experience of Epistemic Injustice in Volunteering: The Case of Community
Organizations in Quebec**

Coline Sénac
Université du Québec à Montréal
senac.coline@uqam.ca

Nicolas Bencherki
Université TÉLUQ
nicolas.bencherki@teluq.ca

A more recent version of this article is published as:

Sénac, C., & Bencherki, N. (2024). The Experience of Epistemic Injustice in Volunteering: The Case of Community Organizations in Quebec. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-024-00634-x>

Abstract

Community organizations aim to promote social and environmental justice but can still reproduce injustice in their participatory and decision-making processes. To understand how that may be the case, we examine the testimonies of volunteers and citizens involved in community organizations in the province of Quebec, in Canada. These individuals, all from minority backgrounds, describe their experiences of epistemic injustice, which corresponds to situations where they are limited in producing or transmitting knowledge in social interactions. In that sense, epistemic injustice hinders their engagement in their respective organization. This article analyzes how experiences of epistemic injustice shape social interactions. It also provides concrete solutions to help organizations promote epistemic justice among their own membership.

Keywords: *epistemic injustice, volunteering, community organization, Québec.*

The Experience of Epistemic Injustice in Volunteering: The Case of Community Organizations in Quebec

Over the past decade, literature has focused on justice and fairness in organizational contexts (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001). While there is limited research on injustice and discrimination (Francis & Barling, 2005), recent articles emphasize their importance in the workplace (Thornton-Lugo & Rupp, 2021). Existing studies acknowledge that unjust racial and gendered issues in organizations affect interactions between members (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft, 2021; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003). Specifically in the non-profit sector, research has recognized subtle racial and gender bias between members, that remains to be fully explored (Feit, 2018; Heckler, 2019). Those diversity and inclusion issues impact the way different members interact within organizations, challenging conventional conceptions of inclusion and calling for renewed dialogue (Ferdman & Deane, 2014; Hawkins, 2014). In that sense, dialogue has been presented as a set of practices that the organization can put in place to foster its engagement with individuals, by demonstrating mutual understanding, and working towards the construction of shared meanings where individuals are treated equitably (Place & Ciszek, 2021). However, injustice and discrimination can hinder the communication that dialogue presumes (Arnett, 2016), as it consists in preventing marginalized groups from expressing themselves in social interaction (Dutta & Zapata, 2019).

As is the case elsewhere, community organizations in Quebec, Canada, rely heavily on volunteers to fight against injustice and discrimination. Although those organizations may pursue a range of specific goals, they all work to improve the conditions of their communities and populations, primarily by advancing social and health justice. However, even as they promote social justice, these organizations may still perpetuate forms of

injustice in their own decision-making and participatory processes (Willner, 2019). The voluntary nature of people's involvement in community organizations makes it challenging to handle situations of injustice through traditional means such as hiring policies or termination. Focusing on volunteerism and citizen involvement, which are assumed to be free of oppressive power dynamics compared to paid work, thus provides a revealing case of how injustice can be dealt with horizontally, through the same communication and interaction practices that lead to injustice in the first place (Bencherki et al., 2020; Reknes et al., 2020).

Our study, based on the notion that social interactions can lead to injustice (Sénac & Bencherki, 2023), aims to examine how individuals face prejudice while engaging with fellow members of the organizations where they are involved, such as paid employees and managers, alongside whom they are supposed to combat injustice and discrimination. As expected, our findings indicate that community organizations are not exempt from such situations. For this study, we interviewed 21 individuals to learn about their most significant experiences with volunteering and civic engagement. Out of these 21 individuals, one-third reported experiencing epistemic injustice, which refers to unfair treatment regarding their knowledge of the world.

Epistemic injustice is not widely explored in the humanities and social sciences, although it regularly happens during our social interactions (Kidd et al., 2017). This type of injustice can take many forms (Pohlhaus, 2017), such as challenging someone's knowledge based on their skin colour, questioning the truthfulness of their testimony because of their gender identity, or silencing them because they identify as a feminist. The concept's initiator, Miranda Fricker (2009), explains that epistemic injustice limits an

individual's ability to understand the world due to prejudice against their social group. Because it focuses on knowledge, epistemic injustice differs from pragmatic competence injustice (Padilla Cruz, 2018), social injustice (Jennings, 1991), and microaggression (Basford et al., 2014). As it involves the suppression of peripheral experience and knowledge, epistemic injustice is examined in postcolonial and feminist epistemologies (Code, 1991; Santos, 2016). Although epistemic injustice is related to language, it affects more than just words, and can generate violence against the individuals that it affects the most (Spivak, 1988).

Our goal is to investigate the impact of experiencing epistemic injustice on individuals' participation within their respective community organization. The organizations have in common that their mandate includes the promotion of social and community inclusion, culture, sports, and access to medical care in major cities in Quebec, Canada. Our research focuses on volunteers and citizens who belong to minority groups because of their beliefs, gender identities, disability situations, or political affiliations, such as feminists, LGBTQ people, and so on. Indeed, according to studies by Metzendorf and Cnaan (1992) and by Meyer and colleagues (2022), individuals' minority status plays a crucial role in their involvement with community organizations. Our participants assume a variety of function and statuses within their organization, from simple participation in activities to management and board duties, and from one-off attendance to regular involvement. They interact with various other members of the organization, such as volunteers, employees, clients, or directors. We focus on cases where those interactions lead to discomfort or conflict, and in the worst case, result in situations of epistemic injustice due to the participant's status and situation.

