Open Access

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Journal of Transformative Praxis
Vol. 6, No. 1, 2025, pp. 27-40
https://doi.org/10.51474/jrtp/16643

Received: May 06, 2025; Revised: June 1, 2025; Accepted: June 15, 2025

Original Article

Epistemic Injustice Experienced by a Hard-of-Hearing Female Student: An Autoethnographic Inquiry

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Abstract

This article presents an evocative autoethnography that offers a critical space and possibilities to overcome the epistemic injustice experienced by individuals who are hard-of-hearing. Through the self-reflections of the author, a female student, it reveals the hidden truths about the justice system's inclusion practices for individuals who are hard-of-hearing. Autoethnography that helps me navigate the fragmented lives presents the journey in (non) chronological segments, detailing the emotions stemming from deeply rooted epistemic injustices concerning the knowledge and experiences of individuals who are hard-of-hearing. While it recounts a personal story, it also resonates with many other minorities who continuously strive to legitimize their voices amidst a dominant, inclusive perspective. Through these personal narratives, the article features meaningful gaps in research pertaining to deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. The study makes a strong case that the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are distinct, emphasizing the importance of understanding these differences through the lens of social justice.

Keywords: *Autoethnography. Epistemic Injustice. Hard hearing.*

Introduction

Reading this article may elicit feelings of empathy towards my experiences and struggles, that have been shaped by exclusion and encounters with epistemic injustice. Many of the personal narratives I have shared in this paper may resonate with those who can personally relate to the challenges described or who have a strong connection to the hard-of-hearing community. Additionally, it has the potential to heighten awareness of the challenges faced by hard-of-hearing individuals, prompting a deeper understanding of the imperative for

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ISSN: 2717-5081 (Print); 2738-9529 (Online)
Journal Webpage:
1. https://jrtp.kusoed.edu.np/

Published by Kathmandu University School of Education, Hattiban, Lalitpur, Nepal.

inclusiveness. To situate myself and interact with the article from a personal perspective, I initially contemplate my own experiences and connections to the issues surrounding epistemic injustice. Then, I consider the article within the current social and cultural context, suggesting its implications in today's broader societal landscape, particularly in educational settings. As I reflect on my experiences, I'm drawn towards increasing awareness, fostering empathy, and advocating for positive changes, particularly in addressing the educational needs of hard-of-hearing children for positive learning experiences.

Encountering Injustice

My hard-of-hearing is the outcome of recurring ear infections since birth, with my hearing worsening each year gradually. By the time I was a young girl in 1994, the condition had already begun to affect my daily life. I remember a cold December morning when, during the school assembly, I realized I could not hear the bell that rang to gather all the students. I wondered if that bell was meant for everyone but me. That moment made me realize my hearing was different from others. As my condition worsened, I became increasingly confused and isolated. My teachers punished me for missing lessons I could not hear, and my classmates mocked me. What began as a quiet disconnect soon turned into a lifelong struggle to be understood in a world that did not recognize or accommodate my condition. Does that bell ring only for those who can hear the sound of the bell? What if I have not seen my friends running for the assembly? As usual, unanswerable questions swirled through my mind like elusive truths. To this day, I remain without an answer, and it has become an integral part of my life. I have come to accept it, believing I deserve this fate in the eyes of others because of my hard-of-hearing and deafness.

The same day, the math class started as usual, and as soon as the class began, my friends got up one by one from their seats and walked toward the blackboard to write the odd and even numbers in the different columns the teacher gave. I was unfamiliar with that because it had already been three days since I had not gone to school due to my ear infection. The teacher looked at me and pointed me toward the blackboard. I was shaking because her angry eyes had already reminded me of the punishment that I had received earlier for not submitting her assignment. I moved steadfastly towards the blackboard and told my teacher that since I was absent for a few days, I could not answer her questions. She stood, caught my ear, and shouted at me, "You always make excuses for being absent, lazy girl," and she sent me out of the class. I could see my friends giggling at me. I felt hopeless, but accepted it as part of my daily school schedule. Every day, I would hope that instead of punishing me for my absence, my teacher could have taken the opportunity to teach me the missed topics. This way, I could have learned those concepts instead of spending the day standing and staring at the wall as part of my punishment. In the following year, 1994, when I was about 9 years old, another incident occurred. I experienced excruciating pain on one side of my head for several days, reaching an unbearable intensity one evening. I could not complete my Nepali assignment and knew I would be punished. Due to punishment every now and then, in a way, I was mentally prepared. It seems, Ms. Bajracharya, my Nepali teacher, was seemingly bored of old punishments. On that day, she went beyond the limitations. She summoned me to the front and started unbuttoning my shirt. I was appalled. I froze until she went for my pants. I returned to my senses and struggled to save my dignity if I had any. I kicked, stretched, and cried with all my strength, but it was not enough. She succeeded in unbuttoning my pants and undoing my underwear after all. I was undressed! My dignity was shattered.

