

The Lived Experience Fallacy

Timothy Hsiao

Let's say that I made the argument that smoking causes cancer, and that I backed this up with a mountain of scientific data and peer-reviewed studies. Now suppose that someone were to respond to all of this with the following: "But my grandpa Bob smoked cigarettes all of his life and never developed cancer! So smoking doesn't cause cancer after all!"

Would you be convinced by this reply? I hope not. Smoking is a *contributory cause* of cancer: those who smoke have a much higher likelihood of developing certain cancers than those who don't because the act of smoking contributes something toward that outcome, even though that outcome doesn't always happen. So, just because some smokers don't develop cancer doesn't mean that smoking plays no role in causing it.

I frequently use this example when teaching causal reasoning in my logic and critical thinking classes. The point behind the example is that personal anecdotes do not invalidate statistical generalizations, which are by nature probabilistic. Most students have no difficulty seeing this point, likely because the link between smoking and cancer has been made abundantly clear to them. Yet students will often turn around and commit this error later on when talking about issues in which they might have a personal stake.

For example, in response to the claim that marijuana use increases the likelihood of developing certain mental illnesses,¹ students will sometimes cite the fact that they have personally used marijuana without developing mental illness. Yet these experiences are irrelevant. Even if it turns out that marijuana use isn't a risk factor for mental illness, citing one's personal experience with marijuana does absolutely nothing to show that. This is because we are dealing with statistical probabilities.

1 Marie C. McCormick et al., *The Health Effects of Cannabis and Cannabinoids: The Current State of Evidence and Recommendations for Research* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2017), chapter 12.

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Another example: in response to the claim that children raised in single mother households fare worse compared to those raised in two-parent families,² students will sometimes cite their own success stories being raised by a single mother. There is no doubt that these examples exist, but they do not falsify the statistical generalization that single mother households on average fare worse. Affirming this does not detract from the dignity of these students or their parents.

Lived Experiences as Bad Statistical Reasoning

In fairness to my students, it's an easy error to make when it concerns something you're invested in, which might explain why it's so widespread. We see it present in the appeal to "lived experiences" as a special source of knowledge. These are the experiences of minority groups who it is said live under oppressive power structures. They are said to hold special epistemic weight because they offer unique insight into the nature of oppression and structural injustice from the standpoint of those who are dominated. Lived experiences form an integral part of what is known as *standpoint epistemology*, which recognizes a "cognitive asymmetry between the standpoint of the oppressed and the standpoint of the privileged that gives an advantage to the former over the latter."³

Lived experiences are often vividly used by woke activists as evidence of widespread injustice, accompanied with a call for action and social change. Yet basing one's entire case for widespread injustice and sweeping social change on lived experiences is, quite simply, bad statistical reasoning. Why should one's personal experience of, say, racism carry any special weight? Should the experience of the smoker who never developed cancer also carry special weight? What about the experience of the unvaccinated person who never got a preventable illness? Or the experience of the drunk driver who managed to get himself home safely? As the old legal maxim goes, "hard cases make bad law." We can say the same when it comes to lived experiences: lived experiences make bad policy.

To be fair, it's not just woke activists who will base sweeping conclusions on personal experiences or anecdotes. The emotional power of experiences makes them a tempting tool for political advocacy. No matter who uses them,

2 See Sara McLanahan, Isabel Sawhill, "Marriage and Child Wellbeing Revisited," *The Future of Children* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 3-9.

3 José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013): 197.

the reasoning is still flimsy. But woke activists are unique in that they view these experiences as sacred and unquestionable. While most recognize that experiences are useful illustrative tools, lived experiences take on the status of quasi-divine revelation for the woke.

The point is not to discount real experiences of racism. Rather, the point is that one cannot prove or disprove generalizations simply on the basis of personal experiences. This is a pretty basic rule of statistical reasoning that seems to have been lost on many people who should know better. Just because one experiences racism does not show that racism is widespread or deeply ingrained, any more than one's experience with a smoker who did not develop cancer shows that smoking doesn't cause cancer.