Between June 2021 and June 2022, we conducted 21 one-hour individual interviews, as well as 2 two-hour group interviews with the same people. The 21 participants shared their personal experiences, which helped us understand their interpretations of the epistemic injustice they faced. We asked them open-ended questions about the multiple interactional situations they encountered during their involvement. In cases where the situation appeared to be an example of epistemic injustice, we made sure to ask additional questions to gain a complete understanding of the participant's perspective and feelings at that moment. Our objective was to gather comprehensive descriptions of their experiences, which can offer significant insights into a situation of injustice (Lackey, 2008). We respected the participants' words and avoided interpreting them by superimposing our own reading grids, following recommendations by Cecchini (2019) and Higgs *et al.* (2009) to uphold ethical standards and avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

We analyzed the accounts we gathered using a performative view of communication that considers interaction as a site where language *does things* (see Austin, 1975; Bencherki, 2016). Our assumption was that, during conversations, differences among participants are established, which can lead to prejudice and can restrict their ability to express themselves fully, ultimately leading to feelings of being misunderstood, unheard and undervalued. To better understand how this happens, we focused on the language and emotional response displayed by participants when describing their experiences, including silences and hesitations (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). This analytical approach considers language at two different levels: that of the interaction that the participant describes, and that of the interview itself as an interactional encounter where the effect of that first interaction is felt and manifested. Changes in attitude, gestures, and expressions

were thus noted at both levels (Hepburn & Potter, 2012; Tutt & Hindmarsh, 2011). This helped us grasp the impact of participants' experiences and how they perceived their civic and volunteer implications. By identifying communicative practices that lead to epistemic injustice, we can hope to remove the barriers that prevent people from being fully engaged in their community organizations, and to help those organizations offer an inclusive and welcoming environment where everyone's voice is heard and valued.

First, we will examine the existing literature on epistemic injustice and the challenges researchers have faced in observing it directly. Next, we will introduce our unique approach to studying this phenomenon and share our findings. Lastly, we will discuss, based on what participants said to us, potential solutions to tackle epistemic injustice and to promote greater participation and inclusivity.

Literature review: The experience of epistemic injustice

Studies have identified inequalities that exclude certain individuals from decision-making, deliberation, and participation in third-sector organizations (Meyer & Rameder, 2022; Southby et al., 2019). Elers et al. (2021) even question the ethical commitment of organizations to the promotion of ideals of equity and inclusion. However, in the context of volunteerism, studies tend to restrict their exploration of the experiences of minority groups, such as immigrants and racialized people, to specific forms and settings of volunteering, such as religious congregations and community groups (Allan, 2019; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Sloopjes & Kampen, 2017). Unfortunately, many more organizations fail to involve minorities in their activities, such as fundraisers, resulting in a lack of representation (Jensen, 2020). We argue that research overlooks many situations of

inequality and exclusion due to its omission of the concept of epistemic injustice and of the way it affects minority members' social interactions with others within their organization.

Epistemic injustice questions an individual's capacity to know the world, because of prejudices about his or her social group of affiliation (Fricker, 2009). This definition leads to two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice. The former consists in not giving credence to an individual's testimony, while the latter, which occurs through the repetition of the former, prevents access to the resources the person needs to fully grasp his or her reality. Fricker (2009, 150-151) illustrates them with the case of sexual harassment: the repeated contestation of a victim's testimony (i.e., testimonial injustice) may lead her to wonder whether she is, in fact, a victim of harassment (i.e., hermeneutic injustice). More specifically, hermeneutic injustice results in denying the very material and intellectual resources needed to recognize that injustice is taking place, such as questioning the definition of harassment or the victim's recollection of the events. Other types of epistemic injustice have since been conceptualized, such as epistemic silencing and willful ignorance. Dotson (2011) describes epistemic silencing as an attempt to smother individuals through indifference or by depriving them of their means to communicate their knowledge. Willful ignorance, for its part, occurs when the victim's interlocutor actively avoids learning about the truth (Medina, 2013; Mills, 1997). However, the various forms of epistemic injustice are only discussed with theoretical cases (Lackey, 2021) and are not sufficiently researched empirically (Sénac, 2022).

The reason for the lack of concrete research is that epistemic injustice presents challenges when applied to real-world situations, like the ones we are examining. The very

nature of the concept is such that some individuals may not even realize they are experiencing epistemic injustice when they do, opening the door to future occurrences. In addition, epistemic injustice occurs in complex situations where participants must consider how their interactions affect them (Hebenstreit & Zemel, 2021). To address epistemic injustice, it is important to take the affective aspect into consideration. Massumi (2015, p. 53) argues that every person affected by a situation feels a sudden “shock” when interacting with others. During this moment, people experience a shared affection where their bodies are influenced by the ongoing conversation, while they also impact their conversational partners. Those affections include intense reactions such as sudden actions, insults, or strong feelings, as well as communication breakdowns like disruptions and misunderstandings (Weigand, 1999). In our research, we found that the presence of hesitations and silences in our participants' testimonies represented the affective impact of experiencing epistemic injustice (Ashcraft, 2021). Despite the variety of affective forms, they are all significant and can result in noticeable changes in behaviour, gestures, or speech (Hepburn & Potter, 2012; Wetherell, 2013).

Although it may be challenging to analyze the experience of epistemic injustice, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the communication practices that lead to unjust treatment in social interactions. In social interactions, epistemic injustice refers to the difficulty in communicating knowledge to others, rather than the inability to produce it. This aspect is often overlooked in the literature (an exception being Medina, 2023), although it is essential to understanding the impact of epistemic injustice on social interaction. Despite what some scholars suggest, epistemic injustice is not exclusively related to linguistic competence (Padilla Cruz, 2018), nor is it reducible social injustice

(Jennings, 1991) or to microaggression (Basford et al., 2014). Microaggression, as Sarah Ahmed (2012) notes, is characterized by the lack of doubt, whereas epistemic injustice exactly opens up the range of possible interpretations. However, the current dearth of studies that empirically studies epistemic injustice means there are few prior examples on how to pinpoint it and its effects in real-life situations. In the next section, we propose our own analytical apparatus to conduct such investigation.