However, the ordeal did not stop there. I was physically dragged around the school, feeling like a ‘helpless being’ in a circus, put on display for everyone's entertainment. It was akin to being paraded like the head of a conquered enemy by a victorious king, receiving cheers, songs of triumph, and respect from the onlookers. I was exhibited as a trophy to the teacher, who garnered approving laughter, validation, and gasps of fear from the others. I saw black and blue bubbles around me due to shame and fear. There were two steps between the classroom and the ground. As I stepped out, I prayed to all religions' gods to make me invisible. I looked at the people around me to check whether they were looking at me. I was forcefully blinking the tears down my face to see the spectators' expressions. After a while, I realized that I was being seen by all the students from Grade 1 to Grade 4. I felt all their eyes on me. Some spectators were even trying to look away because of second-hand shame. This was the final straw of strength that was taken away from me then. I knelt to hide as much as I could in shame. Our headmistress noticed me and swiftly approached, instructing Ms. Bajracharya to escort me back to the classroom. Though I got my clothes, my dignity had already been stripped away. Now that I think about it, the headmistress must have realized that my teacher had done wrong. That's the reason why she directed Ms. Bajracharya to stop the brutality. However, neither action was taken on her, nor consolation efforts were referred to me. I was made to feel I deserve all that shame.

The story that I had not completed my assignments that day because of severe pain at one side of my ear remained untold. From a young age, I found myself excluded in almost every environment because of my hard-of-hearing condition. What made it even more confusing was that my parents had informed the school about my hearing issues, yet no one seemed to know how to communicate with me. Teachers treated me like any other student, even though I could not keep up with lessons or hear instructions. My classmates often left me out of conversations and activities, as if I did not belong. I still do not understand how, despite my parents' efforts to explain my condition, no one at school seemed to grasp how to include or accommodate me. This constant exclusion made me feel invisible, as if my hard-of-hearing condition made me less of a person in their eyes.

Contextualizing the Research Agenda

Reflecting on the memories of exclusion and mistreatment since my childhood, I find myself questioning: Where are the principles of human rights and the rallying cries for child rights? Isn't exclusion a form of human rights violation? Why are schools (in Nepal) not serious to easy inclusion of hard-of-hearings? Considering the issue of non-inclusiveness through the lens of human rights, it becomes evident that I have been subjected to significant violations of child rights. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) explicitly prohibits corporal punishment. Nepal, more recently, has acknowledged this within Article 39 of its Constitution, which focuses on child rights. These provisions outlaw all forms of abuse and violence against children, spanning from familial to societal contexts. The constitution emphasizes that children should not endure physical, mental, or any other form of torture, whether at school, home, or within society.

Keeping such exclusion and non/inclusive scenarios in the background, this paper portrays my journey from a hard-of-hearing, struggling girl to a crawling girl making a career. As a hard-of-hearing student, I experienced several layers of exclusion in school, society, college, and in different organizations. The experiences must have developed my critical sensitivity to raise questions about human rights. Utilizing epistemic injustice as a theoretical framework within the context of autoethnographic inquiry allowed me to center my exploration on self, individual experiences, and perspectives. Epistemic injustice refers to forms of unfair treatment that individuals or groups experience in their capacity as knowers. This concept, developed by philosopher Miranda Fricker in her 2007 work *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, highlights how prejudice can lead to certain individuals or groups being discredited or marginalized in terms of their knowledge and contributions. Hard-of-hearing individuals may experience this when their accounts, experiences, or contributions are not taken seriously because of assumptions about their ability to communicate effectively. For instance, someone who speaks less clearly due to hearing loss might be seen as less competent, leading to their perspectives being undervalued.

Given the seriousness of the situation of epistemic injustice for hard-of-hearing individuals, some studies (e.g., Fellinger, et al., 2007; Johnson, et al., 2017) have been carried out. However, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) find it effective in such cases of subjectively critical issues, personal narrative, and reflexivity of a 'researcher as subject' has not been adequately portrayed. In my journey from childhood to the present, one of the most challenging aspects has been the pervasive lack of recognition and understanding of hearing impairment as a genuine issue. This invisibility of hard-of-hearing challenges is not confined to a particular place but seems to permeate the world (Fellinger, et al., 2007). It's disheartening to realize that in a world where differences should be embraced and accommodated, the struggles and experiences of hard-of-hearing individuals often go unnoticed and unacknowledged. It's as if I've been constantly striving for a notion of perfection, an idealized version of myself, in a world that fails to recognize the imperfections inherent in human experience. The quest to be the "perfect me" becomes an uphill battle when the world around me remains unaware and uninformed about the very challenges I face due to my hard-of-hearing condition. Also, it seems, my pain and sorrow reflect the frustration and isolation that many hard-of-hearing individuals may encounter throughout their lives. It emphasizes the need for greater awareness, education, and inclusivity in our society so that no one has to feel invisible or marginalized due to their hearing abilities or disabilities.

