Melisa Stevanovic*, Minna Leinonen, Henri Nevalainen, Annika Valtonen and Elina Weiste

Hermeneutic injustice and troubling experiences of interactional inequality: a review

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Abstract: Social interaction is pervaded by troubling experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and injustice, yet people's attempts to account for such experiences often encounter difficulties. In this article, we review findings from conversation analytic and discursive psychological research to illuminate these challenges. We summarize the findings regarding (1) the conditions under which troubling experiences of interactional inequality occur; (2) the stakes involved in accounting for such experiences; (3) the narrative and discursive resources used for making them culturally intelligible; and (4) the local consequences of talking about these experiences in different contexts. We draw on the notion of "hermeneutical injustice" as a framework to highlight the potential for social and societal critique embedded in these research findings. We argue that the difficulties in accounting for troubling experiences of interactional inequality are unevenly distributed, and that this injustice contributes to the reproduction of broader societal inequalities.

Keywords: social interaction; interactional inequality; troubling experiences; reported speech; hermeneutical injustice

1 Introduction

Social interaction often involves troubling experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and injustice, which may disturb a person long after the incident (Cui 2014). Abusive behaviors such as sexual assaults, racial harassment, and bullying are key examples of interactions with long-acknowledged devastating psychological

***Corresponding author: Melisa Stevanovic**, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland, E-mail: melisa.stevanovic@tuni.fi
Minna Leinonen, Henri Nevalainen and Annika Valtonen, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland, E-mail: minna.leinonen@tuni.fi (M. Leinonen), henri.m.nevalainen@tuni.fi (H. Nevalainen), annika.valtonen@tuni.fi (A. Valtonen)
Elina Weiste, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Helsinki, Finland, E-mail: elina.weiste@ttl.fi

impacts (Duffy and Yamada 2018). Such experiences often emerge from breaches in everyday interaction rituals (Goffman 1967; Tavory and Fine 2020), described as "interactional vandalism" (Duneier and Molotch 1999) and "uncivil (in)attention" (Horgan 2020), as well as from the undermining of people's positions of knowledge and authority (Clifton et al. 2018; Heritage 2013; Stevanovic 2018). These phenomena point to broader patterns of unequal distribution of power and recognition in interaction (Stevanovic 2023). Instead of being momentary disruptions of mutual understanding, they resist resolution through ordinary repair mechanisms (cf. Jefferson 2018). In this review paper, we refer to these phenomena as *troubling experiences of interactional inequality* (TEIIs).

Although TEIIs are widespread, articulating them can be challenging, as feminist scholars have noted especially in the context of gender-based discrimination (e.g., Acker 2006; Ahmed 2021). Individuals may hesitate to speak up, fearing their experiences seem too minor (Krefting 2003; Valian 1999) or that they will be dismissed as "oversensitive" or "small-minded" (Morley 1999: 2), or accused of failing to face reality (Gill et al. 2017: 1). These hesitations reflect a deeper issue: accounts of injustice are not neutral reports but socially situated actions shaped for specific audiences (Potter 1996). They not only describe events but position the speaker morally and socially – making them vulnerable to dismissal or negative judgment. Yet, such experiences need to be told – for any possibility of meaningful change.

Miranda Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Fricker and Jenkins 2017) offers a framework for understanding the barriers people face in accounting for TEIIs. The theory explains how structural inequalities and identity-based prejudices distort practices of sense-making, often undermining individuals in their capacity as knowers. Fricker describes two key forms of epistemic injustice: *testimonial injustice*, which occurs when a speaker's credibility is unfairly deflated due to prejudice; and *hermeneutical injustice*, which arises when gaps in collective interpretive resources, which in turn are shaped by unequal power relations, prevent individuals from fully understanding or articulating their social experiences. Crucially, hermeneutical injustice involves not only personal confusion but also the inability to make one's experience culturally intelligible. A prime example of hermeneutical injustice is sexual harassment in a culture that lacks this critical concept.

While much research on storytelling and complaints has documented the interactional practices through which speakers construct tellable, credible, and affectively appropriate accounts (e.g., Drew 1998; Edwards 2005; Günthner 1997; Holt 1996; Norrick 2005; Ochs and Capps 2001; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009; Van De Mieroop and Clifton 2013; Whitehead 2013), less attention has been paid to how these normative expectations may pose distinct challenges for tellers of TEIIs. Building on Fricker's (2007) notion of hermeneutical injustice, it becomes essential to consider how the moral and interactional demands of storytelling may themselves reflect and

reproduce the very interpretive gaps that constitute such injustice. TEII accounts are not distinctive because they rely on unique interactional practices, but because they are told under intensified normative constraints. When tellers navigate norms of tellability while simultaneously managing expectations of credibility, emotional restraint, and moral coherence, they are not merely managing how they are perceived by others. Rather, they are working within culturally sanctioned interpretive frameworks that may more or less adequately reflect or accommodate their lived experiences. In this sense, the struggle to present a TEII account as both reasonable and legitimate constitutes a distinctive discursive site where hermeneutical injustice materializes – not only in the absence of concepts, but in the normative pressures that shape how, and even whether, such experiences can be made culturally intelligible.