Analysis: Epistemic injustice as an obstacle to involvement

As we examine the stories of epistemic injustice shared by our participants, we focus on the role that communication plays in shaping their experiences. What characterizes epistemic injustice is how, in the course of an interaction, people stress differences between one another, differences that they then deem relevant in evaluating their connection to knowledge, ultimately affecting their perceptions of each other's ability to reliably convey that knowledge. The notion of "difference" (Allen, 2011), here, pertains to the variations that exist among different social identities, such as gender, class, and race, and so on. Acknowledging these differences entails recognizing that social categorization impacts our abilities to communicate and act (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). It also involves distinguishing oneself from others based on these categories (Del Fa & Vásquez, 2019). When we communicate, the words we choose to express our differences can have a significant impact on how others react. This can ultimately affect our relationships with those around us (Ashcraft, 2021; Massumi, 2015). Certain words or phrases may so powerfully establish such difference that they cause the listener to become speechless or at a loss for words, due to a fear of being judged (Carmona, 2021). This type of

communication breakdown can limit individuals' ability to communicate and act (Barker, 2021), while reinforcing inequalities in knowledge. The concept of epistemic injustice highlights that individuals may be excluded from a conversation even when they are present and participating if they cannot express their knowledge and if others do not value it.

Table 1. The interactional process of the experience of injustice

Experience of injustice	Difference	The creation, in the interaction, of distinctions between people
	Materialization	The communicative materializations of these distinctions: in other words, what particular terms or sentence structures are used
	Affect	The person's affective reaction to these distinctions, which marks the existence of an injustice
	Effect	The effects of this injustice on the person's participation in the organization

In this article, we focus on seven examples of epistemic injustice drawn from our 21 individual interviews, corresponding to individuals from marginalized groups who have the most explicitly faced epistemic injustice. These accounts describe instances where there were discrepancies in how participants were treated during interactions with others within their organization. Based on the theory we have presented so far, we conducted a four-step analysis of those accounts, which is outlined in Table 1. It consists, for each interview excerpt, in asking ourselves what *difference* is being communicatively highlighted; how that difference *materializes* in talk, i.e., through what precise words, sentence structures, or other communicative practices; how the participant affectively responds to that difference being made in that particular way, i.e., remaining speechless, becoming angry, etc.; and finally, the effect of that situation on their ability to participate in their volunteering activity. Indeed, when faced with perplexing affirmations of their difference,

individuals may be affected in ways that shape their actions and words, as well as their overall relationship with the organization they are involved with. Consequently, they alter their interactional style, as well as their engagement with their respective organizations. For privacy reasons, all participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

Safia's experience

Safia, an immigrant and member of the LGBTQ community, has been actively engaged in organizations promoting LGBTQ rights since her arrival in Quebec. She hopes that her journey will inspire individuals with similar backgrounds to recognize themselves and find motivation. During our interview, she told us about several experiences of injustice and discrimination: if it is not racism, it is sexism or homophobia. She feels like her identity is limited to her country of origin, and her testimony is often not given enough consideration in these situations.

There was an advertisement for an association and I directly, I signed up, I went to the first evening, and I am all happy. I arrived and of course, in the beginning, I noticed that there were only white people, but I had just arrived, and I said to myself: "everyone is nice." I start, we go around the table and we start telling our lives and I feel a lot of judgment and a lot of: "You did well to leave your parents, don't talk to them anymore." There was no help, there was just judgment and a lot of "you are" and not "who are you?" There was no question actually, there was a lot of: "I know, and this is what you have to do, this is who you have to be, and we're going to save you." Of course, that was the first and last time I was in a meeting with them, and I came out completely upset, but in a bad way and that was no, no.

In the situation described, the interlocutors give themselves the right to judge her parents who don't accept her homosexuality in her country of origin: "You did well to leave your parents, don't talk to them anymore," without even listening to their experience: "There was just judgment and I feel a lot of "you are" and not "who you are." Safia's experience can be described as testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007), as she was not truly heard or taken seriously. The lack of questions asked made her feel judged, leading to her

feeling overwhelmed by the multiple judgments: “I came out completely upset, but in a bad way and that was no, no.” This experience led her to decide against getting involved with the organization in question. Despite this, Safia remains involved in similar organizations and wishes she had someone who could relate to her identity, both in school and at work.

Claude’s experience

Claude is a feminist and queer person who participates in social inclusion and sports education groups, specifically bike repair. Unfortunately, Claude frequently encounters discrimination and injustice while volunteering due to their gender identity. Despite being associated with the feminine gender, Claude identifies as gender-neutral and prefers the use of pronouns such as “them.” Additionally, their mechanical skills and expertise are often not acknowledged by other members of the organization:

I’m the volunteer person and there’s another person in the shop at that time, a male. The reflex, often of the people, it will be to address this man rather than me who however, carries, you know... I have a mechanic’s apron whereas the other person does not have one. There’s a kind of reflex: “ah, the man in the workshop, well, he’s certainly the one who will be able to answer my questions. He is certainly the one who is in charge of the space at the moment. He is certainly the one who can teach me thing”. So... at the time I don’t react, then after a couple of questions, they realize that: “Oh, I see. I’m not talking to the right person. Ah, well.”