The struggle against injustice in schools does not have the same real-world application as inclusion in education. Molestation, corporal punishment, and exclusion all have a long history in the educational setting. As narrated in the initial paragraphs of this paper, my childhood was devastated by the misery and pain brought on by a lack of safety and inclusion. Although I am the only one of them, there may be many hard-of-hearing individuals who have endured suffering equal to or worse than mine, which is enough to set them back in their lives. For the hard-of-hearing community, societal ignorance about the lived realities of hearing loss can result in a lack of shared language or conceptual tools to discuss their unique experiences. For example, there might be a lack of awareness about the emotional and cognitive toll of navigating a world designed primarily for those with full hearing, which can make it harder for them to express their challenges in a way that others understand.

Autoethnography as Research Methodology

I began my self-reflective inquiry by sharing my narrative as a young girl, progressing through adolescence while navigating the challenges of the educational system and facing social marginalization. In doing so, I have employed autoethnography as a research methodology to highlight the harsh reality of the system and its consequences. In the language of Ellis and Bochner (2000), by bridging personal and professional experiences of oneself and others, the evocative writing within autoethnography proves valuable in delving into different levels of awareness regarding cultural differences and self-perception. Also, in the words of Denzin (2006), autoethnography is a study in which a researcher examines their own autobiographical and personal experiences through writing and self-reflection, before connecting them to more general cultural, political, and societal interpretations. Autoethnography, therefore, served as my platform for articulating my experiences and engaging seamlessly with the cultural and societal environment.

Through this research, I have expressed my thoughts, feelings, and experiences through metaphorical language. According to Luitel and Dahal (2021), autoethnographies use personal experiences, facts about people and places, in-depth details, stories, vignettes, and conversations to make meaning. Following the suggestions, I have used my personal experiences and in-depth familiarity with the locations and subjects of my study so that I may share my lived experiences and real-life stories. In this way, my research demonstrates my own autobiography.

Encountering the ethics of self and others (see Dahal & Luitel, 2022), I have adhered to a set of ethical considerations that have shaped the approach I've employed. Through the use of my own stories, I have strived to maintain authenticity and truthfulness, ensuring that my personal experiences and perspectives are conveyed accurately without resorting to inaccuracies or fabrications. This commitment to ethical storytelling is underpinned by principles such as trustworthiness, a natural setting, and a clear articulation of the study's purpose. Moreover, critical reflexivity has emerged as a cornerstone of this research, illuminating the depth and validity of my insights. Within the realm of quality standards, my focus on reliability, encompassing transferability and conformability, has bolstered the rigor of my exploration into the challenges I have encountered since childhood, particularly within the context of hearing impairment. By weaving my educational journey into the broader fabric of societal barriers faced by the hard-of-hearing, I have strived to forge meaningful connections between personal experiences and broader cultural, political, and social meanings. Credibility and trustworthiness, as emphasized by Denzin (2006), form the bedrock of this research's quality standard. The moral integrity and authenticity embedded in my paper and experiences invite readers to engage with my stories, drawing upon their own backgrounds and sociocultural contexts to assess the contextual subjectivity of my accounts (see Dahal & Luitel, 2022). Through this, I ensure that my autoethnographic research is conducted and disseminated with the utmost integrity and responsibility.

Breaking Chains of Silence: My Path Through Epistemic Injustice

In the landscape of my storytelling journey, my story seeks to unveil the experiences that often linger in the shadows, where the pain and suffering caused by this form of injustice find their voice. It's a narrative of struggle, resilience, and the quest for recognition in a world where societal biases and prejudices frequently silence diverse voices. By sharing my journey in the form of vignettes, I hope to shed light on the intricacies of epistemic injustice, foster understanding and empathy among readers, and catalyze a collective effort to rectify these unjust practices and promote inclusiveness and recognition for all.

Vignette 1: School life is The Dreadful Rolling Coaster

It was December 1997. I was a seventh grader. It was frigid outside, and all the students seem freezing. Our science teacher, Umesh, who was more rigid than any other teacher in our school, never liked me because I was ‘famous’ in my class as a weak student. He began to ask the questions he had given us to read earlier, but I could not do so due to my ear pain. Even though my ear pain remained the same, I had to summon the courage to attend school, but there I suddenly realized that my teacher would not excuse me for not giving his answers. I began to tremble inside due to my fear. Now it's my turn, and as I recall, as soon as he asked me a question, I refused to look at him, and he slapped me. My teacher's violence didn't stop till there. He again hit my back, and finally, I fell from the desk, and my skirt turned out due to the old desk that didn't even show mercy to protect my dress. My eyes filled with tears due to pain and shyness. My science teacher never got tired of punishing me, and I never got tired of crying. But that time, I had shivering ear pain all day, and I cried all day. As soon as school was over, I ran home and told my mother the reasons for the pain. Thus, the next day, my father went to school and talked to the principal about the punishment, and she handled her job gracefully enough to hide her teacher's cruelty.

