
Words Silenced, Words Unknown: The Hermeneutic Injustice Surrounding Undisclosed Child Trauma Survivors

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Kate M. Beamer

Abstract

Childhood trauma is an often life-altering experience that impacts behaviours, relationships, cognition, psychological health, and neurological functioning. In order to mitigate against the multiple effects of trauma, early treatment and support is recommended. Unfortunately, treatment is often not obtained due to lack of disclosure in childhood, which often leaves survivors of child trauma to attempt to understand their experiences in silence. This article centers on the concept of hermeneutic injustice as it relates to undisclosed child trauma survivors. Interpretive findings speak to the impacts of memory and language in relation to traumatic understanding, the often-isolating experiences of living in non-disclosure, the potential of teachers to be hermeneutic allies in the provision of trauma education, and the possibility of schools as a site of traumatic unearthing and learning

Keywords

Child trauma, disclosure, hermeneutic injustice, education, silence

Corresponding Author:
Kate M Beamer, PhD
University of Calgary
Email: kmbeamer@ucalgary.ca

Language is like light; it is a ‘medium’ in which the world discloses itself to us; it is the vehicle that delivers the intelligible world to us.

Wachterhauser, 2002, p. 72

Silence. The words that never meet the paper. The experiences shrouded from the masses. The deafening blow of language unspoken. This is the silence of undisclosed child trauma. It is not the comfortable silence between friends, nor the majestic silence on a serene morning, nor the reflective pause of speech before a response; this is “speechless terror” (van der Kolk et al., 2001, p. 26). It is not as much mere silence as it is a *silencing*: of experience, of voice, and of opportunities for understanding. This silence poses a risk as it often negates understanding and treatment of the trauma experienced. It is very difficult to attain accurate treatment if you cannot utter the words, if you do not have the words, or if it is buried so deep that you cannot piece enough together to constitute a cohesive memory, let alone a disclosure. A voice is desperately needed to fill this silence. Education matters. And with it, could provide the language and tools to give voice to what is often unrecognized, buried, or normalized.

Trauma is an experience that, unfortunately, most of the world’s population will endure at some point in their lives (Ameringen et al., 2008; Benjet et al., 2016; Duckers et al., 2016). While trauma can come from many sources, in global northern countries such as Canada, trauma is more likely to be personal or socio-relational, often linked to abuse and neglect, as opposed to trauma which occurs from war, disease, or natural disasters (Ameringen et al., 2008; Benjet et al., 2016). Experiencing trauma can have negative effects on all people (Mulvihill, 2005; Stige et al., 2013; Thompson & Cui, 2000; van der Kolk, 2005), yet can be particularly damaging to children due to their young age, inherent vulnerability, and fewer learned coping skills (Mulvihill, 2005; Stige et al., 2013; Thompson & Cui, 2000; van der Kolk, 2005). Many children who experience trauma keep it a secret due to fear, dependence, not having someone to tell, or simply because they do not have the language to express what is happening to them (Kohler et al., Schafer, 2018; Perry, 2000; Sorsoli, 2004). Children who do not disclose trauma directly after it happens most often do not disclose until adulthood, if at all (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Smith et al., 2000). Instead, they live out their childhood keeping their traumas a secret. When trauma is kept a secret, or when children cannot disclose due to the many barriers that surround disclosure, they are often left to self-manage their posttraumatic symptoms, often without full awareness of what those entail.

When a child is unable to disclose trauma, due to the myriads of barriers (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Smith et al., 2000; van der Kolk, 2005), they often reside in silence. This is not the comfortable silence that exists between friends, nor the silence born out reflection on a topic; this is a secretive silence induced by trauma, or often a fear-based silencing. When trauma occurs and the child is forced to be silent about it, that silence becomes a secondary form of trauma (Lister, 1982). Studies demonstrated the stress that carrying a secret of trauma can have on a child, which can impede a survivor’s physical, cognitive, and psychological state, even beyond the multiple impacts caused by posttraumatic stress (Graham-Bermann et al., 2011). Children who have endured trauma but cannot talk about it, most often do not have a language to describe their experiences. Moreover, as a young person whose communities usually only extend to their neighborhood and school (Allnock & Miller, 2013), there is little hope in acquiring language that speaks to their traumas. When there is no opportunity to voice trauma, children are more likely to

demonstrate past traumas behaviourally as they get older. This “literal repetition” (Lister, 1982, p. 875) of events becomes an unconscious physical way of processing the traumatic events that cannot be brought into the light of language.