In the situation described, other members (clients, and volunteers) assume, because of Claude’s gender identity, that they have no mechanical expertise: “I have a mechanic’s apron while the other one does not.” Each time, however, it’s the same thing: “Ah, the man in the workshop, well, he’s certainly the one who will be able to answer my questions”. But clients then realize that they are the ones with mechanical expertise after all: “Oh, I see. I’m not talking to the right person. Ah, well.” “Oh, I see” is the interjection of surprise that Claude uses to show the client’s reaction. This is hermeneutic injustice (Fricker, 2009):

even before Claude has a chance to say anything, the possibility of someone appearing as a woman to possess relevant knowledge is deemed implausible. As this type of situation recurred, and Claude had relational problems with other volunteers, they decided to bring the problem to their organization's board of directors, who chose not to react. Eventually, Claude decided to end their volunteering.

Ehsan's experience

Ehsan, from an immigrant background, is working towards becoming a professional in the cultural sector by being involved in various organizations that promote Quebec cinema. However, he acknowledges the sector faces challenges regarding inclusion and diversity. In our interview, Ehsan shared that he struggles to identify as a visible minority. He feels this categorization sets him apart from others, whereas, in his country of origin, he was just like everyone else. It also meant experiencing a fair share of injustice and discrimination, in his opinion for racial reasons. In several situations of epistemic injustice, he was either stigmatized as “the one who doesn't know Quebec” or excluded from conversations with other members of the organization. There was a situation where his testimony was not given enough consideration:

I had [...] a lot of relevant comments, but often it would go by: “oh but no, we hear, we don't listen”, things like that. Again, you don't know what it is, it's not, I also have the impression that my boss was someone who had to make his own decisions, that it was a bit difficult to make decisions. The way to do it is to talk to her and bring her back to that decision, as if he was the one who made the decision, but it was your decision. I'm not saying that it was a manipulative way of doing it, I didn't manipulate, but I did force some of these proposals after a while. It worked, there are many that didn't work. So, I don't know if it's a way of... but, on the other hand, for example, I understood that with time, my status was obtained with great difficulty. Extremely difficult compared to people who came into the organization and had a status like that.

While he managed to attend meetings despite his volunteer status, Ehsan feels that his comments weren't considered during group meetings: “Again, you don't know what it

is.” Ehsan’s situation is akin to testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2009). He expresses himself but is not being listened to: “Oh but no, we hear, we don’t listen.” To ensure that his proposals are heard, he chooses to pass them through his boss, even though he feels guilty about manipulating the other members of the organization: “I didn’t manipulate, but I did force some of these proposals after a while.” While Ehsan’s testimony does not explicitly state that he is affected by the situation, his silences and hesitations betray a certain discomfort: “I don’t know if it’s a way of...” He is aware that he is the only volunteer to have gone through this experience and acknowledges that his place in the organization was obtained with great difficulty. After his volunteer work ended, he decided to switch to a different sector of activity.

Danielle’s experience

Danielle has been working in social, educational, and sports organizations for nearly twenty years, and considers that her religious beliefs are a strong motivator for her involvement. Yet, she feels like an outsider due to those same religious beliefs. To her, disclosing her religion to others amounts to coming out. When she reveals herself to others, she regularly experiences situations of injustice, by having the feeling of being reduced to her religion whereas she is also a feminist, a sportswoman, and an intellectual. Despite being a white majority member, she feels as if she belongs to a minority because of the way others consider her. It is common for her to experience epistemic injustice, where she feels left out of conversations with members of the organizations she is involved with. She shared with us an instance when she voluntarily silenced herself for fear of judgment from others:

I think it’s more that sometimes, I’m mad at myself, I’m mad that I didn’t advocate well exactly. I don’t really know how to say it. I’m proud of myself in

the current group that I have to create this new community, because for me, the idea that we have a clear mission, and that we clarify what our basic values are? Like, it was always kind of put aside. I don't know, I felt like I kept saying that it was important to me, and then the others, said it was clear, but I feel like it's not clear. So, for me to verbalize it – and I'm welcoming in this case – but it's that often I'm angry because I can't say that the group didn't respect my idea. It's just that, sometimes, I was like worried that they'd say, "Ah but that's interesting what you're saying, explain more what you mean" when, in fact, it's more like, "Oh, that's not relevant", because I am like, "Okay, fuck it, because they won't understand". I discourage myself from my voice.

Danielle prefers to stay silent during meetings with other members of the organization, after having suffered judgment from them, including by being treated as if her interventions were irrelevant: “Like, it was always kind of put aside.” She says: “I was like worried that they'd say, ‘Ah but that's interesting what you're saying, explain more what you mean’ when, in fact, it's more like, ‘Oh, that's not relevant.’” Danielle's situation corresponds to epistemic silencing (Dotson, 2011), as she refrains from voicing her opinions for fear of confronting others' judgments: “Okay, fuck it, because they won't understand.” It was after this meeting that she decided not to renew her mandate, even though she feared that the organization would fall apart without her. She encapsulates her feeling of powerlessness when she explains, “I get discouraged by my own voice.”

Amandine's experience

As an immigrant, feminist, and biracial woman, Amandine has become more involved with cultural organizations and music festivals since moving to Quebec. As she told us in the interview, she has experienced several instances of ordinary racism due to stereotypes related to the Black community, with which she does not fully identify. In addition, she experienced epistemic injustices at work. In her volunteer work, she encounters less of it, but still occasionally gets angry about it. There was a time when she chose to stay silent rather than face misunderstanding from others:

Like my co-workers at the festival, we're talking about the steps that are happening against the police in the United States and then the guy starts saying, "Yeah but wait but all these people, anyway, they're so violent. He breaks statues" and then he starts to say that people are not educated at all, that it's the ghetto people who make demonstrations. Then, there were several of us at that time, and I was one of the only ones to react in the mode: "but you are completely sick?" And everyone was there: "well, that's a good point". Okay? There are a lot of places when I'm not with my friends where I'm in mode, I know that if I say something, people will tell me: "Well, you're boring, you're taking away the good atmosphere". There are plenty of times when I don't talk when I want to.

