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Epistemological and other injustices

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Abstract

People of color struggle within academia and in the streets for recognition, freedoms, and life itself. I write this paper in response to a real incident in my department that left me in real doubt about how scholarship, research, and the academy affect that state of affairs. I begin by trying to understand how the ways psychologists understand difference might be epistemologically unjust. Critical Social and Personality Psychology offers a clear indictment of the wrongs done by psychology to the representation of people of color and perhaps more harmfully, the remedies to their clearly disadvantaged situations. When people come together across identities to work against these distortions and harms, conflicts still arise within the alliance. That is the focus of this paper. Pragmatism proves a resource in these circumstances. It adds to Critical Social and Personality Psychology by understanding identity as not only relational but also mutable and multiple. Pragmatism emphasizes the truth claims of broad inclusion and epistemological justice as well as the moral claims. Pragmatists treat these two as inevitably intertwined. This paper explores how pragmatists of color and women address key issues of the behavior, social practices, modes of thought, and challenges of inequalities they/we face. These thinkers have observed that being dominated produces both the epistemological strengths of "double consciousness" and brute vulnerability in the struggle over material and conceptual ownership of the geographies of bodies, public spaces, homes, communities, and even nations and continents. The implications for pragmatist ways of knowing and acting are then considered.

1 | INTRODUCTION

A recent episode reopened for me questions about exclusions from knowledge projects along the lines of race. A group of PhD students of color (SOC) in the program where I teach staged an intervention for White people. They called a community meeting and presented an analysis of injustices they experienced in the program and university. This group described a year of painful group sharing and analysis that brought them to this moment. The content of their intervention can be summarized as follows: (1) White people ignored how the lives of students of color are marked by race; (2) White people lack awareness of the effects of White behaviors and habits on students of color; (3) texts written by White scholars fail to advance knowledge that is faithful to the lives of people of color; and (4) faculty members of color would better understand them and advance their goals. They spoke of micro aggressions that made them feel excluded and demeaned. They argued that a fuller recognition of the bodily, material, epistemological, and moral harms done to people of color requires a form of academic reparations that privileges people of color epistemologically and in actions (Kurtis & Adams, 2015; Martín-Baró, 1994; Phillips, Adams, & Salter, 2015; Salter & Adams, 2013). These include race-conscious changes in admissions and fellowships; a greater commitment by teachers to work with the differential academic knowledge bases of students of color; and hiring, promoting, and tenuring faculty of color. These demands came in the context of persistent faculty efforts to recruit and fund students of color, to work within the administration to obtain positions to hire faculty of color, and to teach and mentor in ways that would support students of color. But clearly, these students thought it was not enough.

The students of color who staged the intervention had encountered many texts from postcolonial, indigenous, critical race theory, and feminist perspectives in their course work. These examined how psychology, the academy, and larger society within the United States and globally perpetuate misrepresentations of the situation of people of color so as to maintain White privilege (Adams, Dobles, Gomez, Kurtis, & Molina, 2015; Fine, 2018; Medina, 2013; Mills, 1997, 1998; Smith, 1999). Critical social psychology, as a knowledge project and as practiced, challenges the disciplinary community of psychology to unmask the continuation of colonial dominance, racism, and sexism and work against the ingrained habits of mind that naturalize and obscure oppression (Adams et al., 2015; Fine, 2018). The hardening of the world into oppositional binaries (c.f. majority world/colonial world; White versus people of color; male/female) keeps our focus on our differences and fixes our identities along one dimension. These oppositions effectively highlight the harms done by domination and challenge mainstream colonial/masculinist/racist epistemologies, habits of mind, and everyday practices. The intervention challenged the White faculty and students to confront more effectively persistent epistemological biases in the field and also the material/behavioral processes that serve White privilege. Giving weight to their argument, empirically, the students of color live in and come from multigenerational histories of unequal and often oppressive condition. Whatever the efforts of psychologists to change that, they were not adequate from the students' perspectives.