Next day the class started. I was at the last desk doing my classwork, but I felt that the science teacher was devilishly looking at me. All the students were preoccupied with their studies, but he was staring at me, so I pretended not to notice him. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my back, and he was touching it inappropriately. I shook my head. He moved away from me, and I never dared look at his face. I felt worse because he had hurt me physically the day before. He was punishing me silently that day. The pettish feelings drag me all day. "Did I get punished because I am hard-of-hearing or because of the immorality of the Science teacher", I wondered. The school owner was aware that I was hard-of-hearing at the time. But I was not yet mature enough to stand up for the injustices that had been done to me. I also thought that fighting would not be of any benefit to me. I received no punishment from my principal, including mercy. She only did me one favor—even though I failed every exam, she upgraded me the class. I'm unsure if I should express my appreciation for her promoting me or my regret for how she handled 'inclusion' in her school. My parents had requested the school principal many times to take care of my studies as I was hard-of-hearing, but that request never worked. It seems like my hearing was somehow lost from her mind as soon as my parents moved away from her office room. The principal never dared to ask me about my health because I was the only one who was hard-of-hearing or because she didn't know what the requirements were to take care of a hard-of-hearing student.

It resonates with Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice, particularly the aspect of testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a person's credibility and testimony are unfairly undermined or discredited based on societal biases or prejudices (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017). I had faced not only physical abuse by my teachers but also an enduring pattern of mistreatment, neglect, and a lack of accommodation for the hearing impairment within the school system. My teacher's refusal to recognize my ear pain and the principal's inability to address my specific needs demonstrate a profound lack of understanding and acknowledgment of my experiences. My reflection on whether the punishment was due to my hearing impairment or the teacher's immorality highlights the central theme of the story, which is the injustice of being disbelieved and silenced because of my unique identity. Paul's (2015) study claims that nearly half of K–12 students have a disability or disabilities (DWD), including those who are deaf and hard-of-hearing. There is, however, a shortage of data on theory, study, and practice pertaining to these learners. The researcher gives a general overview of the challenging environment that the field of education for D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students must contend with. The educational institution has not previously given enough recognition to the needs of the hard-of-hearing. Similarly, Bruce's (2012) research posited that globally, incidents of violence against adolescent girls persist, despite legal safeguards in place, including instances of molestation and discrimination. Consequently, mere enactment of regulations is insufficient to ensure the protection of females with disabilities; a comprehensive framework for monitoring the issue is imperative. Gyawali (2020) connects the case of violence, perpetrator, and familiar place of sexual harassment against adolescent schoolgirls in Nepal to dictate that in our society, teachers deserve great respect and trust from parents and students. They have close access to female students. But the study is silent concerning epistemic injustice, which occurs when someone's credibility as a knowledge-bearer is unfairly deflated due to prejudice. For example, in the story above, my marginalized identity of 'hard-of-hearing' was not taken seriously because of stereotypes or biases about the identity.

Another research by Borders et al. (2016), however, shows that students with hard-of-hearing, especially girls, face problems with social integration in the classroom or society. Hard-of-hearing students have always been caught between whether their peers regard them as a member of their group and whether they can participate in academic project discussions. It dictates that hard-of-hearing students have a higher level of emotional maladjustment than their hearing peers and are often emotionally insecure in their relationships.

Vignette 2: Paranoid of Hope- Treatment or 'Miss' the Treatment

As days passed, my ear infection worsened, leading to further hearing loss. By the time I reached 7th grade, Patan Hospital deemed my case beyond their capabilities and transferred me to Bir Hospital, a reputable facility compared to the government-run Patan Hospital. Bir Hospital boasted superior medical resources and expertise, particularly in the field of ear, nose, and throat (ENT) care, with specialized doctors skilled in eardrum operations. Reflecting on this, I sometimes contemplate whether I should be thankful that they acknowledged their limitations before further harm occurred. It dawned on my parents that my condition was not a simple ear infection with a quick remedy, but potentially something more serious.

We went to Bir Hospital immediately after, hoping to see the face of my healer. As nervous as I knew something devastating, I somehow felt a sense of relief in my lungs when we entered Bir hospital. I was first directed to do an Audiometry test. A middle-aged man with a sturdy build and a frowzy face gave me earphones to wear. I was told to press a button whenever I heard a ring. And I obeyed. I pressed the button whenever I listened to the call. I only kept hearing bell sounds, so I continued pushing the button. "Are you dumb?" he yelled. "Be serious and press it only when you hear the sound." This is not your toy. Stop acting out. "Kids these days, ugh!" I have only a few sounds in my core memory, and his voice is one of them. I was startled as well as confused. I didn't know what I did wrong. Why was that lash directed at me? I'd diligently followed the instructions. Maybe I didn't understand the teaching. Or, maybe I was scared. Perhaps they are right. Maybe I'm dumb. I refrained from pressing the button even when I heard sounds and pressed it at an interval. Guessing the response, the guy must have wanted to. I pressed the button to please him. My diagnosis would have been accurate if that doctor had studied better and understood that an ENT patient might be hearing sounds due to tinnitus. If he had been mindful, I would not have added evidence to my 'I am dumb' narrative.

