

Epistemic Injustice: Experiences of Myanmar (Burmese) Graduate Students in U.S. Universities

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Abstract

The study explores epistemic injustice faced by Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students in U.S. universities, drawing on various forms of epistemic injustices, which define *epistemic injustice* as unfairness in knowledge practices affecting marginalized groups, and considering aspects of race/identity/status and classroom dynamics. Through qualitative research involving 14 Myanmar graduate students selected via purposive and snowball sampling, data were collected through a questionnaire-based interview and analyzed using thematic analysis. The study aims to understand how race/identity/status affects Myanmar graduate students' experiences of epistemic injustice in U.S. universities and explore how classroom experiences contribute to epistemic injustice for Myanmar graduate students. The study reveals diverse experiences of Myanmar graduate students in the U.S. related to epistemic injustice, ranging from feelings of marginalization and cultural dissonance to challenges in being recognized as credible knowers. It underscores the need for higher education institutions to enhance curricular representation, strengthen institutional support systems, foster inclusive academic cultures, support the emotional and psychological well-being, and encourage student advocacy. Findings from this study contribute to broader educational policies and practices by providing empirical evidence on the challenges faced by Myanmar graduate students in U.S. higher education institutions. The study highlights the necessity for structural reforms in institutional policies to address epistemic injustice, including faculty training in cultural competence, curriculum diversification, and the establishment of more inclusive academic and support structures. By advocating for these changes, the research informs policy development aimed at fostering equitable and just educational environments for historically marginalized international students.

Keywords: epistemic injustice, Myanmar graduate students, higher education

1. Introduction

Epistemic injustice refers to the unfair treatment of individuals in their capacity as knowers, primarily through the unjust denial of recognition or dismissal of their knowledge claims (Dotson, 2011, 2012, 2014; Fricker, 2007, 2017). Historically, epistemic injustice has been deeply intertwined with issues of power, oppression, and marginalization. The term was popularized by British philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. However, the concept can be traced back to ancient philosophical discussions, particularly those advanced by Black feminists and feminists of color, about who has the right to speak and be heard. Historically, marginalized communities – including women, racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and others – have faced significant epistemic barriers. Their experiences were often invalidated, overlooked, or misunderstood. For instance, medical research primarily focused on male patients for a long time – leading to a lack of

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understanding about women's health issues. In recent decades, with the rise of feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theories, there has been a growing awareness and critique of epistemic injustice. These theories emphasize the importance of acknowledging diverse perspectives and voices, challenging traditional power structures, and reevaluating whose knowledge is valuable.

The discussion around epistemic injustice continues to evolve – bridging philosophy, sociology, and other disciplines – all aiming to correct historical wrongs and create a more inclusive epistemic community. In higher education settings, epistemic injustice mainly takes place in a classroom or lab setting and involves a minoritized student (Gonzales et al., 2023; Ku et al., 2008). A study on diversity in graduate education by Slay et al. (2019) documented the experience of a graduate student of color facing epistemic injustice. One of her [student of color's] white peers described, "I think that in lab when white students ... speak up our ideas are, you know, everyone likes them. But then we notice that when minority students speak up, it is like "No, that's not a good idea."." (Slay et al., 2019, p. 273). This scenario illustrates that the professor intentionally dismissed the minoritized student's credibility as a knower.

I am interested in understanding how epistemic injustice (in any form) manifests Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students' experiences in United States (U.S.) universities. Myanmar graduate students were chosen as the focal population for this study due to their unique socio-political and educational background. As a group with limited representation in Western higher education, Myanmar students often encounter challenges related to language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and academic recognition. Myanmar's prolonged political instability and underfunded higher education system further contribute to the disparities these students experience when transitioning to U.S. universities (Chongcharoen & Daungkaew, 2016; Lin, 2023). These students' epistemic contributions are often undervalued due to implicit biases and structural inequities within academic institutions. By focusing on this population, the study aims to highlight the intersection of race, nationality, and educational inequity in epistemic injustice within higher education settings.

The paper examines the presence of epistemic injustice in U.S. universities, relating to two concerns: First, graduate schools/colleges aim to educate individuals who will work in diverse settings, including education, health, politics, business, and research (but not limited to). This requires graduates to address challenges in their respective fields, employing socially responsive, culturally sensitive and inclusive approaches to knowledge and knowledge production (Gonzales et al., 2023; Gumport, 2011). Second, extensive studies highlight that students from marginalized groups keep experiencing isolation and marginalization in the context of advising, teaching and learning (classroom experience), and mentoring (Brunsma et al., 2017; Gonzales et al., 2023). For example, a Burmese female master's student reflected and shared her experience, "I don't want to participate in class discussion anymore. I stopped talking not because I don't know the discussion questions and course readings but because professor had dismissed my contributions." Her story underscores the harms and losses of historically marginalized scholars' knowledge contribution and production.