Their intervention left me in a position of real doubt. Real doubt, as opposed to the hypothetical doubt of philosophical skepticism, concerns problematic experiences that do not yield to our analyses and actions. It is not general but experiential, specific, and context dependent (Peirce, 1877); it brings us up short in our engagement with the world. People of color (and women) certainly have lived by rules that often deny their equal worth and the validity of their experience. These rules also shape our life courses and legacies. As a White woman, I have experienced the contradictory positions of the female inheritance of invisibility and subservience and the privileged knowing of Whiteness. The students who shared the presentation differed from each other in the particular oppressed categories they occupied (racial, global south, female, gender nonconforming, and maybe others that I do not know). They also differed in terms of the advantages they experienced in the society and the academy. Students of color not involved in the intervention shared both non-Whiteness and their own unique positionalities. The students of color intervention required bonding in solidarity across differences to call attention to the continued racial injustices in the academy and the broader world. They deployed at least tactical essentialism (Spivak, 1988) within a community that saw itself as in alliance against racism. In the wake of the intervention, students and faculty of color not involved in the intervention struggled to bridge the oppositional dichotomy. White students and faculty had to figure out how to maintain

their alliance with people of color in ways that were truthful, ethical, and helpful both intellectually and practically. Students of color had to define a path to maintaining membership in the community while pressing their demands. All had to deal with the pain and alienation expressed and incited by the intervention.

2 | PHILOSOPHICAL PRAGMATISM AS A COMMUNITY AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL RESOURCE

Pragmatists open up thinking about this problem by rejecting dualisms, understanding identity as mobile and as existing within contexts that change, and arguing for the truth value as well as moral necessity of an inclusive community of inquirers and examining the processes that help us move toward these goals. The pragmatist tradition rejects dualism in scientific and philosophical thought thus offering a resource for understanding oppositional categories differently. Compatible with critical social psychology, pragmatists have argued that knowledge becomes more true the larger and more diverse the community of inquirers who contribute to it (c.f. Peirce, 1868/1992; Dewey, 1939). Thus, pragmatists add a knowledge claim to the moral claim for redressing the exclusion of vast swaths of human experience and thought. Pragmatists (c.f. Dewey, 1929; James, 1907/2004) seek useful truths to improve problematic situations. Defining what improvement means requires bringing considerations of values and truth into the same inquiry. By these criteria, the conditions that brought about and continue discriminatory practices against people of color, women, the disabled, and other categories of people call into question the value of practices that contribute to exclusion. Like some critical social psychologists (c.f. Adams et al., 2015), pragmatists view identity as thoroughly relational and held in place by material, economic, and cultural contexts enacted in institutional and customary practices undergirded by personal habits (James, 1890,v.1,pps 121–122; Sullivan, 2006). Relationships and context and thus identity change as a result of pursuing action-oriented inquiry. They change in unexpected ways because of the limitations of the community of inquirers in any particular time and place and because human action and nonhuman forces introduce real, ineradicable uncertainty (c.f. Dewey, 1929). Pragmatists of color in this century (cf. Collins, 2011, 2012; Medina, 2013) employ the relational conception of identity within an intersectional, multidimensional, and mobile understanding of oppression. In this perspective, solidarity of the oppressed across different dimensions can lead to knowledge projects and actions that change existing conditions of oppression. This praxis of knowledge projects and identity growth is entirely in keeping with Liberation Psychology (c.f. Martín-Baró, 1994). In addition, drawing on the history of struggles for Black liberation in the United States, it engages liberation projects of oppressed peoples within globally dominant societies to increase what Collins calls "situated freedoms" (Collins, 2011; p. 107). Addressing the complaints of students of color in the example at hand requires mobile, multidimensional and expansive concepts of both the community of inquirers and identities. Students of color and White students join PhD programs to become contributing, influential members of a community of inquirers and to shape the future of their discipline. Pragmatists draw attention to the important role played by diverse experiences within situated, interest-driven pursuits of knowledge in determining how general, useful, and moral the truths made by the field can be.