As an illustration of the normative pressures shaping the articulation of TEIIs, consider the following excerpt drawn from an interview with a woman, Kate, working in a male-dominated workplace:

Example 1 (Jones and Clifton 2018: 568)

Kate:	*you know if there's John and I in a meeting they'll talk to John, ehm which always makes me chuckle, particularly if it is a supplier or something because it's me that has the final say and you know they can try and butter John up as much as they want but you know he's not the one making the decision thank you very much. Ehm – sothings like that just kind of amuse me and you know you just play your little games with them and then not give them the business!@*
Interviewer:	((Laughs))
Kate:	*But to be honest* ***I don't come across a lot of sexism*** *or anything like that*

In this account, Kate describes a clear instance of gendered interactional inequality – being consistently bypassed in business meetings in favour of a male colleague – only to follows it immediately with a denial that she encounters "a lot of sexism." As Jones and Clifton (2018) observe, such contradictory positioning highlights the cultural constraints on naming and explaining gendered problems in talk.

In this review article, after detailing how we extracted relevant articles originating in conversation analytic and discursive psychological research to form our database, we examine how these studies have addressed the dynamics of accounting for TEIIs across different social groups. We focus on how this body of work has characterized (1) the conditions under which TEIIs occur; (2) the stakes involved in accounting for such experiences; (3) the narrative and discursive resources used for

making them culturally intelligible; and (4) the local consequences of talking about TEIIs in different contexts. Taken together, these dimensions offer a framework for understanding how hermeneutical injustice operates in practice – how certain troubles may align with specific social positions and how individuals in these positions may face greater risks in speaking out than others. Revisiting the body of relevant research through the lens of hermeneutical injustice, we aim to bring a more critical perspective to a field often focused on the mechanics of telling, but less on their ties to broader structures of marginalization.

2 Methods

We combine two methodological approaches for implementing our review. First, we use methods for systematically reviewing conversation-analytic and discourse-analytic research (Parry and Land 2013; Parry et al. 2014). In line with this approach, we focus on findings from detailed inductive analyses of audio or audiovisual interactions that attend to verbal and embodied practices and their consequences in different contexts. Second, we follow scoping review procedures (Arksey and O'Malley 2005), adhering to a five-step framework: (a) defining the study purpose, (b) identifying studies, (c) screening, (d) extracting data, and (e) summarizing findings to highlight a field not previously established – in this case, TEIIs and how people account for them.

A comprehensive search of seven electronic databases and additional reference collections in October 2022 yielded 586 articles. The search terms combined keywords related to conversation analysis, social interaction, reported speech, and troubling experiences of interactional inequality. After removing duplicates and clearly irrelevant records, 484 peer-reviewed, English-language empirical articles based on audio or audiovisual data of human interaction were retained. These were screened in two phases based on predefined criteria, targeting TEIIs that both occurred and were accounted for in face-to-face interaction, and were treated as problematic by tellers and analysts (for details, see the Supplementary material). Each record was independently assessed by two authors, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Full-text screening of 109 remaining records resulted in a final set of 30 articles, which was later complemented with two additional articles following reviewer feedback, bringing the total to 32. These articles, dating from 1998 to the 2020s, represent diverse discursive research methods and cover various interactional contexts. Details on information sources and data selection processes are provided in the Supplementary material.

Not all studies that met the inclusion criteria explicitly framed their focus in terms of inequality or discrimination, but we considered them nonetheless to offer

valuable insight into how people account for their troubling interactional experiences. Rather than taking hermeneutical injustice as our starting point, we aimed to synthesize general research on storytelling and complaints about troubling experiences with scholarship on inequality and injustice, to examine how difficulties in articulating TEII accounts may reflect broader societal dynamics.

The analysis, based on a collection of 32 articles, was conducted in two phases: first, familiarizing ourselves with the recurring themes and refining a coding scheme; and second, synthesizing findings across four dimensions of TEIIs: *Conditions of TEIIs*, *Stakes of the teller*, *Narrative and discursive resources*, and *Local consequences of telling*. This synthesis highlights potential inequalities in resources in accounting for TEIIs.

3 Findings

In this section, we will present the synthesis of the findings in our compilation of 32 articles. The section will be organized with reference to the four key dimensions of TEIIs described above.

3.1 Conditions of TEIIs

TEIIs are a pervasive aspect of social life, occurring across a wide range of mundane and institutional settings where interactional dynamics are shaped by social hierarchies, roles, and relationships. First, *informal everyday interactions* with family members, friends, or strangers in public often give rise to interactional offenses (Cantarutti 2022; Heinrichsmeier 2021a, 2021b; Pino 2022; Prior 2019; Varjonen et al. 2016). TEIIs have also been reported in various *healthcare contexts* (e.g., Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009; Weiste et al. 2022) and *supportive or therapeutic settings* (Hitzler 2024; O'Reilly and Parker 2014; Pino 2022; Pino and Mortari 2014; Wilkes and Speer 2021), where professionals or other clients have acted in problematic ways. Moreover, in *formal conflict resolution settings*, TEIIs have been observed in courtroom proceedings (D'hondt et al. 2022), child custody disputes (Ingrids and Aronsson 2014), and neighbor dispute resolution and complaint helplines (Stokoe and Edwards 2007). Comparable conflict-oriented dynamics are also present in *educational contexts* where instances of bullying are commonly dealt with among instructors and peers (Evaldsson and Bowden 2020; Konakahara 2017; Svahn 2017; Svahn and Karlsson 2017), and problems discussed between parents and teachers (Caronia 2019). In addition, TEIIs may surface in *workplace settings* such as team meetings (Jacobs et al. 2020; Vöge 2010) and more informal encounters between employees (Olakivi et al.