These concerns encourage me to explore epistemic injustice faced by Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students in U.S. universities, drawing on various epistemic injustice scholarships, which define *epistemic injustice* as unfairness in knowledge practices affecting marginalized groups, and considering aspects of race/identity/status and classroom dynamic. The article will address these two questions: How do Myanmar graduate students perceive the role of race/identity/status in their experiences of epistemic injustice in U.S. universities? What specific classroom experiences (challenges or barriers) have Myanmar graduate students identified as contributing to epistemic injustice? The study aims to 1) understand how race/identity/status affect Myanmar graduate students' experiences of epistemic injustice in U.S. universities.; and 2) explore how classroom experiences contribute to epistemic injustice for

Myanmar graduate students. Findings will inform inclusive policy and practice in higher education settings, acknowledging and addressing epistemic injustice affected Myanmar graduate students in the U.S.

In this pilot study, the qualitative research design is employed to explore the epistemic injustice experiences of Myanmar graduate students in U.S. universities. The primary sampling method is purposive sampling, where initial participants who identified as Myanmar graduate students in U.S. institutions are selected. This is complemented by snowball sampling, where participants are asked to refer other peers who met the study's criteria. The sample size consists of 14 Myanmar students engaged in graduate-level studies in the United States. Data was collected through questionnaire-based interviews, which were divided into two sections: Section A focused on demographic information, and Section B investigated the experience of epistemic injustice. To enhance methodological transparency, a detailed description of the coding process – including examples of coded extracts – has been provided. The data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, ensuring that themes were generated through an iterative and rigorous coding process.

Thematic analysis, specifically reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. The coding process involved multiple phases: initial familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the report. Codes were developed inductively from the data, allowing emerging themes to shape the analysis rather than being imposed by pre-existing frameworks. I first read all responses from the questionnaire three times and noted down initial thoughts. Next, initial codes were assigned to relevant excerpts – grouping similar ideas together. The codes were then refined through multiple rounds of review to identify significant themes. To enhance methodological rigor, memos were kept throughout the process to document reflections and analytical decisions. Additionally, sample excerpts were included to illustrate how themes were derived from participant responses.

To my knowledge, this paper is the very first study on the experiences of Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students facing epistemic injustice in U.S. universities. Hence, while the paper engages with the critical theories and previous studies on epistemic injustices, it also offers the lived experiences of Burmese students in higher institutions in the United States. Firstly, the paper introduces the definitions of epistemic injustice and its various forms and provides examples in the context of graduate education. Secondly, it explores the role of race/identity/status in Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students' experiences of epistemic injustice in general. Next, it discusses the specific epistemic injustice experiences of Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students in U.S. universities. Recommendations for graduate education in U.S. higher institutions, limitations of the study, and future research projects are offered in the conclusion.

2. Understanding Epistemic Injustice and Its Types in the Context of Graduate Education

Patin and Sebastian (2021) highlight the importance of understanding epistemic injustice and its various forms:

Without a close and critical examination of how our policies and practices harm individuals' or entire communities', ways of knowing, we contribute to people experiencing epistemic injustice and thus to epistemicide. ... It's important that we understand different types of epistemic injustices so that we can identify these transgressions and so that we can interrupt and stop them. (p. 2)

Exploring the definitions of epistemic injustice and its various forms is critical not only for a holistic understanding of academic equity but also for fostering an inclusive environment where all voices – especially those traditionally marginalized – are acknowledged and valued. In higher education settings, the dynamics of knowledge production, distribution, and recognition play a crucial role in shaping academic discourses and individual trajectories. Central to these dynamics is the concept of epistemic injustice – a term that refers to the unfair treatment of individuals in their capacity as knowers. This section will primarily discuss the definitions of epistemic injustice and its different forms, explaining the critical perspectives of scholars, philosophers, and educators. It will also relate these concepts of epistemic injustice to the context of graduate education, providing some practical examples.

2.1. Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustice

According to Fricker (2007), there are two main forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical or racial epistemic injustices resulting from racial ignorance (Medina, 2017). *Testimonial injustice* occurs when a speaker's word is unfairly discredited due to prejudice – often based on their gender, race, or social background. Throughout history, women's voices have been systematically marginalized, and their testimonies are viewed as less reliable than those of men. For example, studies have shown that in professional settings, supervisors often overlook or dismiss women's input because of gender bias (Jones & Clifton, 2018). In the context of graduate education, according to Gonzales et al. (2023), testimonial injustice might happen when a professor declines to mentor a graduate student based on her identity as a working, single mother. It may also occur when a professor disregards a student's critique/discussion of reading due to their status as a first-year, international, or student of color. In addition, testimonial injustice rooted in racial bias can be demonstrated in various ways.

Suppose a graduate student who identifies as African American is part of a research seminar. During a group discussion about socio-economic challenges in urban environments, she shares insights based on her academic research and personal experiences growing up in an urban neighborhood. Instead of engaging with her contribution, the professor questions the validity of her input, suggesting that it might be too anecdotal or biased because of her background. Simultaneously, similar insights from her white peers – simply based on theoretical understandings – are accepted without examination. This scenario highlights an instance of testimonial injustice where her testimony is devalued due to racial bias. Despite having a unique blend of lived experience and academic knowledge on the subject, her input is unfairly questioned based on assumptions related to her racial identity.