The goal of building a community of inquirers inheres in a university department tasked with defining, representing, and teaching common concerns of the field and methods of inquiry and debate. Thus, departments present reasonable targets of contestation about these matters by future members of the discipline. PhD students have a legitimate interest in disciplinary content and composition of the community of inquiry. The students were pointing out a valid limitation of psychology as they encountered it that extends beyond the confines of the PhD program. Like two founders of pragmatism, William James and John Dewey, the program in which the intervention was staged had as its mission the building of a more just and useful psychology that would illuminate the complicated mystery of being a specific self, for the moment in particular situations, that simultaneously makes and is made by the world (Brinkmann, 2011). But that is not in general the way psychology developed in the United States (Danziger, 1990). Both of these founders were first presidents of the American Psychological Association, and then

later fully lapsed psychologists who just no longer found the discipline relevant. Students of color were to some extent following in these footsteps in a program named psychology that tried to move in the hoped for direction. But as a whole, the larger discipline of psychology continues to misrepresent them not only just in specific studies but also as a matter of epistemology clothed as methodology and carried in the precedents of existing psychological knowledge (Fine, 2018; Smith, 1999).

3 | EPISTEMIC FRICTION

The students of color created a situation of epistemic friction (Medina, 2013p. 158–159 italics in the original), a situation in which the heterogeneities and discontinuities in the "experiential space" of people of color and White people (Mills, 1998, p. 27) are brought to the surface by acts of resistance by those who experience injustice in the assumed dominant everyday ways of understanding the world. Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemological injustice illuminates the Students of Color's sense of being wronged by lack of understanding of their experiences and by having White faculty teach them, even if they included readings of scholars of color.

Epistemological injustice has two components: testimonial injustice dependent on prejudices cause the listener to doubt the credibility of the speaker and hermeneutical injustice, arising from a lack of interpretive resources to understand situations and utterances. As a remedy for testimonial injustices, Fricker (2007) prescribed virtuous hearing and perception rooted in efforts toward accuracy and sincerity in interactions, reflection, and representation. Congruent with pragmatist thinking, these virtues have both instrumental and ethical value. They involve seeking useful truths and growth in appreciation of what constitutes the good.

Hermeneutical injustice based on lack of interpretive resources requires rigorous critical scholarship to develop better cultural resources for understanding oppressions. Hermeneutic injustice arises from the shared social understanding of the world seen through the eyes of the dominant group. Fricker (2007) wrote that improving virtuous hearing and perception requires better understanding of experiences wrongly understood in a culture (p. 170). In addition, many scholars need to overcome a lack of hermeneutical resources arising from insufficient attention to the everyday understandings and the scholarship of oppressed groups (Phillips et al., 2015; Teo, 2010). One prevalent defense against ideas from other hermeneutic horizons includes "ghettoizing" scholarship by members of oppressed groups and critical of dominant perspectives as necessary only if one addresses the topic of oppression or Black studies, queer theory, feminist theory, etc. Another defense performed by editors, reviewers, and teachers requires citation of canonical (and not so canonical) sources that exclude scholars of colors and other nondominant groups. This may be a failure of virtuous hearing and perception, but it is as likely to be a matter of habit and in-group norms, sometimes reinforced by publishers' requirements to cite already published articles in the particular journal. A third defense includes fixing the terms of understanding oppressions in ways that deny the complexity of experience. Since people have complex, intersectional identities their contributions may be marginalized when speaking as a woman, a transsexual, a Black person, a Muslim, but valued when aligned with, say, middle class world views or normative scholarship.

Epistemological injustice in psychological research has been characterized as epistemological violence of a personal nature (Teo, 2010) because it is done as an act of interpretation by a researcher to the people being studied. The students similarly experienced the actions and omissions as personal violence committed by the faculty, white students, and the administrators. This sense of personal epistemological violence mixes with structural violence in that actions like hiring new faculty members rest in a larger chain of actors going to the state legislature and the governor and embedded in the political economy. Epistemological violence is backed up by raw power controlling the bodies, spaces, and fortunes of people of color. Faculty members powers positions them to be both epistemologically just and unjust and to influence the composition of the student body and to some extent the discipline. The students of color who intervened were calling the faculty to take up their responsibilities to insure epistemological justice (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013; Teo, 2010) and to connect those responsibilities to responsibility for changes in everyday practices and material conditions.