2024; Stevanovic et al. 2024). Finally, *research interviews* – though designed for data collection – can also become sites of TEIIs, particularly when participants' accounts receive insufficient uptake or are subtly delegitimized by the interviewer (Jones and Clifton 2018; Prior 2019).

TEIIs often reflect broader societal problems such as racism and xenophobia (Jacobs et al. 2020; Trinch and Berk-Seligson 2002; Van De Mieroop and Clifton 2013; Varjonen et al. 2016), ableism (Jingree and Finlay 2013; Thompson et al. 2019), ageism (Olakivi et al. 2024), and weight-based discrimination (Hitzler 2024). These injustices may manifest as unequal treatment, the undermining of competence, or the dismissal of authority (as in Extract 1, see Jones and Clifton 2018; Jacobs et al. 2020; Stevanovic et al. 2024; Olakivi et al. 2024). The studies included in our review document TEIIs involving women (Jones and Clifton 2018; Stevanovic et al. 2024), ethnic minorities (Jacobs et al. 2020; Trinch and Berk-Seligson 2002; Van De Mieroop and Clifton 2013; Varjonen et al. 2016), individuals with illnesses (Thompson et al. 2019; Weiste et al. 2022) or disabilities (Jingree and Finlay 2013), and both young and elderly people (Kerby and Rae 1998; Svahn and Karlsson 2017; Olakivi et al. 2024). Intersectional TEIIs emerge when identity threats involve multiple dimensions, such as gender and ethnicity (Stokoe and Edwards 2007; Prior 2019). These scenarios often center on perceived identity threats (Jacobs et al. 2020; Kerby and Rae 1998; O'Reilly and Parker 2014; Prior 2019; Stevanovic et al. 2024; Svahn and Karlsson 2017; Varjonen et al. 2016; Weiste et al. 2022; Wilkes and Speer 2021).

3.2 Stakes of the teller

TEII accounts serve a variety of functions, depending on how and why they are produced. Some function as informal storytelling resources – for entertaining, venting, bonding, or eliciting affiliation from others (Cantarutti 2022; Christodoulidou 2010; Konakahara 2017; Svahn 2017). Others serve more consequential purposes, such as legitimizing complaints, asserting rights, or seeking redress in institutional settings (D'hondt et al. 2022; Evaldsson and Bowden 2020; Heinrichsmeier 2021a, 2021b; Ingrids and Aronsson 2014; Jacobs et al. 2020; Olakivi et al. 2024; O'Reilly and Parker 2014; Pino 2022; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009; Stevanovic et al. 2024; Stokoe and Edwards 2007; Svahn and Karlsson 2017; Trinch and Berg-Seligson 2002; Van De Mieroop and Clifton 2013; Wilkes and Speer 2021; Vöge 2010).

In some of these contexts, TEII accounts play a role in decisions with tangible outcomes. For example, in custody disputes or protective order cases, such accounts can influence legal judgments (D'hondt et al. 2022; Ingrids and Aronsson 2014; Trinch and Berg-Seligson 2002). In workplaces and schools, they may trigger institutional responses – such as anti-discrimination measures or disciplinary action (Evaldsson

and Bowden 2020; Olakivi et al. 2024; Stevanovic et al. 2024; Svahn 2017; Svahn and Karlsson 2017). In these cases, TEII tellings carry practical weight and function as actionable claims.

However, many TEII accounts involve consequences that are less material but equally significant in social terms. Tellers must manage how they present themselves in morally intelligible ways – framing their stories through culturally valued identities, such as the "good" parent, engaged citizen, competent employee, and self-disciplined individual (Hitzler 2024; Olakivi et al. 2024; O'Reilly and Parker 2014; Varjonen et al. 2016; Wilkes and Speer 2021). At the same time, tellers often take care to distance themselves from identities associated with complaining, blame, or emotional excess (Pino and Mortari 2014; Stevanovic et al. 2024). This tension is illustrated in the earlier example from Jones and Clifton (2018), where a speaker recounts being routinely bypassed in workplace decision-making but presents the incident as amusing – "makes me chuckle" – and ultimately denies having encountered systemic sexism. The light tone and explicit disavowal together reflect how TEII accounts may be shaped by the need to remain socially acceptable and morally accountable.

Finally, many TEII accounts also function as critiques of systemic inequality. Rather than simply describing individual trouble, they challenge dominant assumptions about competence, legitimacy, or belonging. Kinship carers question bionormative notions of family (Wilkes and Speer 2021); disabled and chronically ill individuals confront ableist assumptions (Jingree and Finlay 2013; Thompson et al. 2019); and people with immigrant backgrounds resist racialization and stereotypes (Jacobs et al. 2020; Varjonen et al. 2016). These accounts make structural inequality visible while affirming the speaker's own moral and social worth.