On the other hand, *hermeneutical injustice* relates to a lack of structural understanding. It happens when marginalized groups lack the epistemic resources/tools such as experiences, language, and resources to understand, interpret, and communicate their experiences adequately because the dominant frameworks of understanding do not recognize or account for them (Fricker, 2007). This type of injustice is often insidious since it deprives marginalized groups of the language or conceptual tools to express their experiences. Previously, society did not have the language (epistemic resource) to properly define and address issues like domestic violence and sexual assault, which are often rooted in gender biases (Dotson, 2012; Fricker, 2007; Frank, 2013). The process of developing knowledge and awareness about these forms of harassment was challenging because men, who are more frequently identified as perpetrators, generally held dominant positions (more power) in institutions such as media and the courts that could spotlight and address these issues (Gonzales et al., 2023).

Hermeneutical injustice can be observed in the graduate education setting when certain groups of students lack the conceptual framework or vocabulary to describe and communicate their unique experiences and challenges. For example, consider international graduate students from non-Western backgrounds. Upon entering a predominantly Western academic environment, they might face a set of challenges related to

cultural adaptation, language nuances, or differing academic norms. However, the dominant discourse in the institution may lack the conceptual tools to understand or recognize these specific challenges. As a result, these international students might struggle to articulate their unique experiences and access appropriate support, not because their challenges are less real or pressing but because the institution lacks the epistemic resources to recognize and address them. This absence of recognition and understanding can further marginalize these students and hinder their academic progress.

2.2 Contributory Injustice

Contributory injustice is the third form of epistemic injustice conceptualized by Kristie Dotson (2012) to fill the epistemic gap Fricker (2007) failed to acknowledge. Building on the Black feminist viewpoint, Dotson (2012) emphasizes the idea of diverse epistemic resources within various knowledge communities and systems. While she agrees that epistemic injustice can arise from individual bias (testimonial) or a lack of epistemic tools (hermeneutical), she points out the need for a third form, contributory injustice, which emerges from the *willful* denial of other forms of knowledge. It is not just the absence of resources but also the *active* refusal to recognize, learn from, and be educated by them. For example, practitioners and researchers in higher education and student affairs who identify as cisgender often neglect the knowledge possessed by members of the trans community (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018).

In the context of this study, contributory injustice is operationalized through Myanmar graduate students' experiences of having their contributions dismissed or overlooked in academic discussions. Participants reported instances where their insights, rooted in their cultural and academic backgrounds, were devalued compared to those of their peers from Western contexts. This aligns with testimonial injustice, where their credibility as knowers was diminished based on biases about their nationality and perceived linguistic abilities. Similarly, hermeneutical injustice is evident in the challenges students faced in articulating their experiences due to a lack of shared epistemic resources. Several participants described struggling to find the appropriate academic language to frame their experiences in ways that were acknowledged by faculty and peers.

By integrating these three forms of epistemic injustice – testimonial, hermeneutical, and contributory – this study highlights how Myanmar graduate students encounter systemic barriers to full academic participation. Their contributions to class discussions, research collaborations, and knowledge production processes were often constrained by structural and implicit biases – limiting their ability to fully engage as epistemic agents. These findings suggest that addressing epistemic injustice in higher education requires targeted interventions such as inclusive teaching practices and faculty training in recognizing diverse epistemic contributions.

Imagine there is an international graduate student who belongs to a marginalized community. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in Anthropology at a university in the U.S. – focusing her research on the traditional practices of her community. In group discussions and seminars, whenever she provides insights based on her lived experiences and the experiences of her community, her peers and even her advisor often dismisses her contributions, assuming they are biased or subjective. Even though she has done thorough fieldwork, and her arguments are supported by empirical data, they argue that her insights are not objective enough. Consequently, this kind of willful hermeneutical ignorance – a refusal “... to acknowledge the significance of contributions of marginalized knowers to the general knowledge pool.” (Pohlhaus, 2011, p. 734), which will be discussed in the following section – may harm the knowledge of international marginalized students' community and their participation in epistemic systems.

2.3 Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance

Another shortcoming in Fricker's (2007) conceptualization of epistemic injustice is the lack of emphasis on the cooperative effort of knowers in creating willful hermeneutical ignorance. She takes into account only the situatedness of knowers but not the interdependence of knowers when addressing hermeneutical injustice (Pohlhaus, 2011). While the situatedness of a knower refers to the situations they encounter due to the social dynamics that place them in the world, knowers are interdependent because the knowledge resources or tools they utilize function collectively rather than individually (Dotson, 2014; Pahlhaus, 2011).

According to Pohlhaus (2011), *willful hermeneutical ignorance* happens when those in dominant positions fail to recognize knowledge tools derived from the experiences of those in marginalized positions. These refusals enable those dominantly positioned to misunderstand, misinterpret, or ignore significant aspects of the world. The notion of willful hermeneutical ignorance is closely related to what Patin et al. (2021) theorized: *Participatory injustice* occurs when individuals are denied engagement in shaping their own ways of knowing; and *curricular injustice* refers to the lack of essential resources to support one's development in knowledge and understanding. I will not present and analyze participatory and curricular injustices in this section; instead, the discussion will focus on willful hermeneutical ignorance only. The following is an example of willful hermeneutical ignorance in the context of graduate education.