In this situation, the volunteers she works with are unaware of the stereotypes they reenact about Black community members, including when discussing the Black Lives Matter movement: "Yeah but, wait, but all these people, anyway, they're so violent. He breaks statues!" Initially, Amandine would intervene, for instance by retorting, "But you are completely sick?" However, after realizing she was the only one to do so, she decided to keep quiet rather than denounce the racism others don't seem to recognize. She was afraid of being confronted with their reactions, for instance: "Well, you're boring, you're taking away the good atmosphere." Dotson (2011) describes this situation as epistemic silencing: she chooses to remain silent rather than endure her interlocutors' comments. In the end, Amandine realizes this fact: "There are plenty of times when I don't talk while I want to." The recurrence of these situations does not prevent her from engaging with these organizations for their cultural missions. The situation is clear for Amandine: injustice and discrimination are part of her daily life, but this is not a sufficient reason to keep her from acting for other values she cherishes.

Gabrielle's experience

Gabrielle is a feminist and a member of the LGBTQ community who has participated in sports organizations since she was a child and has more recently become involved in a non-profit mental health listening service. Having experienced discrimination

from the moment individuals learned of her sexual orientation, she now ensures that her safety is guaranteed in the organizations in which she chooses to participate. Most recently, she has experienced a lack of recognition of her volunteer expertise:

Sometimes it's employees who say, "You're a volunteer". But yes, we feel the fact that you are "just" a volunteer. [...] Sometimes, it's annoying. We get a lot of callers with borderline personality disorder, also a lot on the autism spectrum. Sometimes I hear things and I think, "Oh my god!". I wish I had gotten that call, but I didn't. It was a [employed] colleague who got it. It's so violent for them... they're in distress, they have the courage to call and then bang: another form of violence. Some people think they know more about what they're talking about when you, it's shocking what I'm going to say – I've had two suicide attempts in my life, and I volunteer because of it. I know what it's like, I've been there.

Gabrielle testifies of situations where employees replicate certain forms of violence on individuals in distress: "I wish I had gotten that call, but I didn't. It was a colleague [a paid employee] who got it. It's so violent for them... they're in distress, they have the courage to call and then bang: another form of violence." Gabrielle is outraged by the situation—she exclaims "Oh my god!"—but also by the fact that her knowledge of how to help callers is dismissed due to her volunteer status. She has some expertise compared to her colleagues: "Some people think they know more about what they're talking about when you [...] I've had two suicide attempts in my life, and I volunteer because of it. I know what it's like, I've been there." As a volunteer, she is subject to hermeneutic injustice (Fricker, 2007), as she is denied the resource (i.e., the status) to make her expertise known by her peers, in an organizational context that is more attached to rank than to experience. Even so, her passion for the organization's mission keeps her involved with it.

Rosalia's Experience

As an immigrant, Rosalia has been volunteering for a community healthcare service center for ten years. She is now retired and has extensive experience managing

international projects. Her volunteer work involves managing a waiting room where patients wait for treatment. While volunteering, she is frequently subjected to epistemic injustice because her expertise is overlooked:

There was a nurse in triage who gave a number for the person to wait a long time. I was watching. That the person was not well. The husband of the person called me, he said: "my wife is fainting". So, I said, "Which nurse did you see?" I went and knocked on the door. She said, "What's this?" I said, "That person, that lady, she's not well, she's fainting". She answered: "Oh no, I know what she has, it's nothing." When I turned around, the lady had fainted. So, what did I do? I knocked on the second door, it was a nurse I know. I said I have someone who just fainted. She came out, she called the others, too, to come and bring a stretcher. I looked the first nurse in the eye. See, she knows exactly what she did. We took over the patient, and she saw that I, I called the nurse in the other triage, and not her, because I knew she wasn't going to do anything.

In the situation she describes, one of the nurses ignores her recommendation despite her expertise in recognizing symptoms that require emergency care: "Oh no, I know what she has, it's nothing." Rosalia then goes on explaining the situation to another nurse: "I said, I have someone who just fainted. She came out, she called the others, too, to come and bring a stretcher." It seems that is a case of willful ignorance here (Medina, 2013; Mills, 1997), as the first nurse ignores Rosalia's request for help based on her satisfaction with her own knowledge. Rosalia cannot help but think that the nurse would have taken her more seriously if she had not been a volunteer: "We took over the patient, and she saw that I, I called the nurse in the other triage, and not her, because I knew she wasn't going to do anything." Rosalia stares intensely at the nurse in response to the situation, as if she is attempting to denounce her: "I looked the first nurse in the eye. See, she knows exactly what she did." It is not just this nurse who does not realize how valuable volunteering can be. Rosalia recently asked the volunteer manager to have volunteers trained by the department in which they are each involved, so that staff members are aware of their expertise and involvement. However, neither the volunteer manager nor the board of

directors (on which she happened to sit) considered her recommendation. After the interview, she regretfully informed us that she had resigned from the board, as did many of her volunteer colleagues.

In all these experiences reported, fighting injustice motivates the involvement of volunteers in community organizations, but then it is also injustice, and specifically epistemic injustice, that affects their involvement in advocating the causes they care about. Table 2 (available as an online appendix) presents a synthesis of these accounts. Participants expressed concerns that they had difficulty communicating, when interacting with other members of the organization (employees, clients, etc.), their true value as knowers. Experiencing epistemic injustice repeatedly transforms their relationship with their environment to the point of causing problems with their ability to participate and to commit. Safia and Ehsan, for instance, eventually stop participating in their respective organization because they feel unheard by others. Amandine and Danielle prefer avoiding conversations about how different they are rather than receiving comments about their differences. Because of their volunteer profile and status, Claude, Gabrielle and Rosalia feel their expertise is not sufficiently recognized by other members of the organization. Claude and Rosalia even decide to put an end to years of involvement.