3.3 Narrative and discursive resources

TEIIs take shape through narrative and discursive resources that help tellers align their accounts with their stakes. This section reviews the functions that these resources serve: constructing a vivid and tellable story (Section 3.3.1); establishing epistemic authority (Section 3.3.2); claiming objectivity in assigning blame and innocence (Section 3.3.3); protecting one's moral self in the telling (Section 3.3.4); and navigating constraints on strategy use (Section 3.3.5).

3.3.1 Constructing a vivid and tellable story

To account for their TEIIs, tellers must construct a vivid and tellable story that justifies extended speaking. To enhance tellability, they draw on various

interactional practices. A common practice is *reported speech* – a key device for constructing complaints (Varjonen et al. 2016; Vöge 2010). By animating others' speech, tellers recreate how the TEII unfolded, drawing recipients "into the moment" (Cantarutti 2022; Ingrids and Aronsson 2014). Reported speech helps dramatize the events in the story, enhancing its vividness, authenticity, and entertainment value – and thereby also its tellability (Jacobs et al. 2020; Jingree and Finlay 2013; Konakahara 2017; Stevanovic et al. 2024; Van De Mieroop and Clifton 2013).

Tellers also use several practices to display *affectivity and extremity*, making events seem vivid and complaint-worthy (Olakivi et al. 2024). As Christodoulidou (2010) has noted, complaints may begin with a negative stance to catch the recipient's attention. Tellers may animate their own negative emotions (Cantarutti 2022), or use metaphors, facial expressions, and gestures to boost vividness, credibility, and entertainment (Konakahara 2017; Stevanovic et al. 2024). Also *extreme case formulations* – expressions that intensify descriptions by invoking maximal or minimal terms, such as "always" or "never" (Pomerantz 1986) – may further legitimize the story (Prior 2019; Pomerantz 1986; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009; Weiste et al. 2024). Excessive detail, recycling, and repetition also contribute to vividness and tellability (Christodoulidou 2010; Konakahara 2017).

3.3.2 Establishing epistemic authority

To make a TEII account plausible, tellers must establish epistemic authority over the events described. One common strategy is to offer detailed, factual descriptions, highlighting specifics about the perpetrator's background, actions, and speech, which may enhance both the absurdity of the event and the credibility of the account (Varjonen et al. 2016). Descriptions of the teller's own emotional reactions serve a similar function, increasing vividness and authenticity while reinforcing their role as a credible witness (D'hondt et al. 2022; Ingrids and Aronsson 2014). Tellers further strengthen authority by portraying themselves as directly involved in the events (Cantarutti 2022; Pino 2022).

Epistemic authority can also be asserted indirectly. For example, Vöge (2010) has described how laughter can be used in organizations to signal insider knowledge. Individuals who have worked together for years become gradually familiar with their co-workers' susceptibilities to various types of misconduct. By referring to such misconduct through laughter alone, tellers can effectively signal their seniority within the organization.

Epistemic authority is often established more broadly by demonstrating contextual, social and societal knowledge. Van De Mieroop and Clifton (2013) have observed how interviewees provided details about the places where the reported events occurred, to enhance the verifiability of their story. Wilkes and Speer (2021)

have described how tellers used "I know" formats to portray themselves as knowledgeable individuals who understand the roots of the microaggressions directed toward them, despite being unfairly treated. Similarly, Varjonen and colleagues (2016) have shown how tellers construct themselves as knowledgeable about patterns of discrimination in their country. Authority may also be negotiated between knowledge domains. For example, Caronia (2019) has examined parent–teacher conferences, where a parent uses reported speech to foreground experiential knowledge from home over institutional knowledge from school.

3.3.3 Claiming objectivity in the construction of blame and innocence

A central feature of TEIIs is assigning blame to a third party. Tellers often use reported speech to depict the antagonist's actions as offensive and blameworthy (Evaldsson and Bowden 2020; Heinrichmeier 2021b). Emotional displays, such as hurt (Pino 2022) or fear (Svahn and Karlsson 2017), support this framing. Detailed accounts of time, place, and circumstances (Jacobs et al. 2020; O'Reilly and Parker 2014; Pino 2022; Varjonen et al. 2016), combined with reported speech, lend an impression of objectivity, enabling recipients to "see for themselves" what occurred (Cantarutti 2022; Caronia 2019; Hitzler 2024; Konakahara 2017; Prior 2019; Stokoe and Edwards 2007; Svahn 2017; Vöge 2010).

Tellers also construct their own innocence, often by contrasting their neutral or ordinary behavior with the inappropriate actions of others (Kerby and Rae 1998; O'Reilly and Parker 2014). Extended reported dialogues highlight this contrast (Christodoulidou 2010; Ingrids and Aronsson 2014). Tone of voice further reinforces innocence – for instance, by portraying the other as irritated while themselves sounding patient or friendly (Stevanovic et al. 2024). Some tellers also present themselves as agentless victims. In bullying narratives, this may involve emphasizing helplessness (Svahn and Karlsson 2017), while in clinical contexts, patients may cite medical conditions – such as coma, medication effects, or forgetfulness – to explain behavior and reduce perceived agency (Weiste et al. 2022).