3.1 | Double consciousness and pragmatic hope

For pragmatists, experience provides the touchstone for useful knowledge that has both moral and empirical content, (c.f. Dewey, 1929, 1939; James, 1909/2004; Peirce, 1868/1992). For diverse experiences to benefit the community of inquirers and the growth of its members, knowledge and identity must have a mutable character rather than deriving from a fixed position. But neither selves nor ways of knowing are always mutable and not by choice. Dubois (1897; 1903/1994) clearly explains the double vision African Americans came to have because White dominance denied their experience while imposing a view of the world that African Americans were forced to live with on pain of not just epistemological exclusion but also loss of life, property, family, community, and well-being. One demand of the SOC intervention was to become creators of ways of seeing and being, following in the lineage of Dubois: "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, -- this longing to attain a self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost (and to become) a co-worker in the kingdom of culture." DuBois (1897). The intervention attempted to claim students of color's standings as coworkers in the creation of culture. As coworkers, White people would be challenged to develop a their own double vision (Alcoff, 2006), one that included an awareness of their unconscious habits of thinking and acting and of the ways that Whiteness smoothed White people's paths to achieving goals and living comfortably in the world as they see it.

Dewey linked the freedom of the subject and the truthfulness of knowledge to everyday practices, beliefs, and values as well as democratic and inclusive institutions. Democratic practices and institutions depend circularly on subjects capable of tolerant attentive engagement with others enabled by social practices and institutions. He explicitly implicated educational institutions in contributing to a democratic way of life, which Dewey thought was required to make for more just societies and to allow people to flourish most fully by increasing the possibility of satisfactions found in social life (Dewey, 1916, 1929, 1939).

3.2 | Enduring challenges of racism and sexism within the academy

Two consistent problems characterize the ways that the U.S. society, including the academy and psychology, continue to impede rather that improve the development of democratic ways of living and thus constrain an understanding of an enlarged collectively experienced identity: (1) misrecognition of dominated groups experiences, representations and reasonings and (2) barriers to equal participation because of potential harms to dominant persons who can occasion even more harms to the nondominants.

3.3 | Pragmatic responses to epistemological injustice

Pragmatist Shannon Sullivan came to accept the concept of White epistemological ignorance (Mills, 1997; Sullivan, 2006, 2014; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Her analysis rests on the pragmatic conception of habit and helps us understand the resistance to reason and evidence through which White epistemological ignorance functions. Convinced of the reality of White epistemological ignorance and the harm done to people of color, Sullivan (2006, 2014) wrestles from within the pragmatist tradition with her White privilege and the inadequacy of reason and argument in overcoming racial injustice. She argues that habits partially unconsciously and partially willfully perpetuate White privilege and ignorance. Habits hamper well-intentioned resistance to racial injustice so that the effects may be more to make White people feel better than to ameliorate the situation of non-Whites. She qualifies the pragmatist understanding of habits as living across skins as much as in them by arguing that Whites must own their habits of White privilege: "While a person's habits are not her own in the sense of being totally manufactured "inside" her, independent of "external" input, they are hers in that they make up who she is and in that she can exercise some influence over their constitution and deployment. While unconscious habits of White privilege will continue to thwart attempts

to expose and change, change can occur and habits of resistance can be developed, but only if a person takes responsibility for her unconscious life(Sullivan, 2006; p. 197).

Sullivan's argument helps relocate pragmatism in a greater recognition of the historical weight of White dominance. She broadens the pragmatist tradition concerning the inequalities of race. Yet turning to the individually owned unconscious moves away from pragmatist transactional conceptions of self and the need for an inclusive community. It also fails to interrogate the Whiteness/non-Whiteness dichotomy.

4 | MULTIPLE OPPRESSIONS, COMMUNITY, AND SITUATED FREEDOMS

African American scholars have made claims on the heritage of American pragmatism by rooting the history of Black people in the United States in the same conditions and aspirations that spawned Peirce, James, and Dewey, and later Rorty (Holden, in press; Molesworth, 2012; Pascal, 1971; West, 1989, 1999; pp. 143–212; 2001). They were drawn to the work of James and Dewey especially because of the unfinished and nonunitary conception of truth as something that happens to an idea and because of its democratic and humanist aspirations. They also constantly critiqued the glaring obstacles to pragmatic ideals posed by race relations in the United States. In doing so, they broadened the hermeneutic resources of pragmatism. They drew on the everyday struggles as well as the political activism of African Americans as much or more than scholarly pragmatism. In analyzing the plight of the "American Negro," they also developed economic critiques of capitalism.[1] For example, Dubois championed a form of cooperative economics within a socialist framework (reviewed in Nembhard, 2014). West (1999, 2001) used Marxism to complicate his analysis of racism.