The graduate curriculum for a department in a university is designed primarily around Western-centric theories and methodologies. An international graduate student from a non-Western background proposes a research project that uses a methodology rooted in her indigenous culture and traditions. The faculty committee who unfamiliar with and skeptical of non-Western methods dismisses her proposal, suggesting that her research should more closely align with "established/legitimized" (Western) methods to ensure its validity. Despite the student's attempts to explain the depth and significance of her chosen methodology, the dominant academic framework refuses to recognize the value of knowledge that comes from a marginalized position. This refusal not only sidelines diverse ways of knowing but also maintains an incomplete understanding of the world, and thus incorporating willful hermeneutical ignorance.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section will focus on how Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students in U.S. universities perceive the role of race/identity/status in experiences of epistemic injustice and discussion on their specific experiences in classroom settings. It is important to note that the experiences of epistemic injustice can be subjective and challenging to quantify and address.

3.1 The Role of Race/Identity/Status in Myanmar Graduate Students' Experiences of Epistemic Injustice

The findings suggest a varied experience of epistemic injustice in classroom settings among Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students in U.S. universities. As indicated in Figure 1, a significant number of students (46%) rarely feel ignored due to their nationality; this could show a somewhat inclusive environment in their respective academic settings. However, the fact that 29% of students sometimes feel ignored and 28% never experience ignorance reveals a range of experiences and perceptions. This also suggests varying levels of inclusivity across different academic environments. The presence of students who "sometimes" or "rarely" feel ignored because of their nationality points out that while visible examples of epistemic injustice may not be common, there are still occasions where these students feel marginalized or undervalued. This could be due to various factors such as cultural differences, language barriers, or implicit biases. Some students who "never" feel ignored might reflect either a genuinely

inclusive environment or a lack of awareness or recognition of subtle forms of epistemic injustice. It is also possible that these students have developed certain types of coping mechanisms or support systems which help lessen or reduce the impact of such experiences.

In the context of epistemic injustice, it is important to consider testimonial silencing, as discussed by Saba Fatima (2020). *Testimonial silencing* refers to situations where individuals' contributions or testimonies are either not given the due weight or are entirely dismissed, particularly because of their social identity. Fatima (2020) emphasizes that the primary harms of epistemic injustice include the direct impact on the individual's credibility and their ability to contribute meaningfully to knowledge-sharing environments. Secondary harms may involve the long-term psychological impact, such as feelings of alienation or a diminished sense of self-worth, which may also explain why some students "sometimes" feel ignored. This could suggest that even in environments perceived as inclusive, subtle forms of epistemic injustice still manifest, leading to the marginalization of these students' contributions (Fatima, 2020).

Testimonial silencing in academic settings not only affects the credibility of marginalized students but also restricts their intellectual growth and participation (Dotson, 2011). When students consistently experience their knowledge being disregarded, they may internalize a diminished sense of epistemic confidence, leading to self-censorship and unwillingness to engage in academic discussions (Fricker, 2007). This dynamic reinforces existing power imbalances, ensuring that dominant voices continue to shape knowledge production while marginalized perspectives remain underrepresented. Furthermore, the psychological consequences of testimonial silencing can extend beyond the classroom. Students who frequently experience their contributions being ignored or undermined may develop heightened levels of academic anxiety, disengagement from learning, and hesitancy to pursue leadership roles in academic and professional spaces (Medina, 2013). This long-term impact underscores the necessity for institutions to address epistemic injustice proactively – implementing interventions such as faculty training, structured classroom participation models, and mentorship programs that amplify marginalized voices (Fatima, 2020).

By integrating Fatima's analysis, it becomes clear that while some Myanmar (Burmese) students in U.S. universities may not frequently experience overt epistemic injustice, the instances where they do feel ignored could stem from deeper, systemic issues that contribute to their testimonial silencing. Therefore, even environments that appear inclusive on the surface may still harbor conditions that marginalize certain students, highlighting the need for ongoing awareness and intervention to address both primary and secondary harms of epistemic injustice.

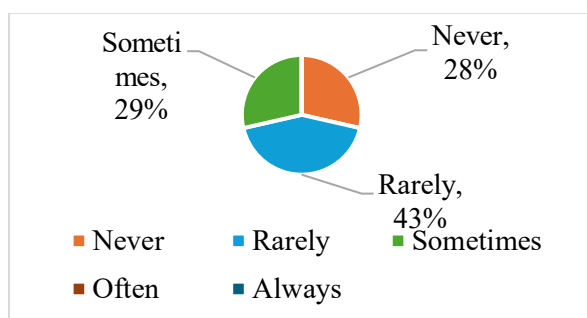


Figure 1: Feeling Ignored Due to Nationality

Hermeneutical injustice outlines the primary harm as a lack of intelligibility due to hermeneutical marginalization. This form of injustice occurs when a person is unable to make their experiences

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intelligibly communicated due to a gap in collective interpretative resources (Fricker, 2007). As Figure 2 shows, while only 7% of student answered “to a great extent” and 29% of students responded “moderately”, 64% of students feel “slightly” and “not at all”. The result shows that the majority of students (64%) feel only “slightly” or “not at all” influenced by their cultural background could be indicative of such a gap within the classroom’s hermeneutical resources. Furthermore, the minority of students (36%) who feel their cultural background influences the reception of their contributions “moderately” or “to a great extent” might be facing contributory injustice because this form of epistemic injustice arises when individuals from dominant groups refuse to employ accurate hermeneutical resources that have been developed by marginalized communities from contributing to the shared understanding (Dotson, 2012).