3.3.4 Protecting one's moral self in the telling

As pointed out above, a critical task for tellers is to protect their moral selves during the telling. This is often achieved through distancing strategies that reduce the personal stake or seriousness of the complaint. These include hedges, silences, hesitations, vague or generalized references, and idiomatic expressions (Konakahara 2017; Pino and Mortari 2014; Stevanovic et al. 2024). Other devices include extreme specifications (e.g., "one specific lecturer"), alternative recognitionals such as "ladies" (Vöge 2010), and humor or parody that frames the matter as unserious

(Hitzler 2024; Prior 2019; Stokoe and Edwards 2007; Thompson et al. 2019). Such strategies allow tellers to maintain credibility while minimizing the risk of being perceived as overly emotional, aggressive, or self-serving.

In addition to distancing themselves from the complaint, tellers may also downplay the severity of the issue to protect their moral self. One strategy is to suggest that the transgressor lacked intent, a common feature in microaggression narratives (Wilkes and Speer 2021). Another is "de-gendering" sexist experiences, framing them as general rather than gendered problems (Jones and Clifton 2018). Tellers may also normalize the event by balancing negative accounts with positive ones, as seen in narratives of discrimination (Varjonen et al. 2016) and service use (Jingree and Finlay 2013). Finally, they may frame their reaction as an over-interpretation, questioning whether they misread ageist (Olakivi et al. 2024) or gendered (Stevanovic et al. 2024) behavior. These strategies all serve to maintain moral integrity when accounting for TEIIs.

3.3.5 Navigating constraints on strategy use

The reviewed studies show that producing a convincing TEII account involves notable challenges, typically falling into three categories.

First, tellers often struggle to present their experiences in ways that invite serious attention. Domestic violence victims, for instance, may provide broad narratives lacking legal specificity (Trinch and Berk-Seligson 2002). Similarly, abstract or general accounts may highlight broader relevance but reduce focus on personal detail (Stevanovic et al. 2024). While abstraction supports calls for structural change, too much specificity can frame the incident as isolated, weakening its systemic framing (Trinch and Berk-Seligson 2002; Stevanovic et al. 2024).

Second, TEIIs may conflict with dominant cultural discourses, creating social acceptability tensions. Svahn and Karlsson (2017) have shown that girls' complaints about a mother's role in bullying clash with conventional peer-based bullying frames. Healthcare workers have struggled to report over-active clients within patient-centered paradigms (Weiste et al. 2024). Women in leadership may hesitate to voice undermining experiences due to gendered expectations that favor cooperation over authority (Stevanovic et al. 2024). Similarly, as demonstrated in Extract 1, a female professional in Jones and Clifton's (2018) study, denies systemic sexism while describing exclusion. Thus, tellers may actively align their accounts with socially acceptable norms and avoid framings that risk being perceived as confrontational.

Finally, power asymmetries – either in the story-world or telling context – can limit what can be safely said. People with learning disabilities risk harm when criticizing essential services (Jingree and Finlay 2013), and children may avoid blaming adults in bullying contexts (Svahn and Karlsson 2017). In institutional

settings, power imbalances – for example, children narrating to adults – may hinder effective storytelling, as adults may dominate or dismiss the children's narratives (Evaldsson and Bowden 2020). Tellers in these contexts must therefore work particularly hard to establish credibility.

3.4 Local consequences of telling

A central expectation in TEII accounts is that recipients will *affiliate* with the teller's emotional stance – that is, display support or alignment with how the teller feels about the reported events (Couper-Kuhlen 2012; Stivers 2008). This stance may involve feelings such as indignation, anger, disappointment, or amusement, and affiliation can be shown through verbal or embodied means. Conversation-analytic research shows that whether this affiliation is provided or withheld can significantly shape the outcome of the telling (Couper-Kuhlen 2012; Stivers 2008).

This section examines how the presence or absence of affiliation enables or constrains TEII accounts. We begin by discussing resources for recipient affiliation (Section 3.4.1). We then turn to discuss situations in which there is a lack of recipient affiliation (Section 3.4.2). Finally, we consider tellers' responses to non-affiliation (Section 3.4.3).

3.4.1 Resources of recipient affiliation

Recipient affiliation in storytelling ranges from subtle acknowledgments to explicit moral support. Expectations for affiliation vary by context and typically intensify toward the end of a story (Stivers 2008). Mildly affiliative responses – such as acknowledgment tokens (Stokoe and Edwards 2007; Svahn and Karlsson 2017), continuers (Heinrichsmeier 2021b; Konakahara 2017; Varjonen et al. 2016; Weiste et al. 2022), or newsworthiness markers (Stokoe and Edwards 2007) – signal understanding without committing to a moral stance.

