

## “EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVERSITY” IN EDUCATION: PHILOSOPHICAL AND DIDACTIC CONSIDERATIONS<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** A recent but widespread view holds that ethnic or cultural groups have their own distinctive epistemologies, that epistemologies are also gendered, and that these have been largely ignored by the dominant social group. A corollary of this view states that educational research is pursued within a framework that represents particular assumptions about knowledge and knowledge production that reflect the interests and historical traditions of this dominant group. The call for epistemological diversity becomes problematic when it conflates epistemological pluralism and epistemological relativism. More often than not, in such arguments for different, diverse, alternative, decolonized or demasculinized epistemologies some relevant philosophical issues remain unresolved, if not unaddressed altogether. What exactly do these claims about epistemological diversity mean? Do these ways of establishing knowledge stand up to critical interrogation? Moreover, how do they relate to traditional epistemological distinctions, e.g. between knowledge and belief and between descriptive and normative inquiry, and to epistemologically essential components like warrant/justification and truth? This paper examines some of the mistakes and misconceptions involved in appeals to diverse epistemologies. The concern is not just whether or not a word (‘epistemology’) is being misused, but also (and importantly) whether or not the issues dealt with in epistemology (a complex field that has evolved over a long period of time) are being given short shrift, if not ignored altogether.

**Keywords:** Educational research; epistemological diversity; pluralism; relativism.

### ‘Epistemological diversity’

My concern in this article is to demonstrate that so-called ‘epistemological diversity’, an idea frequently employed in postcolonial and feminist theory (within

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educational discourse and elsewhere), refers neither to a multitude of truths nor to an ‘anything goes’ conception of justification, but rather to different experiences connected to particular social locations. In this sense, reference to ‘epistemologies’ – and reference to “plural systems of knowledges” (De Sousa Santos et al. 2008, p. xxxix) or to indigenous, local or subaltern ways of knowing – is not only unhelpful but also misleading.

The ideas of epistemological diversity and diverse epistemologies have a rich recent history. In Aaron Pallas’s discussion of the ways and possibilities of preparing doctoral students for ‘epistemological diversity’, he writes, “One of the most confusing developments in educational research over the past quarter-century has been the proliferation of epistemologies – beliefs about what counts as knowledge in the field of education, what is evidence of a claim, and what counts as warrant for that evidence” (Pallas 2001, p. 6). According to Pallas, novice researchers and seasoned academics alike are experiencing difficulties in keeping up with the “cacophony of diverse epistemologies” (ibid.), like foundationalism, rationalism, naturalism, empiricism, positivism, postpositivism, antifoundationalism, pragmatism, relativism, feminist standpoint epistemology, postmodernism, constructivism, and the like. Pallas considers these ‘epistemologies’ to be fundamental to the production of, and engagement with educational research. “Since epistemologies undergird all phases of the research process, engaging with epistemology is integral to learning the craft of research”. Furthermore, “epistemologies shape scholars’ abilities to apprehend and appreciate the research of others”, and it is this appreciation that is “a prerequisite for the scholarly conversations that signify a field’s collective learning” (ibid.). Pallas continues: “If educational researchers cannot understand and engage with one another, both within and across at least educational research communities, the enterprise is doomed to failure” (ibid., p. 7). Therefore, in order to avoid an ongoing pattern of epistemological narrow-mindedness and single-mindedness, Pallas emphasizes the need on the part of educational researchers “to engage with multiple epistemological perspectives to the point that members of different educational research practice can understand one another, despite, or perhaps through their differences”. Pallas considers the preparation of “novice educational researchers for such epistemological diversity” to be “one of the most important things that faculties of research universities can do” (ibid.).

In their defence of what they call the “ecology of knowledges” Boaventura de Sousa Santos, João Arriscado Nunes and Maria Paula Meneses, too, speak of the immense “epistemological diversity of the world” (De Sousa Santos et al. 2008, pp. xix, xlvi). However, on the basis of the premise that “there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice” (ibid., p. xix), they relate this appeal not to different normative theories of knowledge, but rather to diversity across ethnicities, cultures, etc. (see also Green 2008, for a similar approach). They argue that although “there has been a growing recognition of the cultural diversity of the world” over the last few decades, “with current controversies focusing on the terms of such recognition

[...] the same cannot be said of the recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world, that is, of the diversity of knowledge systems underlying the practices of different social groups across the globe” (De Sousa Santos et al. 2008, p. xix).