Pohlhaus (2011) discusses willful hermeneutical ignorance. This form of injustice happens when dominantly situated individuals refuse to adopt the hermeneutical resources of marginalized groups, which helps maintain hermeneutical gaps at the intercommunal level. Such an attitude could contribute to the feelings of marginalization expressed by students in the questionnaire.

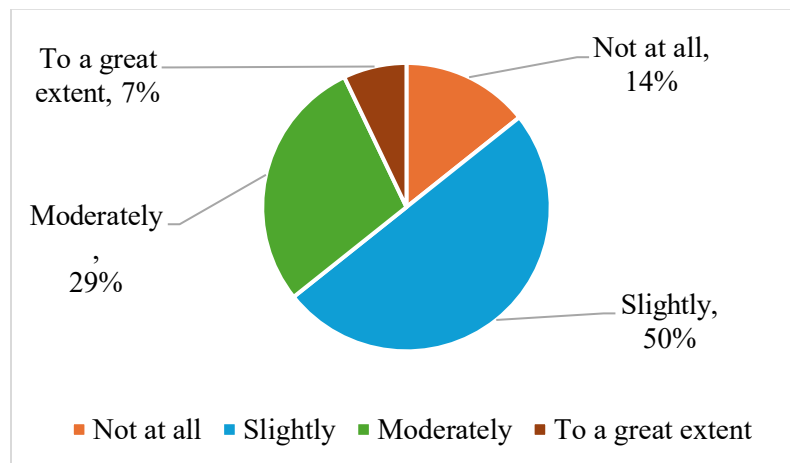


Figure 2: Cultural Background Influences on Classmates’ Reception

As shown in Figure 3, the responses reveal varied experiences among Myanmar graduate students in U.S. universities regarding the attribution of their ideas in classroom discussions. The results show that a significant portion of students feel that their ideas are attributed to others in classroom discussions, with the majority indicating that this happens “sometimes” to “always”. This can be interpreted through the lens of epistemic injustice, which refers to wrongs done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower.

A majority of the students (64%) reported that their ideas were “rarely” or “sometimes” credited to others, and it might suggest a *willful* dismissal of their contributions. This may lead to willful hermeneutical ignorance, which occurs when individuals in dominant positions deliberately refuse to engage with the knowledge produced by marginalized groups (Pohlhaus, 2011). The responses “rarely” and “sometimes” by 64% of informants also show a somewhat presence of overlooking of contributions and such dismissal is a form of testimonial quieting, where the speaker is not perceived as a knower (Dotson, 2011). Moreover, a smaller group of five students indicated that they “often” or “always” encountered situations where their ideas were attributed to classmates’. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word (Fricker, 2007). The students who

reported that their ideas are “often” or “always” attributed to others could be experiencing this form of injustice, where their contributions are not appropriately acknowledged due to biases or stereotypes associated with their identity.

The findings, not all students felt marginalized, might indicate that epistemic injustice is not a monolithic experience but can vary significantly based on various factors such as the class context, the awareness of professors and peers, and the diversity of the group.

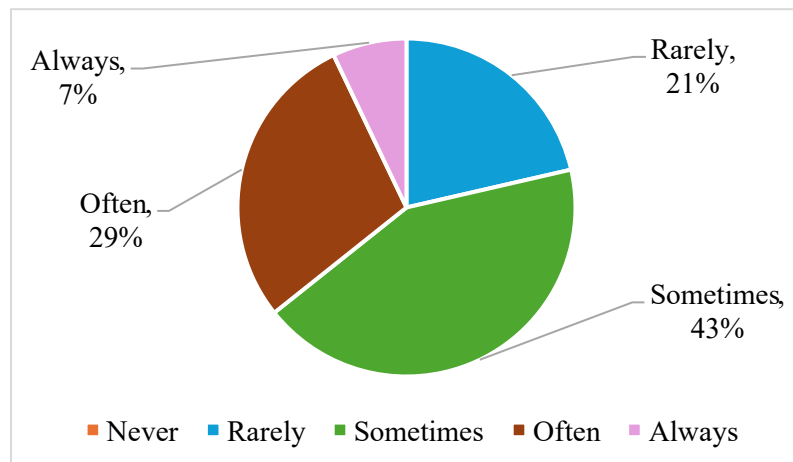


Figure 3: Ideas Being Attributed to Others in Classroom Discussions

Concerning professors’ understanding of Myanmar students’ challenges, as shown in Figure 4, 86% of informants responded professors’ understanding of their challenges as moderate to slight, with a few exceptions. This indicates that Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students continue to experience various degrees of epistemic injustice. If Myanmar students feel their professors only “slightly” or “moderately” understand their challenges, this may imply a lack of recognition of their credibility when they express their difficulties. They may experience testimonial injustice when professors give their contribution less credibility or importance due to conscious or unconscious bias against their social identity (Fricker, 2007).