Stronger affiliations draw on vocal, embodied, and verbal resources. Recipients may express surprise or disbelief through prosody (Cantarutti 2022; Konakahara 2017), gestures (Konakahara 2017), facial expressions (Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009), or emphatic response tokens (Konakahara 2017). They might echo the teller's prosody, repeat punchlines, or use laughter to signal affiliation (Olakivi et al. 2024; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009; Vöge 2010).

Verbal expressions of affiliation include evaluations that mirror the teller's emotional stance (Cantarutti 2022; Heinrichsmeier 2021b; Konakahara 2017; Vöge 2010; Weiste et al. 2022; Wilkes and Speer 2021), statements that endorse the account (Cantarutti 2022; Konakahara 2017; Svahn and Karlsson 2017; Varjonen et al. 2016),

and rhetorical questions or ironic evaluations of the complaint's target (Christodoulidou 2010; Heinrichsmeier 2021b; Svahn 2017; Svahn and Karlsson 2017). Recipients may also display affiliation by providing analogous accounts or referring to similar experiences from others (Heinrichsmeier 2021b; Hitzler 2024; Konakahara 2017; Pino 2022).

Affiliation can also extend to co-constructing the complaint, adding affective detail or upgrading the account (Cantarutti 2022; Heinrichsmeier 2021b; Svahn 2017). Such collaborative responses help shape the TEII, as seen in support group and interview settings (Pino 2022; Weiste et al. 2022, 2024). This type of affiliation is also illustrated in Extract 1 from Jones and Clifton (2018), where the interviewer's laughter following the teller's light framing of gendered inequality functions as a mild affiliative move. While it maintains rapport and validates the teller's stance to some extent, it also reinforces the minimization of the issue. In doing so, such affiliation may contribute to steering the telling away from further elaboration or explicit naming of the underlying problem.

3.4.2 Lack of recipient affiliation

Recipients of TEII accounts may disaffiliate from the telling by disregarding or minimizing the teller's complaint. Disaffiliation can manifest through responses that are delayed, hesitant, mitigated, or otherwise indicate reluctance to agree (Konakahara 2017), silence (Heinrichsmeier 2021b; Olakivi et al. 2024; O'Reilly and Parker 2014; Prior 2019; Stevanovic et al. 2024), or minimal acknowledgments followed by contrasting markers like "but" (Caronia 2019; D'hondt et al. 2022; Konakahara 2017; Svahn and Karlsson 2017). Non-verbal cues like gaze, facial expressions, gestures, or laughter may also signal disaffiliation (Konakahara 2017; Olakivi et al. 2024; Svahn and Karlsson 2017). Verbally, a recipient may minimize the problem using understatements (Stevanovic et al. 2024). Additionally, conditional words like "if" and "try" may be used to imply the possible non-existence, or non-solvability, of a problem (Olakivi et al. 2024). Recipients' follow-up questions indicate interest but can also be used to bypass the slot for providing affiliation (Olakivi et al. 2024; Stevanovic et al. 2024; Svahn and Karlsson 2017; Trinch and Berk-Seligson 2002). In some cases, disaffiliation involves explicit disagreement (Caronia 2019; Olakivi et al. 2024).

Disaffiliation is often linked to the TEII account not conforming to the cultural norms that prevail in the given setting, which has been shown to happen, for example, in research interviews or institutional settings (D'hondt et al. 2022; Trinch and Berk-Seligson 2002; Weiste et al. 2024). In such cases, recipients may reformulate the problem (O'Reilly and Parker 2014; Pino 2022; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009) or offer an alternative interpretation of the antagonist's behavior (Caronia 2019; Heinrichsmeier 2021b; Pino 2022; Olakivi et al. 2024), which shifts the focus into a new

direction deemed more fitting for the setting (Heinrichsmeier 2021b; Konakahara 2017; Pino 2022).

Another factor influencing disaffiliation is the allocation of blame. Complaints may be disaffiliated if the storyteller describes their own problematic behavior or is suspected of abusive actions (Stokoe and Edwards 2007). Blame attributed to a third party can also risk disaffiliation, especially in situations where the recipient seeks to maintain impartiality, such as a supervisor or facilitator in support groups might be willing to do (Olakivi et al. 2024; Pino 2022). In these situations, recipients may seek to shift the focus of culpability (Heinrichsmeier 2021b; Olakivi et al. 2024). According to Varjonen and colleagues (2016), in interviews with individuals from immigrant backgrounds, accounts of racism are often met with disaffiliation, with recipients blaming the teller for a bad attitude and normalizing discriminatory behavior.

3.4.3 Tellers' responses to non-affiliation

A lack of recipient affiliation can be a stressful moment for the teller (Peräkylä et al. 2015), often prompting explicit or implicit efforts to seek alignment (Couper-Kuhlen 2012; Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori 2012; Selting 2010). Explicit cues include expressions like "eh" (Jacobs et al. 2020), "y'know" (Trinch and Berk-Seligson 2002; Prior 2019), or appeals such as "see how much it annoys me" (Christodoulidou 2010). Implicit strategies include adding examples (Stevanovic et al. 2024), extreme case formulations (Christodoulidou 2010; O'Reilly and Parker 2014; Prior 2019), emotional intensifiers – like exclamations, prosody, or gestures (Konakahara 2017) – and aligning the recipient with the teller's group or responsibility (Jacobs et al. 2020; Olakivi et al. 2024).