To understand epistemic injustice, we examined how communication between individuals can result in the unfair treatment of our participants. They may feel injustice when interlocutors fail to recognize their identity or dismiss their views based on social, gender, political, or religious differences. At time, our participants attempted to share their experience, but others ignored or invalidated their contribution; in other cases, they even felt too afraid to express their knowledge, leading to a silencing effect. Seeing people only

through the prism of their differences can be consequential: stressing those differences affects people and the way they can use language, sometimes even leaving them speechless. Indeed, as we saw, affect accounts for the way epistemic injustice can cripple a speaker's ability to communicate ideas, knowledge, or emotions, depending on the way he or she has been affected by social interaction. The way people express themselves in their experience of epistemic injustice reflects their inability to be truly recognized by others in the interaction. Over time, epistemic injustice can cause people to be excluded from participating in communities, decision-making, deliberation processes, and organizational life.

Discussion: How to promote epistemic justice?

The notion of epistemic injustice enhances our understanding of the challenges volunteers and involved citizens face as they participate in community organizations. Our analysis of testimonies shows that epistemic injustice is not limited to cases where power relations are expected. As our analysis has shown, epistemic injustice occurs when interlocutors modulate their interactions based on differences they perceive between themselves and others, leading to troubling situations where individuals are less likely to feel legitimate to interact with other members of the organization. This happens even in community organizations that should be supportive and welcoming and strive against injustice and discrimination. It is therefore imperative that community organizations not only develop a noble mission but also rethink the value of all their members' contributions.

Epistemic injustice may appear as harmless misunderstandings, but its effects are pernicious in many ways and hinder participation and engagement for those experiencing

it. As we show, even well-intentioned interactions can lead to undesirable outcomes, exposing volunteers to epistemic injustice, even within organizations supposedly committed to their interests. When individuals suffer from epistemic injustice, their relationships with others change, causing them to gradually disengage from their involvement. Thus, epistemic injustice not only harms its actual victims but also, through demobilization, the organization itself, because it is deprived of the participation of those who share its purpose. To ensure epistemic *justice*, these organizations should value the profiles, experiences, and fields of expertise of their volunteers and citizens, as Rosalia suggests.

In concluding our interviews with them, we asked our participants how they believed epistemic injustice could be prevented. First, they suggested that organizations need to provide their volunteers with emotional, physical, and mental safety so that they can express themselves freely. A key aspect of ensuring safety is the punctual creation of non-mixed or chosen-mix groups and meetings in order to guarantee security for subaltern groups (Fraser, 1990) and foster a nurturing relational culture (Demaris & Landsman, 2022). Withing such a safer environment, members could build meaningful relationships with others without worrying about epistemic injustice, allowing them to fully invest in their involvement. Another piece of advice our participants formulated is that organizations should implement policies and programs valuing the contributions of diverse volunteers and citizens. For instance, organizations could implement training on interactional conflict. In all cases, the long-term goal should be to adopt a participatory approach in which volunteers and citizens are fully integrated into the various teams (board, facilitation committees, etc.) and can share their expertise with them. Organizations that work towards

ensuring epistemic justice also show that they value the cohesion of their members, that they are truly committed to promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion. Otherwise, they risk fueling distrust from their membership as they give but lip service to the terms “diversity” and “inclusion”, without any concrete implementation of social and epistemic justice. Indeed, it is only through a culture of collaboration and constructive feedback that an organization fully promotes social and epistemic justice.

Works cited

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies : A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139-158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002>

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included : Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.

Allan, K. (2019). Volunteering as hope labour : The potential value of unpaid work experience for the un- and under-employed. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 60(1), 66-83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2018.1548300>

Allen, B. J. (2011). *Difference matters : Communicating social identity* (2nd ed). Waveland Press.

Arnett, R. C. (2016). Dialogue Theory. In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy* (John Wiley&Sons, p. 1-13).

Ashcraft, K. L. (2021). Communication as Constitutive Transmission? An Encounter with Affect. *Communication Theory*, 31(4), 571-592. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtz027>

Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words* (2d ed). Clarendon Press.

Barker, B. (2021). Epistemic Injustice and Performing Know-how. *Social Epistemology*, 35(6), 608-620. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.1882608>

Basford, T. E., Offermann, L. R., & Behrend, T. S. (2014). Do You See What I See? Perceptions of Gender Microaggressions in the Workplace. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 38(3), 340-349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684313511420>

Bencherki, N. (2016). How things make things do things with words, or how to pay attention to what things have to say. *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(3), 272-289.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1214888>

Bencherki, N., Matte, F., & Cooren, F. (2020). *Authority and Power in Social Interactions : Methods and Analysis*. Routledge.

Carmona, C. (2021). Silencing by Not Telling : Testimonial Void as a New Kind of Testimonial Injustice. *Social Epistemology*, 35(6), 577-592.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.1887395>

Cecchini, M. (2019). Reinforcing and Reproducing Stereotypes? Ethical Considerations When Doing Research on Stereotypes and Stereotyped Reasoning.

Societies, 9(4), 79. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc9040079>

Code, L. (1991). *What Can She Know? : Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*. Cornell University Press.

Cohen-Charash, Y., & Spector, P. E. (2001). The Role of Justice in Organizations : A Meta-Analysis. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 86(2),

278-321. <https://doi.org/10.1006/obhd.2001.2958>

Colquitt, J. A., Conlon, D. E., Wesson, M. J., Porter, C. O. L. H., & Ng, K. Y.

(2001). Justice at the millennium : A meta-analytic review of 25 years of organizational justice research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 425-445.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.3.425>

Del Fa, S., & Vásquez, C. (2019). Existing through differenciación : A Derridean approach to alternative organizations. *M@n@gement*, 22(4), 559-583.