The 43% of students who feel their challenges are only “moderately” understood by their professors might be experiencing a form of hermeneutical injustice, where their social experiences are not fully comprehensible to their professors due to a lack of shared hermeneutical resources (Fricker, 2007). For example, they could struggle to find the language or means to communicate their experiences or to be understood within the academic settings and professors is not aware of their unique challenges. Moreover, if professors are only “slightly” or “moderately” understanding the challenges of Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students, it may suggest a willful ignorance of the unique context these students are coming from (Pahlhaus, 2011). These students may also encounter participatory injustice (Patin & Sebastian, 2021) because professors might not create an inclusive and equitable academic environment where all students feel comfortable and encouraged to participate.

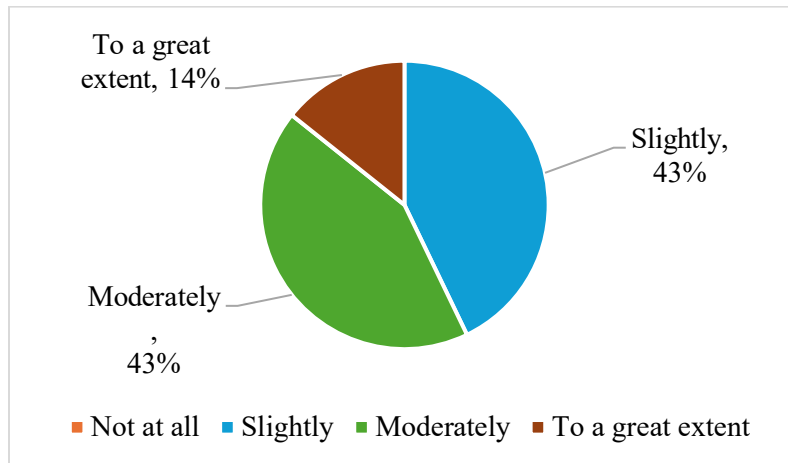


Figure 4: Professors' Understanding of Challenges

As Figure 5 shows, a significant majority of students feel that the course content seldom or never reflects or is sensitive to their cultural perspective. This lack of representation and sensitivity can be interpreted through various forms of epistemic injustice. For example, Patin & Sebastian (2021) point out that this form of epistemic injustice, specifically curricular injustice, occurs when the curriculum does not include or represent the histories, contributions, and perspectives of marginalized groups. Students from these groups may not see themselves reflected in the curriculum, which can impact their engagement and the development of their own cultural identity.

Furthermore, if students “rarely” find their cultural perspective reflected in course content, it could be indicative of a systemic disregard for their potential contributions to the course material and discussion. They may face contributory injustice, the third harm done when the dominant group in a community does not allow marginalized individuals to contribute to the shared understanding (Dotson, 2011) since the course content and discussions are not designed to include or value the unique perspectives of marginalized students and these students might be unable or discouraged to contribute their insights – effectively silencing their voices in educational conversations (Dotson, 2014; Pohlhaus, 2011).

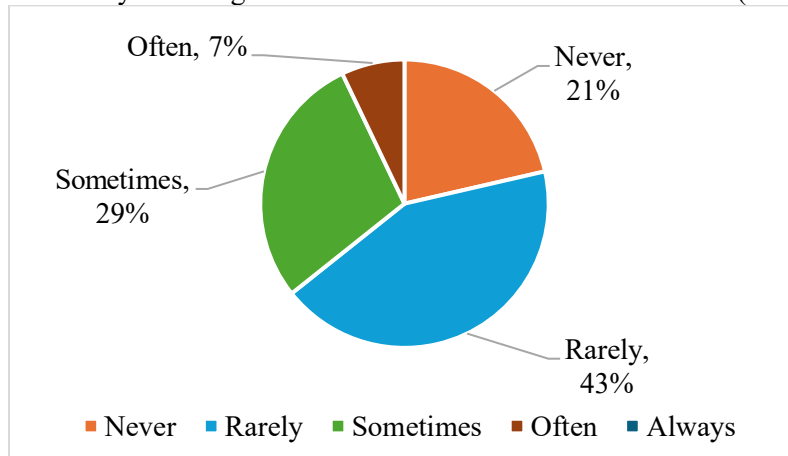


Figure 5: Course Content Sensitivity to Cultural Perspective

3.2 Myanmar Graduate Students' Experiences of Epistemic Injustice in Classroom Setting

In this sub-section, findings from thematic analysis will be discussed in six themes: Marginalization, challenges and barriers, institutional dynamic and support, emotional and psychological support, cultural dissonance and identity, and advocacy and change.

Marginalization. The responses indicate that students had differing experiences with marginalization. One of the informants mentioned: "As far as I can recall, I never felt marginalized whenever we have class discussions because our course topics are primarily focused on the developing countries' context, so we're pretty much being favored by the professors and classmates." While some students recalled being favored due to the "developing countries context" of their course, others highlighted feelings of being marginalized. This reflects Fricker's (2007) concept of testimonial injustice, where individuals may be given a deflated level of credibility because of prejudices.