A common method for pursuing affiliation is adding details to the story, enhancing its vividness and liveliness (Jacobs et al. 2020; Olakivi et al. 2024; O'Reilly and Parker 2014; Prior 2019; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009; Stevanovic et al. 2024; Svahn and Karlsson 2017). This granularity helps recipients understand the problematic nature of the event (Cantarutti 2022; Christodoulidou 2010; Pino 2022; Prior 2019). However, it can also emphasize the isolated nature of the issue, shifting focus from broader problems (Stevanovic et al. 2024).

In TEIIs, recipient affiliation is crucial for validating both the story and the teller's moral character. Its absence can threaten the teller's face, prompting them to adjust the story to gain support. Tellers may soften or narrow their criticism (Konakahara 2017; Pino and Mortari 2014), mitigate their statements (Konakahara 2017; Stevanovic et al. 2024), or distance themselves from the issue with expressions like "it doesn't affect me," laughter, or irony (Hitzler 2024; Vöge 2010). Most radically, however, the tellers may change the basis of their complaint (Weiste et al. 2024) or redirect it to a new target (Svahn and Karlsson 2017). For example, a teller may

reframe an event that was initially presented as part of a broader pattern of injustice as a personal, isolated experience. (Olakivi et al. 2024; Stevanovic et al. 2024). In these cases, a lack of recipient affiliation leads to the tellers themselves to inadvertently undermine the significance of their own accounts.

4 Discussion

This review has examined research on people's accounts for their *troubling experiences of interactional inequality* (TEIIs). While tellers are shown to employ diverse strategies to convey their experiences, they are also found struggling to articulate their experiences in ways that would resonate with their listeners and validate the seriousness of the issue in hand. While such struggle has already been pointed out in the feminist organization studies (e.g., Acker 2006; Ahmed 2021), conversation-analytic and discourse-analytic research can shed further light on the precise nature of these difficulties.

TEIIs are associated with various types of inequalities. First, these primary experiences themselves are distributed unevenly, disproportionately affecting those belonging to less powerful or marginalized groups. For these groups, TEIIs are often rooted in identity-related concerns, which generate systematic and repetitive negative experiences, permeating broad areas of daily life. Furthermore, in such TEIIs, various aspects of identity – such as gender and ethnicity – can intersect (see Prior 2019; Stokoe and Edwards 2007), with exposure to multiple power dynamics contributing to the accumulation of TEIIs (Parmenter et al. 2024). Second, accounting for TEIIs can be particularly complex for groups facing such compounded experiences. Although societal awareness of intersectionality has increased, integrating personal experiences into a story that underscores multiple systematic injustices is a particularly complex endeavor.

People's stakes in talking about their experiences constitute a further dimension of potential inequalities surrounding TEIIs. As our review demonstrates, the stakes vary in relation to contexts, including the material consequences, moral and identity-related issues, and broader societal critiques. In high-stakes interactions with concrete material consequences (e.g., court), it is critical for the tellers to have enough resources to pursue their stakes, which is why extra societal support has been allocated to even out potential inequalities in this respect (Trinch and Berg-Seligson 2002). However, when it comes to the stakes concerning moral and identity-related outcomes and broader societal critique, the situation is trickier. The tellers may similarly lack resources to account for their experiences, as has been illustrated, for example, with reference to female leaders (Stevanovic et al. 2024), but no collective support is available for them. Furthermore, in these situations the teller might end

up losing more than what can be gained through telling (see e.g., Harts 2019). The stakes associated with research interviews, then again, are of quite specific nature, as people may talk and reflect on their experiences without many of the social risks associated with telling in other contexts (Ahmed 2021: 18–19; Leinonen et al. 2024). While this can be empowering, the fact that TEII accounts depend on such exceptional environments underscores a structural issue that calls for societal attention.

The uneven distribution of resources to account for TEIIs is linked to Fricker's (2007) concept of *hermeneutical injustice*. As Fricker explains:

> "unequal power relations can skew shared hermeneutical resources so that the powerful can easily understand their experiences, while those in weaker positions may encounter certain social situations as if through a glass darkly, without the concepts to render them intelligible" (p. 148).

According to Fricker (2007), this hermeneutical marginalization extends beyond the content of speech to the manner of expression. For instance, speakers who use emotional styles of expression may encounter a hermeneutical gap, as Western societies have a long history of culturally valuing masculine "rationality" over emotional expression (De Beauvoir 1953). As shown in various studies reviewed in this paper, many TEII accounts are imbued with intense verbal or prosodic expressions of emotion, exclamations, and extreme case formulations (e.g., Christodoulidou 2010; Prior 2019), which may partially explain the ineffectiveness of TEII accounts.