Beginning with the assumption that “cultural diversity and epistemological diversity are reciprocally embedded”, the authors’ intention is to show that “the reinvention of social emancipation is premised upon replacing the ‘monoculture of scientific knowledge’ by an ‘ecology of knowledges’”. In other words, “far from refusing science”, the “alternative epistemology” envisaged here “places the latter in the context of diversity of knowledges existing in contemporary societies” (ibid., p. xx). This “ecology of knowledges is an invitation to the promotion of non-relativistic dialogues among knowledges, granting ‘equality of opportunities’ to the different kinds of knowledge engaged in ever broader epistemological disputes aimed both at maximizing their respective contributions to build a more democratic and just society and at decolonizing knowledge and power” (ibid.).

This exemplifies the recent but widespread view that ethnic or cultural groups have their own distinctive epistemologies, that epistemologies are also gendered, and that these have been largely ignored by the dominant social group. A corollary of this view states that educational research is pursued within a framework that represents particular assumptions about knowledge and knowledge production that reflect the interests and historical traditions of this dominant group. For example, in opposition to “the monochrome logic of Western epistemology” (Odora Hoppers 2002a, p. vii), Catherine Odora Hoppers draws attention to the existence of “plural manifestations of epistemology” and endorses indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous theories of knowledge (Odora Hoppers 2002b, p. 18). In her book *Technofeminism* Judy Wajcman (2004) makes a similar plea for ‘epistemological diversity’ and for the coexistence of a multitude of truths. Other popular, related terms include ‘democratic epistemology’ (Nkomo 2000, p. 54), ‘multicultural epistemologies’ (Banks 1998), ‘African’/‘Afrocentric epistemology’ (Asante 1990; 2005; Bakari 1997; Teffo 2000, p. 112), ‘feminist epistemology’ (Harding 1987; 1996; 2002; Code 2012; Schumann 2016), ‘Chicana feminist epistemology’ (Delgado Bernal 1998), ‘Afrocentric feminist epistemology’ (Hill Collins 1990), etc. – alongside references to ‘sexist’/‘androcentric’ and ‘racist epistemologies’ (Braidotti 1991; 1993; 2006; Scheurich, Young 1997, respectively), as well as ‘ecology of knowledges’ (De Sousa Santos et al. 2008), ‘women’s’ or ‘gendered ways of knowing’ (Belenky et al. 1986; Harding 1996), ‘Islamization of knowledge’ (Dangor 2005), and ‘African’ or ‘native ways of knowing’ (Dei 2002; 2004; Barnhardt, Kawagley 2005, respectively).

For the remainder of this section, I will concentrate on the arguments advanced by De Sousa Santos et al (2008): “Conceptions of knowledge, of what it means to know, of what counts as knowledge, and how that knowledge is produced are as diverse as the [different] cosmologies and normative frameworks [...]”. They assert that all “social practices involve knowledge” and that the “production of knowledge is, in itself, a social practice” (xxi). The authors consider “recognition

of the epistemological diversity of the world” to be “inseparable from the diversity of the cosmologies that divide and organize the world in ways that differ from Western cosmology and its offshoot, modern science” (ibid.). They contend that epistemological diversity is “neither the simple reflection or epiphenomenon of ontological diversity or heterogeneity nor a range of culturally specific ways of expressing a fundamentally unified world”. There exists “no essential or definitive way of describing, ordering, and classifying processes, entities, and relationships in the world”. In fact, “different modes of knowing, being irremediably partial and situated, will have different consequences and effects on the world”. The authors take the “very capacity of the modern sciences to create new entities and in this way to enact an ontological politics [...] – with the effect, intentional or not, of increasing this heterogeneity of the world – [...] to support this conception”. De Sousa Santos et al understand this to give “shape to a robust realism and to a strong objectivity, a clear awareness of the need to accurately and precisely identify the conditions in which knowledge is produced and its assessment on the basis of its observed or expected consequences”. This, they contend, “allows a rigorous account of the situatedness, partiality, and constructedness of all knowledges, while rejecting relativism as an epistemological and moral stance” (ibid., p. xxxi).