The study conducted by Zaien et al. (2021) sheds light on the under-representation and under service of Deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) communities in health services research and healthcare systems. Deaf and hard-of-hearing patients often encounter communication barriers when seeking healthcare services, which can negatively impact their overall healthcare experience and outcomes. These barriers may include a lack of accessible communication tools, the limited availability of qualified sign language interpreters, and healthcare providers' inadequate understanding of the unique needs and preferences of DHH individuals (James et al., 2023). Another study conducted by Graycar (1996) demonstrates that violence against individuals with disabilities can manifest in various forms, including direct and indirect physical, psychological, or economic forms, akin to violence experienced by individuals based on gender. The realization of women's and girls' human rights, along with their quest for equality, progress, and peace, remains impeded by the prevalence of violence against women. Individuals with disabilities often face mistreatment and discrimination, even within medical circles. Furthermore, gender-based assaults are often underreported to law enforcement. Compounded by severely low self-esteem, disabled women and girls often fear reporting abuse due to concerns of abandonment, child removal, loss of financial support and care, and exacerbation of their situation.

Here is yet another story to share. A hospital staff handed out the Audiogram report and asked us to visit Dr. Dahal's room in the left corner of the corridor. We followed the instruction, and there he was, my doctor, me to be healed. He stared at my reports, the validity of which I doubt, given my panic-driven audiometry performance. He glanced at me with pity and then stared at my father with an undertone of irritation. In his piercing tone, he said, “You’ve brought her too early. Maybe you should have waited until she went deaf.” Following this, my only remaining choice was my ear drum operation, which the doctor suggested my father schedule as soon as possible to stop the ear infection at least.

The walls of optimism started crumbling down for me. I looked at my father, hoping for some restraint. But it was not any different for him as well. He examined the most shocked, guilty, helpless, and angry at himself, all at the same time. That has been the most unique feeling I have seen on my father’s face. Now, I was not even trying to hear anything. All my senses could feel a sharp and cold wind coming to my ears. The open and transparent windpipe when I stepped inside Bir Hospital moments ago was now jammed up, preventing the air from getting out of my lungs. My hands were numb, my gut felt asphyxiated, and all my brain could configure was, “Shit! I don’t hear.” The 2017 study on educational planning for deaf children sheds light on parents' perspectives regarding their children's diagnosis. It highlights that the delay in diagnosing ear conditions was a major contributing factor to deafness among their children (Scarinci et al., 2017). There are numerous strategies to promote inclusion for individuals with hearing loss. One effective approach involves raising awareness about hearing loss and its impact on individuals' lives. Moreover, the significance of assistive technologies like hearing aids and cochlear implants cannot be overstated, as they can significantly enhance the quality of life for those with hearing impairment. Training programs and workshops aimed at sensitizing people and teaching effective communication techniques when interacting with the hearing-impaired are also vital components. Wolters and Isarin (2015) claims that the most crucial factors are empowerment and representation. These elements not only provide support to the hard-of-hearing but also enable them to contribute their perspectives and insights to society. As narrated above, it seems, my stories vividly illustrate the concept of epistemic injustice through my journey of struggling to be heard, understood, and accommodated within the healthcare and educational systems. The initial misdiagnosis and mistreatment of my hearing condition, stemming from a lack of medical professionalism and awareness of hearing impairments, exemplify testimonial injustice (see Fricker & Jenkins, 2017). Furthermore, the educational system's delay in diagnosing my hearing impairment highlights how a lack of awareness and timely intervention can lead to life-altering consequences.

Incorporating the research findings emphasizes that these instances of epistemic injustice are not isolated incidents but part of a larger systemic issue (Fricker, 2017). The barriers which I have faced in both healthcare and education, as well as the lack of representation and awareness of the unique needs of the hard-of-hearing communities, underscore the broader problem of societal biases and a lack of recognition of diverse voices and experiences. According to Miranda Friskers, the detrimental impact of epistemic injustice on the individual's well-being emphasizes the urgent need for recognition, understanding, and accommodation for individuals with different abilities and experiences (Langton, 2010; Fricker, 2017).

Vignette 3: Social Butterflies: The Perfect Hunter

As the day progresses, new life adds more drama to the same issues of deafness, or, as I would put it, the difficulty of understanding me by the so-called "humane" people. I almost lost all faith in human beings based on how they treated me. As a reference, here, I share one story that I experienced. It was around February 2005; I wore the same long sky-blue dress that I had worn for my uncle’s wedding. I looked pretty in my reflection. I was wearing my favorite color, after all. So much had changed from when I last wore that dress to now. Except for the dress, everything was different. It was summer, and a calm wind splashed on my face in the evening around 4 pm in May. My family and I visited our Maternal Grandmother Home to attend our Uncle's Marriage ceremony. That day, I stood outside the small garden alone, gesturing to the different light colors. A male who seemed to be in his mid-forties had been staring at me at the wedding party. My sixth sense had already smelled malice and warned me. I was eating with my cousin when the guy came near me to talk to me. He asked for my name, location, and other general personal details. I stopped responding after 2-3 questions. It felt creepy and intrusive. I hurriedly finished my meal and went away from him.