One of the trademarks of being human is the desire to understand ourselves, our experiences, and the world which surrounds us (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988). This is most always done through language and dialogue, as language is the medium in which understanding occurs (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Dialogue, in hermeneutics, facilitates understanding and a connection to self and others (Gadamer, 1960/1989). When trauma is rooted in secrecy and silence, and there are no opportunities to connect experience with language, it can cause increased long-term stress, in comparison to those who do disclose their traumatic histories (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988). Disclosure is most often required for treatment, yet, when disclosure is withheld, most often, so is treatment. Without treatment, the majority of child trauma survivors reside in silence, isolated from information that could help them connect their current behaviours to their traumatic histories.

When human beings do not have the resources to adequately understand their experiences, they are at risk of suffering from hermeneutic injustice. Hermeneutic injustice occurs “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair advantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). In other words, there is “a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be” (Fricker, 2007, pp. 150-151). While child trauma is often approached as an individual issue, it might be more appropriate to speak on child trauma as a universal phenomenon because of its prolificity, often rooted in violence (Johnstone & Lee, 2025). Like the phenomenon of child trauma, hermeneutic injustice is a form of structural injustice that transcends the individual, affecting an entire group of people (Medina, 2017). These are “hermeneutical wrongs built into the very structure of our communicative practices” (Medina, 2017, p. 42). Not only are hermeneutic injustices structural, but in the case of child trauma, they are also institutional. Institutional hermeneutic injustices occur when dominant institutions, such as schools, do not provide crucial resources that would aid in the formation of understanding (Johnstone & Lee, 2025). Fricker (2006) explained that the understanding of our social experiences, which would include trauma, is an epistemological activity. Yet, our understandings of our experiences can be halted or remain incomplete due to not having resources to aid in the formation of these understandings (Fricker, 2016). A result of these incomplete understandings can result in a lack of what Elzinga (2018) termed “epistemic confidence” (p. 80). “To lack epistemic confidence is to lack a sense of one’s ability or standing to make a normative claim and thereby operates as a form of internalized oppression and a further roadblock to the full expression of one’s agency” (Elzinga, 2018, p. 80). When a group of people are unable to understand their experiences due to a lack of language, it then becomes impossible for them to communicate these experiences to others, leaving them to float in the limbo of silence. Hermeneutic injustice affects groups of people, such as minorities, where the information is being directed by the dominant groups. This is a form of oppression that “should not be minimized or underestimated, for the interpretive capacities of expressing oneself and being understood are basic human capacities” (Medina, 2017, p. 41). Even if the groups being targeted are not minorities, it is a “formal equality, but lived inequality” (Fricker, 2006, p. 103). The injustice occurs when the information being withheld harms or severely disadvantages the targeted social group (Johnstone & Lee, 2025). It is a human inclination to make meaning out of our experiences;

when this is denied it can impede development and growth (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2017). When a group of people are unable to understand their social experiences, they cannot participate fully in all aspects of their social experiences (Fricker, 2016). When unequal participation occurs, we become hermeneutically marginalized (Fricker, 2006). While child trauma survivors may participate in social experiences, their experiences are altered and misaligned, due to a severe lack of understanding of the effects of the trauma.

A hermeneutical injustice is done when a collective hermeneutical gap impinges so as to significantly disadvantage some group(s) and not others, so the way that the collective impoverishment plays out in practice is effectively discriminatory. Let us say, then, that the primary harm of hermeneutical injustice consists in a *situated hermeneutical inequality*: the concrete situation is such that the subject is rendered unable to make communicatively intelligible something which it is particularly in his or her interests to be able to render intelligible. (Fricker, 2006, p. 103, italics in original)

This marginalization becomes a form of powerlessness in addition to the layers of victimization caused by the trauma endured (Fricker, 2006). As Fricker (2006) noted,