Demaris, L., & Landsman, C. (2022). Relational Culture : Beyond Prefigurative Politics. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 44(3), 242-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2021.1945373>

Dotson, K. (2011). Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing. *Hypatia*, 26(2), 236-257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x>

Dutta, M. J., & Zapata, D. B. (Éds.). (2019). *Communicating for Social Change : Meaning, Power, and Resistance*. Springer Nature Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2005-7>

Elers, P., Dutta, M. J., & Elers, S. (2021). Engagement and the Nonprofit Organization : Voices from the Margins. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 35(3), 368-391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08933189211001883>

Feit, M. (2018). Addressing racial bias in nonprofit human resources. In A. M. Eikenberry, R. M. Mirabella, & B. Sandberg (Éds.), *Reframing nonprofit organizations : Democracy, inclusion, and social change* (Melvin&Leigh, p. 66-75).

Ferdman, B. M., & Deane, B. (Éds.). (2014). *Diversity at work : The practice of inclusion*. Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand.

Folger, R., & Cropanzano, R. (2001). Fairness Theory : Justice as Accountability. In *Advances in Organizational Justice* (Stanford University Press, p. 1-55).

Francis, L., & Barling, J. (2005). Organizational injustice and psychological strain. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue Canadienne Des Sciences Du Comportement*, 37(4), 250-261. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087260>

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the Public Sphere : A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>

Fricker, M. (2009). *Epistemic Injustice : Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

Handy, F., & Greenspan, I. (2009). Immigrant Volunteering : A Stepping Stone to Integration? *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 38(6), 956-982. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764008324455>

Hawkins, P. H. (2014). Diversity For Nonprofits : Mission Drift Or Mission Fulfillment? *Journal of Diversity Management (JDM)*, 9(1), 41-50. <https://doi.org/10.19030/jdm.v9i1.8621>

Hebenstreit, B. L., & Zemel, A. (2021). Chapter 1.2. Affect in interaction : Working out expectancies and responsibility in a phone call. In J. S. Robles & A. Weatherall (Éds.), *Pragmatics & Beyond New Series* (Vol. 321, p. 51-76). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.321.02heb>

Heckler, N. (2019). Whiteness and Masculinity in Nonprofit Organizations : Law, Money, and Institutional Race and Gender. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 41(3), 266-285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2019.1621659>

Hepburn, A., & Potter, J. (2012). Crying and Crying Responses. In A. Perakyla & M.-L. Sorjonen (Éds.), *Emotion in Interaction* (p. 0). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199730735.003.0009>

Higgs, J., Horsfall, D., & Grace, S. (2009). *Writing Qualitative Research on Practice*. BRILL. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789087909086>

Jennings, M. K. (1991). Thinking about Social Injustice. *Political Psychology*, 12(2), 187. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791461>

Jensen, C. (2020). Fundraising, race, and discourse: The challenges and opportunities' of social construction. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 25(3). <https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.1658>

Kidd, I. J., Medina, J., & Pohlhaus, G. (Éds.). (2017). *The Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice* (First issued in paperback). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Lackey, J. (2008). *Learning from words : Testimony as a source of knowledge*. Oxford University Press.

Lackey, J. (Éd.). (2021). Applied Epistemology. In *Applied Epistemology* (1^{re} éd., p. 3-16). Oxford University PressOxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198833659.003.0001>

Lee Ashcraft, K., & Allen, B. J. (2003). The Racial Foundation of Organizational Communication. *Communication Theory*, 13(1), 5-38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2003.tb00280.x>

Massumi, B. (2015). *The politics of affect*. Polity.

Medina, J. (2013). *The Epistemology of Resistance : Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199929023.001.0001>

Medina, J. (2023). *The epistemology of protest : Silencing, epistemic activism, and the communicative life of resistance*. Oxford University Press.

Metzendorf, D., & Cnaan, R. A. (1992). Volunteers in feminist Organizations. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 2(3), 255-269. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.4130020305>

Meyer, M., & Rameder, P. (2022). Who Is in Charge? Social Inequality in Different Fields of Volunteering. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 33(1), 18-32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00313-7>

Meyer, S. J., Dale, E. J., & Willis, K. K. M. (2022). “Where My Gays At?” The Status of LGBTQ People and Queer Theory in Nonprofit Research. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 51(3), 566-586. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640211021497>

Mills, C. W. (1997). *The racial contract*. Cornell University Press.

Nagar-Ron, S., & Motzafi-Haller, P. (2011). “My Life? There Is Not Much to Tell”: On Voice, Silence and Agency in Interviews With First-Generation Mizrahi Jewish Women Immigrants to Israel. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17(7), 653-663. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411414007>

Padilla Cruz, M. (2018). Pragmatic Competence Injustice. *Social Epistemology*, 32(3), 143-163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1458351>

Place, K. R., & Ciszek, E. (2021). Troubling Dialogue and Digital Media: A Subaltern Critique. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1), 205630512098444. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984449>

Pohlhaus, G. (2017). Varieties of Epistemic Injustice. In I. J. Kidd, G. Pohlhaus, & J. Medina (Éds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (p. 1-15). Taylor & Francis Group.

Reknes, I., Glambek, M., & Einarsen, S. V. (2020). Injustice perceptions, workplace bullying and intention to leave. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, 43(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-10-2019-0406>

Santos, B. de S. (2016). *Epistemologies of the South : Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge.

Sénac, C. (2022). L'injustice épistémique : Questions de vérité et méthode. *Labyrinth*, 24(1), 135-156. <https://doi.org/10.25180/lj.v24i1.286>

Sénac, C., & Bencherki, N. (2023). L'injustice épistémique comme expérience affective : Le cas du milieu du bénévolat et de l'engagement citoyen au Québec. In *La communication organisante. Études de cas en communication organisationnelle*. Presses de l'Université du Québec.