Toward the end of the party, my aunty brought a marriage proposal to my mother in front of me. The proposal was from the same guy. He was in his mid-forties. He was a divorcee and a father to two kids. My aunt was also trying to convince my mother to get me married to the person. "He earns well. He has liked your girl. Your girl doesn't hear properly anyway. There's no use in keeping her unmarried in your home. Get her married. This is the best proposal you can get." My mother said to my relatives, "My daughter has hearing loss; she is not deaf; she doesn't need any translator, nor does she need anyone to catch her hand while she walks around. She will not be able to reply if she didn't catch the sound around her: That's it." Then suddenly, in the middle of my mother's clarification, the so-called relative aunt added, "Or, in other words, you can say she's deaf... right? My mother's eyes fill with tears. Now she doesn't have the courage to add more to it. My mother had the face of a player who just lost a battle when that auntie said this to her. I could see the feeling of helplessness on her face. I could see her resisting the internalization of what the auntie had inferred. She defended my worth, nonetheless. She rejected the proposal. However, the aftertaste of this inference had stayed with her. It stayed with me as well. Was being a trophy wife to a guy of almost my father's age, and who exuded a malicious aura, the best alternative in my life? Why did this happen to me? - Because I was not 'normal'? Wasn't it a biased perspective to see the hard-of-hearing. In the past, research on parents of children with disabilities, particularly those who have hearing loss, primarily focused on the difficulties they face. It provided relatively little attention to the advantages, benefits, and positive assessments of their experiences. Szarkowski and Brice (2016) points that a biased perspective that tends to see these parents' experiences as inherently different and frequently less satisfying than those of parents of usually developing children is the result of this imbalance in research attention. This bias has resulted in an insufficient knowledge of the varied and complex experiences of parents parenting children with impairments, regardless of whether it was introduced by the research design itself or reflects how parents have traditionally regarded their personal circumstances.

Epistemic injustice refers to a form of injustice that occurs in the realm of knowledge and understanding (Fraser, 2009). It involves the unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on their perceived lack of credibility or competence in sharing their knowledge or experiences. Epistemic injustice can manifest in various ways, such as disregarding someone's testimony, dismissing their perspectives, or excluding them from decision-making processes (Fraser, 2009; Fricker, 2017). In other words, a lot of research has been done on the epistemology of witnessing. What happens, therefore, when listeners reject speakers' claims when they ought to? Or, to put it another way, what should we make of inaccurate testimony? How we often fail to trust speakers due to unsuitable prejudices, either implicit or explicit, is a current issue of study in feminist philosophy and epistemology (McKinnon, 2016). Epistemic injustice is what is happening here. Miranda Fricker's seminal work on epistemic injustice (see Fricker, 2017) stresses both critiques and expands on the nature and scope of epistemic injustice. In the context of individuals who are hard-of-hearing, they may indeed experience epistemic injustice due to the unique challenges they face. Being neither fully deaf nor hearing, they may find themselves in a marginalized position within both the deaf and hearing communities. This, according to Szarkowski and Brice (2016), can lead to exclusion from inclusion activities that are designed to support individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, as they were not separated from the deaf community even though their requirements were different from those of deaf people.

There is always a tiny gap between opportunities and accessibility, indicating that differently abled people, particularly girls, are always behind, preventing them from experiencing their human rights (Stewart-Ibarra, 2021). The research by Britton and Mauldin (2019) focuses on the experiences of Tamil and Sinhalese women with disabilities in Sri Lanka in 2019. It also presents these women's life stories. It illustrates the physical and social barriers that affect the accessibility of daily activities, as well as the complicated gender norms surrounding social expectations to remain hidden from public view. Furthermore, individuals who are hard-of-hearing may encounter barriers to effective communication with their normal-hearing peers. They may struggle to fully participate in conversations or access information, leading to a limited understanding of certain topics. This can result in others questioning their credibility or competence, further exacerbating the epistemic injustice they experience. On the other hand, the needs of hard-of-hearing people have been undermined, and only a few studies have been conducted on hard-of-hearing people. It is important to address and rectify such forms of epistemic injustice by promoting inclusivity, accessibility, and understanding (Fraser, 2009; Fricker, 2017). Creating spaces that acknowledge and accommodate the needs of individuals who are hard-of-hearing can help ensure their voices are heard and valued. Providing assistive technologies, communication support, and inclusive classroom spaces can empower them to actively participate in discussions and decision-making processes. Additionally, raising awareness about the experiences and challenges faced by the hard-of-hearing community can help combat misconceptions and biases that contribute to epistemic injustice.

Studies of disability and interpersonal violence (e.g., Johnson et al., 2017) shows that domestic abuse is a common, devastating phenomenon that affects many people, especially those who have impairments. Power, oppression, and control concerns are variables that underlie violence in intimate relationships. As Johnson et al. (2017) stress, deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. It seems, therefore, that fostering a more inclusive society requires recognizing and valuing the knowledge and perspectives of all individuals, including those who are hard-of-hearing. By promoting equal access to information, communication, and opportunities, we can work towards reducing epistemic injustices and creating a more equitable world for everyone.