Challenges and Barriers. Some informants stated experiencing some forms of challenges and barriers such as language barriers, cultural misunderstanding, and the subsequent hesitancy to participate in class discussions. A response from a student emphasized this:

Coming from Myanmar, I've found that while many of my peers and professors are somewhat acquainted with African contexts, they are less familiar with Asian cultures, particularly that of Myanmar. This lack of familiarity has presented numerous challenges in my interactions, both in terms of language and cultural understanding.

These experiences can be seen as forms of hermeneutical injustice, where students feel they are at the disadvantage in contributing meaningfully to academic discourse due to a gap collective interpretive resource (Fricker, 2007). Moreover, a student expresses the presence of hermeneutical gap in the course content as:

Depending on the course content and context, I feel that sometimes my contribution might not be fully recognized. For example, in my first semester, I took a class called "Media, Culture and Global Politics". Although it was a very engaging class and I learned a lot about the role of media in politics around the globe, materials and topics we discussed were mostly focused on North and Latin America, Africa, Middle East and Europe. ... when I tried to raise the issues around social media and Burmese politics, I felt that it was not deemed interesting enough to my fellow classmates who mostly have their cultural backgrounds in the US, Latin America and Europe.

This lack of representation in the curriculum can lead to a hermeneutical marginalization of non-Western perspectives (Fricker, 2007) and a curricular injustice, which arises when cultures, contributions and perspectives of marginalized knowers have been excluded from the conversations based on the Western dominant framework (Patin & Sebastian, 2021).

Institutional Dynamic and Support. Another theme students highlighted is institutional dynamic and support – both positive and negative institutional dynamic. Students have identified a range of support they received and also what they desire from their academic institutions to overcome challenges related to epistemic injustice. One student said:

I'm receiving a lot of support from my school since I got here and sometimes, professors if they want to hear our voices, they just ask "How is it in Myanmar?" something like that. I think we should reach out to professors and call out in the classroom to let everyone [one] your points of view on the specific topic.

This is what Dotson (2011) calls for academic institutions to acknowledge and address the specific needs of marginalized students to promote more equitable learning environments. While some students appreciated the support from faculty, others felt a need for improved outreach and understanding. A student's response pointed out:

While our university does have an association dedicated to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, it needs to be improved. As of now, there seems to be a lack of active initiatives such as diversity workshops or awareness campaigns that could proactively address these issues and foster a more inclusive atmosphere campus wide.

Dotson (2012) emphasizes the role of institutions in perpetuating or challenging epistemic injustice. Institutional efforts to address these dynamics are critical in mitigating epistemic injustice. Furthermore, Alison Jones (1999) discusses the limits of cross-cultural dialogue in educational settings, which provides a valuable perspective on the institutional dynamics described by the students. Jones (1999) argues that while cross-cultural dialogues are often well intentioned, they can inadvertently reinforce power imbalances if not carefully managed. In the context of the students' experiences, the institutional support provided through dialogues, such as professors asking about students' perspectives, may be a step towards inclusivity. However, these efforts must be more than superficial inquiries; they require a deep understanding and genuine engagement to avoid perpetuating a form of epistemic injustice where minority voices are heard but not fully integrated or valued. This highlights the importance of not only institutional initiatives but also the depth and quality of cross-cultural interactions in truly addressing epistemic injustice within academic environments.

Emotional and Psychological Support. Students frequently mentioned the emotional and psychological impact of experiencing epistemic injustice and the need for a more inclusive environment. A student shared their feeling:

The social dynamics within the classroom can often be visually and emotionally stark, particularly during those times when I find myself as the sole student of color among my peers. On such occasions, I might gravitate towards sitting alone in a corner, acutely aware of the contrast.

Another student expressed the same feeling of isolation, frustration, and its impact on individual's psychological well-being:

The influence of my peers in the classroom is significant, as their actions and attitudes can either exacerbate or alleviate the emotional toll that instances of epistemic injustice inflict. These experiences can be quite disheartening, affecting not only my academic confidence but also my overall well-being.

These experiences echo Dotson's (2014) work on epistemic violence and the need for recognition and reform of silencing practices in academic settings (Dotson, 2011). Furthermore, these experiences underscore the importance of addressing the emotional well-being of students as part of combating epistemic injustice.

Cultural Dissonance and Identity. The challenge of navigating cultural dissonance and identity was a recurrent theme. Students responded that they often felt their unique cultural identities were not recognized or valued within the academic settings. A student said: "I feel like my classmates are not really

interested in our discussions related to Myanmar context.” This response highlights the presence of contributory injustice, the third form of epistemic injustice which occurs not just because of the absence of epistemic resources but also because of the *willful* refusal of other forms of knowledge (Dotson, 2012). One of the students also reflected:

I assume due to the cultural differences, there are times that I could not ask questions to the professors because where I grew up, we were taught not to question to the teachers or elderly people and also, I feel I am not open-minded enough to interact with my peers especially with the domestic students.

The lack of cultural competence among peers and faculty members can contribute to experiences of marginalization. Their experiences underline a need for greater cultural competence and sensitivity within higher education.