Indeed, there is even a *logical fallacy* named after this exact kind of reasoning: hasty generalization. Consider what one logic textbook says about it:

General propositions are normally supported by observing a sample of particular cases. But we often draw conclusions too quickly, on the basis of insufficient evidence. This fallacy, known as hasty generalization, can take many forms. A single bad experience while traveling can prejudice our view of an entire city or country. Most of us have stereotypes about ethnic groups, professions, or people from different regions of the country, based on our exposure to a few individuals.⁴

Substitute “ethnic groups, professions, or people from different regions of the country” with “white males, police officers, and Bible-belt Christians” and it becomes very clear that the appeal to lived experiences (which typically involve negative evaluations of these groups) is nothing more than textbook fallacious reasoning dressed up in quasi-sophisticated language.

The point remains even if one tries to redefine racism and sexism in terms of structural factors that need not be perceived consciously. Lived experiences cannot be used to make (or disprove) statistical generalizations about the prevalence of institutional injustice, as institutions range far beyond what is perceivable from individual experience. Nor does it help to bundle similar lived experiences together, as this illicitly cherry-picks only those experiences which

4 David Kelley and Debby Hutchins, *The Art of Reasoning* 5th ed (New York: NY: W. W. Norton, 2021), 122.

“fit” and excludes those that do not. It would be like arguing that a political candidate couldn’t have won because everyone you know voted against him.

Every experience is “unique” in the sense that it is from the standpoint of an individual who is not identical to any other person. We might say then that all experiences are “lived” experiences. If one has special weight, they all do. But if they all do, then none of them is special.

The Lived Experience Fallacy

This leads to another point: the appeal to lived experiences must go both ways. What about the lived experiences of those who have not experienced oppression or injustice? Consistency would seem to demand that these experiences should also be considered authoritative. Suppose John argues that his lived experience of police mistreatment is evidence that there is something problematic about policing as a whole. But if we accept John’s lived experience as authoritative on account of his first-person experience, then what about Bob’s lived experience of being treated well by the police? It would seem that these two experiences cancel each other out.

The critical theorist’s response is that John’s lived experience is uniquely privileged because it is indicative of *oppression* or *victimhood*. By contrast, the experiences of Bob and others in “dominant” groups do not count because they lack an awareness of what it means to be oppressed. All of this is supposed to matter because oppression is something that can only be understood if it is felt. Those in dominant groups lack this epistemic prerequisite, as they cannot be oppressed on account of their being in a position of power. As such, they are not in a position to rule on the non-existence of oppression.

This response is not convincing. First, it ignores the distinction between propositional knowledge and experiential knowledge. One can know that something is the case without having to experience it in certain ways. For example, I know that drunk driving is bad even if I have never consumed alcohol or been the victim of a drunk driver. My lack of experiential knowledge does not prevent me from having propositional knowledge about drunk driving. The same is true of oppression. I can recognize oppression and understand it to be bad without having to be oppressed, just as I can recognize murder, child abuse, and theft and understand them as evil without having to be the victim (or perpetrator) of these offenses. The experience of being a victim is not a prerequisite to knowledge of injustice as a social problem.

Second, this is still just the same bad statistical reasoning from a different angle. The *experience* of being mistreated by police may give one unique insight into the *experience* of oppression, but it does not allow one to construct sweeping axioms out of thin air that range across social science and moral psychology. The error is twofold: the wrong kind of knowledge is being used to make an improper generalization. We might call this the *lived experience fallacy*.

Consider an analogy. If I lose everything from an economic depression, then I know what it is like to be thrust into poverty. However, that experiential knowledge does not give any kind of theoretical knowledge or expertise when it comes to economic policy. Indeed, one can have knowledge of how to remedy an economic depression without ever having experienced poverty. Likewise, being the victim of oppression does not make one an expert on, say, criminal justice reform. One can authoritatively weigh in on injustice without being in a marginalized group.

This touches on a third problem. The critical theorist wants to say that only the lived experiences of the oppressed count. But who are the “oppressed”? While social justice activists typically have a certain demographic in mind, we must realize that oppression is—to borrow a term from the social justice lexicon—*intersectional*. That is to say, oppression cuts across categories and contexts. Perhaps men are not structurally oppressed when it comes to, say, the alleged wage gap, but they are structurally oppressed in that they receive longer sentences for crimes (even after relevant variables are controlled for). Perhaps Asians are not structurally oppressed by racial profiling, but they might be structurally oppressed by affirmative action programs. Perhaps Christians are not structurally oppressed when it comes to the right to assemble, but they are structurally oppressed by legal frameworks that compel them to act in ways that violate their conscience. Almost everyone would count as oppressed under some category or context—left-handed individuals, for example, might claim to be oppressed insofar as they live in a world designed for the right-handed. As such, everyone’s lived experience matters. To dismiss the experiences of some because it is not the “right kind” of oppression would be to ignore its intersectional nature.