Hermeneutic injustice is a structural notion, for it is a form of inequality—it is an epistemic inequality. The background condition for hermeneutic injustice is the subject’s hermeneutical marginalization. And the actual moment of hermeneutical injustice comes when the background condition expresses itself in a more or less doomed attempt on the part of the subject to render an experience intelligible. (p. 102)

Medina (2017) furthered this point to assert that continued hermeneutical marginalization can result in “hermeneutic death” (p. 41). According to Medina (2017), hermeneutical death is a

phenomena that radically constrains one’s hermeneutical capacities and agency such as the following: the loss (or radical curtailment) of one’s voice, of one’s interpretive capacities, or of one’s status as a participant in meaning-making or meaning-sharing practices ... this occurs when subjects are not simply mistreated as intelligible communicators, but prevented from developing and exercising a voice, that is, prevented from participating in meaning-making and meaning-sharing practices. (p. 41)

Not only are some groups prevented from fully understanding their experiences, but they are also prevented from fully being.

The primary harm of hermeneutical injustice, then, is to be understood not only in terms of the subject’s being unfairly disadvantaged by some collective hermeneutical lacuna, but also in terms of the very construction (constitutive and/or casual) of social identity. In certain social contexts, hermeneutical injustice can mean that someone is socially constituted as, and perhaps are even caused to be, something they are not, and which it is against their interests to be seen to be. Thus we can say, without essentializing, that they are prevented from becoming who they really are. (Fricker, 2006, p. 107)

There is a direct connection between language and voice. When someone is stripped of language and the opportunity to make sense of what they have experienced, it not only denies full participation in life, but also restricts voice. The depth of this injustice can result in a form of epistemic death.

...the hermeneutical harms become so pervasive that they compromise one's epistemic life and status as a meaning-making subject in expressive and interpretive practices. In the latter marrow-of-the-bone cases, the effects of hermeneutic injustice are totalizing, and they reverberate across all corners of one's epistemic life, affecting one's entire hermeneutical subjectivity, that is, one's capacity to make sense and be understood. The most radical case would be the one in which one's voice is *killed* – what I have called *hermeneutical death*. (Medina, 2017, p. 47, italics in original)

There must be, as Medina (2017) asserted, “collective and shared forms of responsibility” (p. 42) for denying these groups of individuals linguistic access to understanding their experiences. Medina (2017) termed this “hermeneutic resistance” (p. 48), which is “exerting epistemic friction against the normative expectations of established interpretive frameworks and aiding dissonant voices in the formation of alternative meanings, interpretations and expressive styles” (p. 48). While hermeneutic injustice and hermeneutic death transcend the individual, individuals are needed to correct the linguistic neglect by filling in the gaps and providing resources and a language to the hermeneutically marginalized. It is not enough to simply ensure that these resources exist, but more importantly, that they are accessed and accessible. As educators, and those working with traumatized children and youth, we have a responsibility to become hermeneutic allies to best aid in their ability to make sense of their experiences:

We should all feel responsible to facilitate, in any way we can, the hermeneutical agency of eccentric voices and perspectives that *resist* established meanings and communicative dynamics, and work toward the formation of original meanings, alternative expressive styles, and new horizons of interpretation. (Medina, 2017, p. 49, italics in original)

By providing a language and a space for child trauma survivors to make sense of their experiences, we are opening up possibilities, not only for increased understanding, but also for a “more epistemically just society” (Elzinga, 2018, p. 61). This is especially true in terms of authoritative constructions of meaning that may not align with one's experience.

Authoritative constructions in the shared hermeneutical resource, then, impinge on us collectively but not uniformly, and the non-uniformity of their hold over us can create a sense of dissonance between an experience and the various constructions that are ganging up to overpower its proper nascent meaning. (Fricker, 2006, p. 106)

While hermeneutic injustice and marginalization can affect any marginalized social group, it does have direct implications for child trauma survivors, who cannot understand their experiences due to a lack of information on how trauma affects them. While I do not think the information is being purposely withheld, it is inaccessible for a number of reasons. First, it is often housed within fields of psychology, where access to the information is through engaging with a counsellor, social worker, psychologist, or other form of mental health professional. As

undisclosed survivors often remain silent and never enter the office of a mental health professional, they never gain access to this pertinent information. Secondly, much of the literature on the impacts of child trauma are written in inaccessible formats, such as with much of academic writing.