Here is another story which I find worth sharing. It was a cold winter day in 1995 when the school bell rang, and suddenly, all my classmates rushed out to the playground. I was confused at first, wondering why everyone was heading outside instead of having lunch as usual, so I followed them. When I asked my friend what was going on, she explained that we were all gathering to submit names for the upcoming spelling contest happening in a few days. Excited, I quickly made my way to our class teacher, eager to give my name as a participant. But when I approached her, she hesitated and told me that because of my hearing problem, I might struggle to understand the questions. She suggested I try next time instead of joining this time. Her words hit me hard. I felt a deep sense of embarrassment and disappointment, and as I walked back to the classroom, I watched my friends' excited and happy faces, feeling more isolated than ever. The personal narratives above show that the experiences of individuals who are hard-of-hearing can significantly diverge from those who are completely deaf, particularly concerning their social lives and overall well-being. According to Fellinger et al. (2007), complete prelingual deafness often immerses individuals in a supportive deaf culture where sign language serves as a common form of communication. Conversely, those who are hard-of-hearing may contend with heightened isolation due to their disability, struggling to fully assimilate into a culture predominantly tailored for individuals with normal hearing.

Interpretation and Meaning Making

Also mentioned in the introductory section of this study, the self-reflections unveil a profound journey that serves as a poignant illustration of epistemic injustice, particularly regarding individuals who are hard-of-hearing. It chronicles my personal journey, replete with instances of testimonial injustice, where my boundaries and communication preferences are ignored, my identity is inaccurately inferred, my credibility is undermined, and I have experienced exclusion and marginalization within the communities. This 'multifaceted autobiographical story' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), emphasizes the detrimental impact of society's lack of understanding and awareness regarding the unique experiences and challenges faced by those with hearing impairments. Beginning from here, I make meaning of the study, bringing into reference the above narrated lived experiences and the studies carried out in this field. Doing so, I particularly take the reference of justice related literature by Nancy Fraser and Merinda Fricker.

Beyond the Dilemma of Recognizing 'Deaf' and/or 'Hard-of-hearing'

The term 'deaf' and 'hard-of-hearing' serves as a broad umbrella encompassing individuals with varying degrees of hearing impairment, acknowledging the diversity within the community while recognizing the shared experience of living with hearing loss. Yet, amidst this acknowledgment lies a quandary: the distinct needs of the deaf and hard-of-hearing must be addressed individually. A haunting question lingers: why do my schoolteachers turn a blind eye to the struggles faced by hard-of-hearing students? They seem unafraid to meet out punishment arbitrarily, leaving me to ponder whether my hearing impairment warrants such harsh treatment, or if it is merely an overlooked injustice. It becomes painfully apparent that hard-of-hearing children remain invisible amidst the crowd, their disabilities concealed like shadows in the darkness. The battle against injustices I endure stems from a deeper, entrenched epistemic injustice pervasive within our societal fabric (Fraser, 2009).

Deaf individuals often grapple with severe to profound hearing loss from birth or early childhood, often relying on sign language or visual communication methods. Their communication needs may necessitate specific modifications and support, such as sign language interpreters or captioning services. In contrast, those who are hard-of-hearing experience a spectrum of hearing loss severity, ranging from mild to severe. Cochlear implants, hearing aids, and other assistive listening devices are employed to enhance their auditory capabilities. The sole requirement for communication with their hearing peers is merely an adjustment in volume to accommodate their hearing loss. It seems, therefore, that to ensure equitable participation in inclusive environments, extensive research into the unique requirements of hard-of-hearing individuals is imperative, coupled with an understanding of these distinctions and the adaptation of accessibility measures and accommodations accordingly. Individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing face significant communication barriers, necessitating careful planning and support to facilitate language acquisition and establish a solid foundation. Emerging research unveils targeted intervention strategies aiding deaf and hard-of-hearing children from infancy through their educational journey. While acknowledging the limitations of existing approaches, this research signals a paradigm shift in the education landscape for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, propelled by evolving technologies and methodologies (Borders et al., 2016). Recognizing the special needs of individuals with hearing difficulties is paramount for fostering inclusion. This entails leveraging sound-amplifying technology, ensuring clarity and legibility of visuals, deploying captioning or transcription services, and equipping educators with communication techniques tailored for those with hearing loss.