Advocacy and Change. Some narratives showed a push towards advocacy for systemic change within universities to address the issues of epistemic injustice. This proactive stance is vital for the evolution of academic environments toward inclusivity. An informant proposed: “Having merely symbolic support for diversity and inclusion will not bridge the gap of epistemic injustice; substantive and tangible support should be provided.” This response reflects an awareness of the need for policy reform to tackle epistemic injustices within higher education settings.

In addition, a student recommended: “It’s clear that while some steps have been taken to address these issues [epistemic injustice issues], much more work is necessary to foster a truly inclusive and supportive educational environment.” These suggestions reveal a sense of advocacy and a desire for systemic change. These views call for active participation from both the institution and the student body in the transformation process.

4. Conclusion: Suggestions and Recommendations

As Dotson (2012) suggests, “university play a pivotal role in either reinforcing or dismantling the structure that contribute to epistemic injustice.” (p. 242). Based on the discussions, the following suggestions and recommendations are proposed for the higher education institutions to address epistemic injustice experienced by international graduate students, including Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students in U.S. universities:

Enhance Curricular Representation. Since a lack of representation can lead to hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007), institutions should review their curricular to ensure they are inclusive of diverse perspectives, particularly those from non-Western contexts. For example, universities could integrate global case studies and examples which reflect the background of international graduate students. Additionally, they could encourage students from diverse backgrounds to be involved in curriculum development processes to ensure their perspectives are represented. Specific steps could include forming student advisory boards to review syllabi, ensuring that readings include authors from historically marginalized communities and incorporating course content that critically examines knowledge production across cultures. Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaborations between departments such as cultural studies and STEM fields can provide a more comprehensive approach to integrating diverse epistemologies into curricula.

Strengthen Institutional Support System. Dotson (2012) emphasizes that universities play an importance role in challenging or perpetuating epistemic injustice. Therefore, universities need to create

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vigorous support systems that recognize and value the contributions of all students. Support system examples could be establishing or strengthening mentorship programs, in which Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students are paired with faculty or senior graduate students who can explain the nuances of the academic environment in the host country and institution – helping students adapt to different teaching and evaluation styles, and who can act as a liaison between Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students and university administration, conveying student concerns, feedback, and suggestions for improvement. Additionally, training sessions for faculty and staff on cultural competence and the dynamic of epistemic injustice should be conducted regularly.

Foster an Inclusive Academic Culture and Develop Cultural Competence. It is important to note that cultural competence among faculty and students is critical to reducing cultural dissonance and creating an inclusive academic culture. Establishing this may need higher education institutions to promote open and inclusive classroom discussions where all voices are heard and valued equally. Universities and colleges should implement policies which discourages discriminatory practices and encourage reporting and resolution of any instances of perceived epistemic injustice. Moreover, faculty should be encouraged to utilize culturally sensitive/sustaining/revitalizing curriculum and pedagogical approaches which respect and integrate students' cultural backgrounds into learning activities.

Support Emotional and Psychological Well-being. Epistemic violence can largely impact students' emotional and psychological well-being and findings reveal that Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students are facing such experience. Therefore, universities in the U.S. should strengthen counselling services which are sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of international graduate students such as providing mother-tongue based counselling services because the current services in most universities do not really take into account the cultural dimension of international students in general. Furthermore, they should organize/initiate/strengthen peer support groups such as affinity groups where students can share experiences and coping strategies in a safe and supportive environment.

Encourage Student Advocacy. Student advocacy can be a powerful tool for systemic change to harness epistemic injustice experienced by Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students. Higher education institutions should address issues of diversity and inclusion by creating platforms for student-led initiatives. Moreover, universities should support student organizations which represent international communities – providing them with resources to organize events and awareness campaigns – and encourage them to actively engage in graduate student organizations and university policymaking and decision-making processes.

These recommendations are aimed at encouraging higher education institutions to take proactive steps toward promoting an educational space where all students, regardless of their backgrounds, can thrive and contribute to the academic community. The implementation of these recommendations requires a commitment to long-term structural change within higher education institutions. By following these measures, universities can work towards a more just and equitable academic environment, where the epistemic contributions of Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students and all students from historically marginalized groups are recognized and valued.

Findings of the study suggest that Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students in U.S. universities are experiencing a range of challenges related to epistemic injustice. Even though the findings contribute to the broader conversation on epistemic injustice by providing empirical evidence of the challenges faced by Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students within the higher education system in the United States, the study may not encompass the diversity within the Myanmar graduate student population. Another limitation of the study can be time constraints for the depth of study since research is the pilot study and

was conducted in two months. The paper highlights the need for multiple approaches to address the issues identified such as reforming curricula to include diverse perspectives, providing better institutional support, fostering an inclusive academic culture, and encouraging student advocacy.

These findings extend the existing literature on epistemic injustice by offering insights into the specific challenges faced by Myanmar (Burmese) graduate students, a group that has been underrepresented in research on epistemic marginalization. Future studies should expand on this work by exploring the experiences of other marginalized student populations such as first-generation college students, refugees, and students from indigenous communities. Investigating the intersection of epistemic injustice with other forms of social exclusion, such as economic disparities and disability, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers to full academic participation. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impact of epistemic injustice, and the effectiveness of institutional interventions aimed at addressing these issues.

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