Slootjes, J., & Kampen, T. (2017). 'Is My Volunteer Job Not Real Work?' The Experiences of Migrant Women with Finding Employment Through Volunteer Work. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 28(5), 1900-1921. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-017-9885-6>

Southby, K., South, J., & Bagnall, A.-M. (2019). A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering for Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Implications for Health Inequalities. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 30(5), 907-920. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00119-2>

Spivak, G. Chakravorty. (1988). *Can the subaltern speak?* Macmillan; WorldCat.org.

Thornton-Lugo, M. A., & Rupp, D. E. (2021). The Communication of Justice, Injustice, and Necessary Evils : An Empirical Examination. *SAGE Open*, 11(3), 215824402110407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211040796>

Tutt, D., & Hindmarsh, J. (2011). Reenactments at Work : Demonstrating Conduct in Data Sessions. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 44(3), 211-236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351813.2011.591765>

Weigand, E. (1999). Misunderstanding : The standard case. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31(6), 763-785. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(98\)00068-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(98)00068-X)

West, C., & Fenstermaker, S. (1995). Doing Difference. *Gender & Society*, 9(1), 8-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124395009001002>

Wetherell, M. (2013). Affect and discourse – What’s the problem? From affect as excess to affective/discursive practice. *Subjectivity*, 6(4), 349-368. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2013.13>

Willner, L. (2019). Organizational Legitimacy and Managerialism Within Social Justice Nonprofit Organizations : An Interest Divergence Analysis. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 41(3), 225-244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2019.1621654>

Table 2. Description of our participants' experience, following the process established in

Table 1.

Saphia's experience	Difference	There was just judgment and I feel a lot of "you are" and not "who you are".	Being an immigrant from a non-LGBTQ friendly country.
	Materialization	"You did well to leave your parents, don't talk to them anymore."	Replacing her own life story with a wrong version invented by others.
	Affect	"I came out completely upset, but in a bad way and that was no, no."	Difficulty communicating who she really is; feeling completely upset.
	Effect	"Of course, that was the first and last time I was in a meeting with them"	Stigmatization and decision to leave the group.
Claude's experience	Difference	"I have a mechanic's apron while the other one does not."	Being perceived as a woman, and therefore failing to be recognized as a competent mechanic.
	Materialization	"Ah, the man in the workshop, well, he's certainly the one who will be able to answer my questions."	Clients directing their question to men in the workshop.
	Affect	So... at the time I don't react	Even though Claude is aware of the problem in the situation, they feel unable to react.
	Effect	"Oh, I see. I'm not talking to the right person. Ah, well."	Claude's experience is undervalued, to the point they decided to leave.
Ehsan's experience	Difference	"Again, you don't know what it is."	Being racialized—although not admitted.
	Materialization	"Oh but no, we hear, we don't listen."	Not being listened to. Also, in the interview itself: hesitations in the narrative, expressing regret for "manipulating" people.

	Affect	“I don’t know if it’s a way of…”	Disbelief in the situation and inability to verbalize it.
	Effect	“I didn’t manipulate, but I did force some of these proposals after a while.”	Recurring difficulty contributing to decisions on an equal footing with other members of the organization, requiring efforts to “force” one’s ideas to remain involved.
Danielle’s experience	Difference	“Like, it was always kind of put aside.”	Impression of saying things differently than others.
	Materialization	“I was like worried that they'd say, "ah but that's interesting what you're saying, explain more what you mean" when, in fact, it's more like, "oh, that's not relevant.”	Fear of being misjudged because of a lack of relevance in her interventions.
	Affect	“I discourage myself from my voice.”	Feeling of being discouraged by herself.
	Effect	“Okay, fuck it, because they won't understand.”	Prefers remaining silent because of this fear of being misjudged.
Amandine’s experience	Difference	“But you are completely sick?”	She is the only one to recognize stereotypes towards Black communities.
	Materialization	“Yeah, but wait but all these people, anyway, they're so violent. He breaks statues.”	Difference in recognizing this sentence as ordinary racism.
	Affect	“Well, you're boring, you're taking away the good atmosphere.”	Fear of being judged by others.
	Effect	“There are plenty of times when I don't talk when I want to.”	Silences herself instead of calling out.
Gabrielle’s experience	Difference	“Some people think they know more about what they’re talking about when you [...] I've had two suicide attempts in my life, and I volunteer	The experience she possesses qualifies her for expert status, but since she is a volunteer, she is unable to be recognized.

		because of it. I know what it's like, I've been there.”	
	Materialization	“We feel the fact that you are just volunteering.”	The others judge her knowledge based on her status as a volunteer.
	Affect	“Oh my god”	It surprises her that her employed colleagues do not know what being distressed is like.
	Effect	“I wish I had gotten that call, but I didn't. It was a [employed] colleague who got it. It's so violent for them... they're in distress, they have the courage to call and then bang: another form of violence.”	It is her employed colleagues who reproduce a form of violence towards her and others in need.
Rosalia's experience	Difference	“I said, I have someone who just fainted. She came out, she called the others, too, to come and bring a stretcher.”	The nurse refuse to recognize Rosalia's expertise as a volunteer.
	Materialization	“Oh no, I know what she has, it's nothing.”	Her status as a volunteer is used to judge the relevance of her intervention.
	Affect	“I looked the first nurse in the eye. See, she knows exactly what she did.”	She feels anger and she stares intensively the nurse as an attempt to denounce her.
	Effect	“We took over the patient, and she saw that I, I called the nurse in the other triage, and not her, because I knew she wasn't going to do anything.”	The lack of recognition as a volunteer can put patients in danger.