Responding to TEII accounts is also a challenging endeavor. As pointed out by Konakahara (2017), engaging with a story about someone's blame can threaten both the teller's and the recipient's face. The recipient's face is threatened, for instance, when a teller claims having experienced discrimination by people that belong to the same group as the recipient (Varjonen et al. 2016). Responses to TEIIs may also be constrained by legal norms (D'hondt et al. 2022; Trinch and Berg-Seligson 2002) or professional requirements for neutrality (Pino and Mortari 2014; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors 2009; Stokoe and Edwards 2007), which may prevent affiliative responses. Most crucially, however, the recipients must discern the tellers' goals and understand whether to provide affiliation or engage in action, or both. Some complaints only call for affiliation, as shown, for example, in the study of hair salon interaction (e.g., Heinrichsmeier 2021a, 2021b). In a hair salon, it would indeed be highly inappropriate for the professional to take action against the client's family members for their minor annoyances. But then again, when an employer complains about their co-workers' inappropriate behaviors to a supervisor who holds the power to prevent further inappropriate behavior, mere affiliation may be unsatisfactory as a response (e.g., Olakivi et al. 2024; Stevanovic et al. 2024). However, recipients may also use the ambiguity of TEII accounts to strategically avoid responding as expected, evading

action by offering affiliation or circumventing affiliation by focusing solely on problem-solving.

As noted earlier in relation to the stakes of research interviews, TEII accounts can also be empowering in that they identify certain experiences as typical for members of a specific identity category. Such interactions can bring societal recognition to problems, support the teller's agency, and encourage collective action. TEII accounts offer an emancipatory remedy by allowing individuals to conceptualize their experiences and give a name to the harm they have encountered. The concept of "microaggression" illustrates a case in point. While attributing blame in ambiguous situations is difficult (Wilkes and Speer 2021), the concept of "microaggression" encompasses this ambiguity, casting it as the defining feature of the problem. Thus, rather than diminishing the problem's severity, labeling a behavior as an instantiation of microaggression emphasizes the problem's unique and severe nature precisely due to its intangible nature. In this way, new concepts have the power to change the world.

In and through this review article, we also seek to "change the world." To this end, we have introduced the notion of "hermeneutical injustice" as a framework to highlight the potential for social and societal critique within the bodies of conversation analytic and discursive psychological research, which may not explicitly achieve this on their own. In so doing, we align with the agenda of Fricker (2007: 172), who has promoted a "background social 'theory' that is informed by the possibility of hermeneutical injustice" as a way of encouraging skepticism in initial credibility judgments when someone's account does not immediately make sense. Ultimately, this could help to even out inequalities. There is also a need for a deeper understanding of how new concepts emerge from accounts of interactional trouble and how their usage can empower individuals – and what researchers could do to promote emancipation and empowerment for marginalized groups.

This review has certain limitations. Although the included studies span a broad range of settings – from informal conversations to institutional encounters – this diversity also introduces complexity. The interactional norms and stakes of telling differ across contexts, which may limit the comparability of some findings. While our synthesis highlights recurring discursive challenges, these cannot be assumed to manifest in identical ways across all environments. Furthermore, despite our systematic search strategy, the reviewed literature is largely rooted in Western, particularly European, contexts. This reflects broader trends in conversation analytic and discursive psychological research but also signals a clear gap. Broader discourse analytic work – such as studies in social work – did not appear in our final sample, nor did our search strategy include book-length publications. Which tend to be less visible in standard database searches. Their absence might have influenced our findings. Since the affiliative recognition of TEII accounts is culturally shaped,

future research is needed to examine them in underrepresented cultural settings. Such work would help assess whether the forms of interactional inequality and hermeneutical injustice identified here are generalizable or context-specific. It would also allow to consider whose experiences remain underrepresented in the current body of research – that is, whose voices are less likely to be heard not only in interaction, but also in the research literature itself.

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Bionotes

Melisa Stevanovic
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
melisa.stevanovic@tuni.fi

Melisa Stevanovic, PhD, is associate professor in social psychology in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University, Finland. Her research interests include the analysis of power, authority, participation,

and joint decision-making in various interactional settings. Currently she leads a Research Council of Finland funded project on people's ways of accounting for their problematic interactional experiences.

Minna Leinonen
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
minna.leinonen@tuni.fi

Minna Leinonen, PhD, is a Senior Research Fellow at Tampere University, Finland, with extensive experience in working-life research, particularly focusing on equalities. Her interest lies in how change occurs or is subverted in and through interaction. Currently, she studies how negative experiences of working-life interactions are shared in interviews. Her research interests are motivated by advancing social justice and improving the quality of working life.

Henri Nevalainen
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
henri.m.nevalainen@tuni.fi

Henri Nevalainen is a doctoral researcher in the field of social psychology in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University, Finland. His research interests lie in threats within interaction and the challenges related to narrating these experiences.

Annika Valtonen
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
annika.valtonen@tuni.fi

Annika Valtonen is a doctoral researcher in the field of social psychology in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University, Finland. Her research focuses on the problematic interactions that immigrants encounter in their daily lives, and the dilemmas that are related to sharing these experiences with others.

Elina Weiste
Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Helsinki, Finland
elina.weiste@ttl.fi

Elina Weiste is a leading researcher at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health in Finland. She holds the title of docent in clinical interaction and a PhD in sociology. Currently, she is involved in various research projects investigating workplace interaction, participation, and well-being at work.