Hearing loss ranks as the fourth most common cause of disability globally, impeding speech, language, and social skill development. Particularly vulnerable regions include South Asia, the Asia Pacific, and sub-Saharan Africa, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions (Zaien et al., 2021). Wolters and Isarin's (2015) study illuminate the unique challenges faced by deaf and hard-of-hearing youth in forming peer relationships, highlighting the imbalance in reciprocity stemming from communication and behavioral issues. It underscores the imperative for societal and educational institutions to cultivate a supportive environment addressing the distinctive needs of early adolescent DHH individuals through inclusive learning environments, communication accessibility enhancements, peer education initiatives, and social skills training. Reflections as such show that phenomenon of domestic violence among deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals remains critically understudied, with Johnston-McCabe et al.'s (2010) research providing a rare glimpse into the lived experiences of this marginalized group. Their study of 46 adult females revealed a distressing reality: 71.7% of the participants reported psychological abuse, while 56.5% disclosed physical violence from their partners. Disturbingly, many participants recounted that their deafness was a specific factor in their abuse. Despite these alarming findings, the study also highlighted a deeper issue: the level of perceived social support did not significantly differ between those with and without a history of domestic violence, pointing to a broader systemic failure to adequately recognize and address the unique needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. This disconnect suggests a profound instance of epistemic injustice—where the personal experiences of those who are hard-of-hearing are not given adequate weight or consideration in social support structures. The neglect of their subjective challenges, including communication barriers and the stigmatization of their deafness, leaves them vulnerable to abuse while simultaneously denying them the recognition and resources they deserve. As Fricker (2017) notes, such epistemic injustice occurs when marginalized individuals are excluded from knowledge-sharing practices, further entrenching their marginalization.

Journeying through this reflective meaning-making process, now I have come to the point that one facet of epistemic injustice confronting hard-of-hearing individuals is testimonial injustice, wherein their ‘knowing’ is discounted due to biases or preconceived notions about their identity. This systematic marginalization of their contributions underscores the pervasive nature of epistemic injustice within society (Fraser, 2009; Fricker, 2017), perpetuating a cycle of neglect and undervaluation of their perspectives. My story with ‘hard-of-hearing’ experiences, which I portrayed in the narratives above, reflects the same. The implications of these findings are significant. They highlight a pervasive issue: the failure to recognize and adequately respond to the specific vulnerabilities of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in both educational and social contexts. This oversight perpetuates their struggles, not only in cases of domestic violence but in their broader societal participation. Borders et al. (2016) underscore the necessity of tailored interventions that support the holistic development of individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Without addressing this epistemic gap, efforts to promote inclusivity will remain superficial at best. Inclusion in education, too, falls short in addressing the challenges faced by hard-of-hearing students, as Stinson and Antia (1999) argue. Despite the push for ‘inclusive education,’ many programs fail to address the linguistic, intellectual, and social-emotional needs of these students, perpetuating a form of systemic neglect. This lack of responsiveness to the personal experiences of individuals with impairments reflects an ongoing epistemic injustice within the educational system. Sharma's (2019) work on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion further reinforces this issue, with educators showing varying degrees of awareness and sensitivity toward the needs of students with disabilities, including those who are hard-of-hearing. Globally, as Nguyen and Mitchell's (2014) research in Vietnam reveals, girls with disabilities, including hearing impairments, face compounded marginalization due to the intersection of gender and disability. Their study calls for comprehensive policy reforms to address these layered vulnerabilities, which have yet to be adequately addressed in most contexts. My personal reflections portrayed above along with the past studies in this area suggest that the failure to recognize and integrate the personal experiences of the hard-of-hearing experiences into social and educational structures represents a significant form of epistemic injustice. To remedy this, both policy and practice must evolve to provide targeted interventions, resources, and support systems that truly meet the needs of this vulnerable population.

Conclusion

Empowerment and fostering an inclusive environment for hard-of-hearing individuals are vital components in advancing equality, inclusivity, and ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all members of society. These two concepts are intrinsically linked as true empowerment cannot be achieved without equity. The term 'development' inherently implies inclusion, as progress cannot be attained single-handedly. The unity necessary for development remains incomplete without inclusion. While legislative acts advocate inclusive education, their implementation often raises doubts. On one hand, women's empowerment entails enabling women to take control of their lives, make independent decisions, and have equitable access to resources and opportunities. In this regard, individuals who are hard-of-hearing possess diverse needs and preferences regarding support and communication. It is crucial to grasp the wide spectrum of hearing loss severity and its impact on individuals' auditory and cognitive abilities. Genuine inclusion cannot be achieved until their needs are recognized and addressed. Consequently, it is imperative to understand the reasons behind the segregation of hard-of-hearing individuals from their hearing peers and explore why they may lack motivation due to their hearing impairment. Next, inclusion for the hard-of-hearing emphasizes providing equitable educational opportunities for students with varying backgrounds and abilities, including those with disabilities, while fostering a supportive culture conducive to their well-being. Thus, inclusion is indispensable for individuals with diverse abilities, particularly those who are hard-of-hearing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Assistant Professor Shree K. Wagley, PhD, of Kathmandu University School of Education, for his invaluable support as a critical friend, providing critical insights and theoretically informed suggestions. His engagement with my self-reflective narratives has played a pivotal role in shaping this article.

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Suggested Citation:

Thakuri, N. (2025). Epistemic injustice experienced by a hard-of-hearing female student: An autoethnographic inquiry. *Journal of Transformative Praxis, 6*(1), 25-40. https://doi.org/10.51474/jrtp/16643