Perceived Oppression and Actual Oppression

Experiences are often misleading. One danger in according near infallible epistemic status to lived experiences is that it downplays or even completely

ignores the real possibility of error in these experiences. While one cannot be wrong that he is experiencing something, one can make erroneous inferences from that experience. Thus, perceived oppression is not the same thing as actual oppression. Otherwise, there could never be such a thing as oversensitivity.

Suppose a police officer pulls over a member of a minority group for speeding and tickets him. The minority perceives that he is being issued a ticket instead of a warning because of his race. But that is not the only explanation. Nor may it be the most plausible one given the context. Perhaps this particular officer tickets everyone he catches driving at a certain speed over the limit. Or perhaps the officer just flipped a coin. Or maybe he was just having a bad day. Now it could very well be true that the driver was in fact ticketed because of his race, but there isn't enough known about the situation to warrant that specific conclusion.

The point of all this is that many lived experiences are vague or ambiguous when it comes to identifying oppression. We must approach them with healthy skepticism, especially given the tendency of many to read predetermined victim narratives gleaned from popular trends into their experiences.

It is well-known that our political commitments can corrupt our ability for objective analysis. In my logic and critical thinking classes, students' abilities to correctly identify logical fallacies are often negatively affected if they are presented with examples that are politically charged. Students tend to overlook (or even excuse) fallacious arguments if those arguments are for a cause they agree with, while at the same time "finding" fallacies that aren't actually present in arguments for a cause they disagree with. The same thing is true with experiences. If one already has a certain narrative in mind (e.g. one is a member of an oppressed group and should expect to be oppressed), then one is more likely to "find" oppression even when it is not present.

Retreating to Postmodern Epistemology Doesn't Help

Some critical theorists might object to what I've said on the grounds that I have ignored the proper context for evaluating lived experiences. That is to say, we cannot understand the logic behind lived experiences without understanding their role in the larger epistemic framework of power and oppression upon which critical theory is based. They argue that there is a difference between mere experiences and lived experiences.

I have already gestured towards some problems with the underlying narrative from which lived experiences derive their authority. Apart from these problems, the retreat into theory makes things worse, for it means that lived experiences lose their persuasive power. Here's why: critical theory starts with a set of postmodern "axioms" from which lived experiences are supposed to derive their special weight.⁵ Only those lived experiences which are in harmony with these axioms are allowed to "count" as legitimate sources of knowledge. Now this setup might be fine if we're reasoning from within the critical theorist's own internal system among those who already accept it, but it is obviously circular reasoning if used as a means of persuading those outside the critical theorist's framework to accept its claims about oppression, structural injustice, and the like. Why? Because those who don't already accept the critical theorist's postmodern epistemic framework will have no reason to treat lived experiences as authoritative. Yet this is exactly how many activists will use lived experiences when arguing about their pet issues.

In other words, if lived experiences only derive their weight from a specific epistemic framework, then using lived experiences as a way of validating that framework is rigging the game by assuming the very thing in question.

One might fall back to the claim that lived experiences are normatively authoritative within the postmodern framework of critical theory (and thus can no longer function to prove claims outside the framework), but then they become inept as tools for activism and social change. And woke activists don't want to relinquish that weapon.

So those who wish to accord special argumentative weight to lived experiences face a dilemma. Either lived experiences have special weight on their own merits, or they have special weight within the context of a larger postmodern epistemic system. If the former, then according special weight to lived experiences amounts to nothing more than fallacious statistical reasoning. If the latter, then it is circular reasoning, which is also fallacious.

Either way, things don't look good. If we want to talk about lived experiences, then we should talk about them as just being experiences, subject to the same rules as other experiences. There is nothing particularly special about their being "lived."

5 For a survey and evaluation, see Helen Pluckrose, James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020).