Other authors embraced intersectionality as a necessary concern of pragmatic inquiry into inequality (Collins, 2011, 2012; Medina, 2013). Male African American pragmatists identified the constraints on identity formation arising from institutionally, normatively, and legally enforced histories of domination anchored in American history. As a Black feminist scholar, Collins (2011) argued that the writings and political work of 19th century African American women who were intellectuals, writers, and political activists should also be considered part of the pragmatist tradition. From their location as women among Black male activists/theorists and as Black people among White women and men, they inserted a gender analysis into debates about race and class in social and political thought. They sought new practices and epistemologies that made multiple the understandings of structural identities. These Black women activists were concerned with using intelligence to address real and obdurate problems through collective inquiry and action in order to change the oppressive and discriminatory conditions of life. American pragmatism is a useful resource because of its ideas of the complex, multiply emergent and relational social self, and the political and experiential potential of social groups (Collins, 2011).

Dewey especially brought the structural issue of class under pragmatic scrutiny (Dewey, 1932/2008; 1936/2008). However, classical pragmatists' inattention to race, and often gender, means that the pragmatist tradition needs the works of scholars of color and intersectionality. When academic discourses of pragmatism regain a social movement focus on race, class, gender, and sexuality, they bring the confluence of multiple embodied ignorances and conditions of disadvantage and privilege into the world of collective action. The scholarship and actions of 19th century Black women in a slave-owning nation in which women also were denied full legal status exemplify the epistemic and practical resources such ignored voices can bring. One's position in the fray matters both discursively and conditionally.

Once we recognize the multiple and divergent positions of privilege and domination and the ways that the world looks different from these differently situated positions; the idea of achieving democratic consensus needs to be replaced with positions that can bring about improvements provisionally. "Situated freedoms" (Collins, 2011; p. 107) can be achieved by changing conditions in ways that may not be understood similarly by different actors. Thus, the pragmatist understanding of social action and social order would need more fully to encompass understandings of the power dynamics that structure groups, communities, polities, and society. Black women's visionary pragmatism

challenges the pragmatic method of open-ended action-oriented social inquiry by invoking principled commitments to particular social outcomes. It embraces and works with the "creative tension between the desirable, the possible, the probable and the practical" (Collins, 2011; p.108).

Like Sullivan (2014), Collins (2011, 2012) invites an open-ended critical scrutiny of ideas, actions, and their consequences. Rather than focus on the cultivation of critique and self-examination, Collins turns to a reinvigoration of the concept of community as potentially socially expansive and collective action as multifaceted and arising from different visions. A less unitary more mobile and multiple concept of community derived from fusing the insights from pragmatism and from intersectionality might develop a construct of community that "provides a template for describing the actual power relations as people live them and conceptualize them"(Collins, 2012; p. 445), thus anchoring the "universal of community as a construct that is always understood through an emerging set of particulars that attend to intersecting power relations" (Collins, 2012; p. 446). Community arouses emotions and has different and conflicting meanings that can be experienced and worked with in the practical living of community life and in discourses expressing commitments and motivating action. Pragmatists link participatory democratic processes with community emergence, as well as the construction of relational selves (c.f. Dewey, 1939). Community supplies a transactional idea and social/geographic space that mobilizes multiple social identities, relations, and contradictions (Collins, 2010, 2011, 2012). As a field of intersecting structural vectors of power, differently situated groups and individuals can seek possible situated freedoms. The emotionality, symbolic resonance, and power saturated dynamics within the unfinished conceptual and lived field of community can be mobilized around both egalitarianism and difference, giving space and language for creative action. "In this sense, participating in building a community is simultaneously political, for negotiating power differences within a group, dynamic for negotiating individual and collective goals, and aspirational" (Collins, 2012; p. 448). Collins presents a version of community that emphasizes power differentials and inequality but that can be mobilized for more just and democratic purposes.

4.1 | What is next after epistemological friction?