The cognitive disablement prevents her from understanding an important patch of her own experience; that is, a patch of experience which is strongly in her interests to understand, for without that understanding she is left deeply troubled, confused, and isolated, not to mention vulnerable to continued harassment. Her hermeneutic disadvantage renders her unable to make sense of her ongoing mistreatment, and this in turn prevents her from protesting it, let alone securing effective measures to stop it. (Fricker, 2006, p. 97).

Hermeneutical injustices work as a form of epistemological oppression.

Often it is hard to see the sky clearing when you are in the middle of a storm. This is made more difficult when there is no available language to describe experiences, or when that language is withheld or made inaccessible, locked within a repository of academia. Educators can become hermeneutic allies, to assist in the formation of meaning-making, just by including inaccessible language in their classrooms. “Fighting hermeneutical injustices typically involves improving communication across hermeneutical practices and communities and making dissonant meanings and eccentric interpretive frameworks available through the social fabric” (Medina, 2017, p. 49). As a hermeneutically marginalized group, understanding can be facilitated when language and relevant resources are provided by dominant or authoritative groups: “hermeneutical gaps are filled in only when members of a society (or at least, in the present case, most members of the workforce) have the relevant concepts and know how to use them” (Elzinga, 2018, p. 65). Providing resources involves “putting the experience into words, giving that experience a name, and making the description of the experience under that name socially widespread” (Elzinga, 2018, p. 72). Understanding is most often facilitated through dialogue. Yet, there can be no effective dialogue without the right language, without the right words, to articulate experiences. Children who have endured trauma are the majority of our population (Benjet et al., 2016; Duckers et al., 2016; van Ameringen et al., 2008). With incidents of childhood trauma increasing (Pumariega et al., 2022), we are at risk of raising and educating a generation of traumatized children, without our knowledge, or more acutely, without their knowledge. The psychological, behavioural, cognitive, neurological, and physical impacts of trauma are paramount and pervasive (Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2002; van der Kolk, 2000, 2003, 2005). Often, undisclosed survivors do not realize that many of their current behaviours or struggles are rooted in trauma; many do not realize they are traumatized at all (van der Kolk, 2005). Children who have endured trauma need intervention and treatment so they can be safe and have opportunities to connect their behaviours with their traumatic history. Unfortunately, currently the only way to receive treatment is to disclose, which many children are unable to do due to the barriers that surround disclosure (Alaggia et al., 2019; Allnock & Miller, 2012; Smith et al., 2000). They then, are at risk to live in traumatic silence, with no opportunities for treatment or healing. One of the commonalities that most of these children share is that they attend school. Educators have a powerful potential to become hermeneutic allies to help break the silence and isolation experienced by many child trauma survivors, by providing information on traumatic impacts.

Children who do not feel safe cannot learn. Children who do not understand what is happening to their bodies and their thoughts cannot learn. Children who must spend most of their energy suppressing a secret cannot learn. Children must have a sense of agency and control in order to learn. Yet, what is interesting about most approaches to working with and educating children who have been traumatized, is that it does not include them in the dialogue but is instead focused on educating school staff on traumatic impacts. Without knowing the root cause of trauma and often battling memory blocks, hyperarousal, and dissociation, many survivors are left feeling isolated, crazy, abnormal, and different from the other students. In many cases, they are ultimately silenced. Providing this information to the survivors themselves could prove to be significantly impactful.

Schools are the core environment in which we address the academic competence of our youth, but they are far more than that. As with all caregiving environments, they are a significant and long-lasting social environment. They are a forum in which youth learn about themselves, about others, and about the world. They are where children and adolescents succeed or fail, gain competency or internalize vulnerability. They are the context in which youth experiment with self, with ideas, and with possible future roles. Without question, our school experiences help shape who we ultimately become. (Blaustein, 2012, p. 19)

The etymological root of the word trauma means “wound” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.-b). Children who have survived trauma are wounded, and like all wounds, they need to be tended to and treated. Yet without a connection, or access to information that could facilitate that connection, they are often left to care for their own wounds in silence; otherwise, they just continue to fester. Imagine the possibilities if the school experience included being educated on trauma and posttraumatic impacts; imagine if educators could provide more than breadcrumbs of information on trauma and all of its effects. It could be transformative.

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