Pragmatism places knowledge projects within the process of trying to understand the world so as to change unjust and unsatisfying conditions. These are collective projects that are inseparable from collective activism. The students of color intervention may have increased already existing courses, invited lectures and informal reading groups that give space to voices of people of color and other nondominant groups. Faculty, students, and alumni continue to produce research and publications expanding the representations of diverse realities and advocating for excluded groups (c.f. Fine, 2018; Lee, 2018; Payne & Bryant, 2018; Torre & Ayala, 2009; Saegert, 2018). But these efforts are not new. The affect expressed and aroused by students of color suggests an emotional rawness, something held at a distance by the discourses on epistemological injustice and epistemological virtues. The indictment was a starker claim to embodied damage. Indeed, as Ruth Anna Putnam (2017) insisted in her brief for a pragmatist version of one world despite different experiences: "To take your problems-where you stand as a representative of humanity—seriously, I must take it for granted that the toe I would step on, were I not to take care, is the toe in which you would feel pain." (Putnam, R.A., 2017; p. 15). "...So to take pragmatism seriously is to take oneself to be living in a world that one shares with others, others with whom one cooperates in inquiry, others with whom one may compete for scarce resources or with whom one may cooperate in seeking to achieve common goals." (p. 17). To this group of students of color, the toes on their feet were the ones the people around them stepped on. The friction sparked by the intervention was as much an effort to change power relations and the conditions of life that our embodied differences bear as an effort to make the audience aware of their experiences. Students wanted both acknowledgement and actual redress of hurts and inequalities they have inherited and continue to live. Thus, ignorance among White faculty of these pains was not only an instance of epistemological injustice. As Mills (1997) pointed out, the ignorance of oppressors of the causes of the pains is a more fundamental injustice meant to continue to assure that the oppressed can continue to be subject to real material loss and pain. The students of color's intervention was an effort not only to

have their stories and voices heard but also to make sure that the toes they stepped on are the toes the audience felt. Beyond the goal of changing the balance of power within the PhD program, the students wanted the actual conditions of their education to change in ways that included hiring initiatives and redistribution of resources. It seems doubtful that practicing epistemic virtues alone would be adequate.

Given the austerity practices and multiple departmental reorganizations at the university and the legal turn against affirmative action, those demands are very hard to realize. Thus, the implications are to redouble already existing commitments to an activist form of scholarship directed toward justice that is epistemological, relational, and material. We as humans, members of society, and of the university need to change the context that produces injustice. Part of that effort includes changing ourselves personally and as a community to be more effective at the different levels of personal relations, community processes, pedagogy/scholarship, university politics, and politics in the broader world. We must recognize that our personal humanity is larger than our scholarly selves and lives not inside us but in our relationships.

4.2 | Coda

At a recent doctoral dissertation defense, the author, a Korean–American, reported the findings of empirical research conducted on and with immigrant delivery cyclists caught in a multitude of oppressions in New York City (Lee, 2018). Summarizing the most valuable lessons he had learned in the course of research, he observed that (1) doing this work is painful and changes you more than you can foresee and (2) both the changing and the work itself can only be done in a community. Among those attending the dissertation defense were the students of color who had staged the intervention described earlier, as well as many of the faculty and White students who had been in the audience at that event. Also attending the defense were delivery cyclists and Asian American political activists who worked with the cyclists and the researcher to improve working conditions in the city. The emotional response to his presentation expressed shared appreciations of his struggles and successes that were in some way also our own.

ENDNOTE

[1]Dewey's writings on capitalism during the Great Depression expressed profound concern about its implications for his vision of a creative democracy. He also held open the possibility that American capitalism might have within itself the resources to ameliorate the problems of inequality that undermined the development of democratic citizens (c.f. Dewey, 1929/2008). As the Depression progressed, he more openly called for a socialist alternative while arguing for a specifically American kind of socialism (c.f. Dewey, John (1934a/2008, 1934c/2008). He also rejected Soviet brand communism for its vanguardism, historical determinism, and suppression of dissent, among other ways in which it went counter to the key tenets of pragmatism (1934b/2008). This writing is less well-known as it appeared in letters to FDR, commentaries on other writers, etc. but less so in his major works.

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