It is not at all clear how an appeal to “the situatedness [...] of all knowledges” *can* avoid the charge of relativism, how “partiality” is to be reconciled with “strong objectivity”, or “constructedness of all knowledges” with a “robust realism”. “That which exists – knowledge, technological objects, buildings, roads, cultural objects – exists *because* it is constructed through situated practices”, according to De Sousa Santos et al. They see the pertinent distinction to be “not between the real and the constructed, but between that which is well constructed, which successfully resists the situations in which its consistency, solidity, and robustness are put to the test, and that which is badly constructed, and hence vulnerable to criticism or erosion”. They take this to constitute “the difference that allows a distinction to be made between facts (well constructed) and artifacts (badly constructed)” (ibid.).

In her plea for an epistemically diverse undergraduate curriculum, Kathy Lockett, too, claims that students should be encouraged to “understand knowledge as socially constructed, historically and culturally specific, and that their own judgements are contextually contingent” (Lockett 2001, p. 32). But what is the status of this particular knowledge claim? Is it also historically and culturally specific? Is Lockett’s judgement also contextually contingent? There is clearly a grain of truth in constructivism. Some facts are socially constructed, the results of human description and designation – like pass grades in tests or exams, codes of ethics, laws, speed limits, standards of etiquette, culinary recipes, etc.: contingent facts that emanate from our social practices. Constructivism errs, however, in saying that all facts, including historical and scientific facts, are human constructs. As a pedagogy, I suggest, constructivism has two major, related shortcomings. It degrades a fundamental educational task – that of transmission of knowledge.

Furthermore, like postmodernism, constructivism is not only misleading but also potentially dangerous, in that it gives people (educators as well as learners) a false sense of empowerment and authority. Contrary to what their advocates have contended, neither approach is emancipatory. In fact, both as a pedagogy and as a learning theory, constructivism is likely to be disturbingly disempowering. The failure of outcomes-based education in most parts of the world, with its devaluation of subject-based knowledge, knowledge developed in the past and of knowledge for its own sake, is testimony to the plausibility of this judgement<sup>2</sup>. But suppose we accept this constructivist framework: could we not then distinguish between knowledge (well constructed) and superstition (badly constructed), between science (well constructed) and pseudo-science (badly constructed)?

More often than not, however, in such arguments for different, diverse, alternative, decolonized or demasculinized epistemologies some relevant philosophical issues remain unresolved, if not unaddressed altogether. What exactly do these claims about epistemological diversity mean? Do these ways of establishing knowledge stand up to critical interrogation? Moreover, how do they relate to traditional epistemological distinctions, e.g. between knowledge and belief and between descriptive and normative inquiry, and to epistemologically essential components like warrant/justification and truth?

### Some essential distinctions

Jon Levisohn and Denis Phillips explain that, especially in the educational literature on multicultural reforms, the language of epistemology has been employed in some kind of rhetorical inflation, thus obscuring rather than clarifying important issues and distinctions (Levisohn, Phillips 2012, p. 40). Traditionally, ‘epistemology’ refers to ‘theory/logic of knowledge’ (*episteme* – knowledge; *logos* – word). Over the centuries, beginning with Socrates and Plato, epistemologists have reached a general agreement about a basic division, that between knowledge and belief. The present concern is not just whether or not a word (‘epistemology’) is being misused, but also (and importantly) whether or not the issues dealt with in epistemology (a complex field that has evolved over a long period of time) is being given short shrift, if not ignored altogether. A related distinction has been made between descriptive and normative inquiry, regarding beliefs and knowledge. “If these distinctions are

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<sup>2</sup> This is not the place for a detailed critique of these approaches. My sketchy remarks here are unlikely to persuade anyone that constructivism, for example, should be rejected. They merely serve to underline my misgivings about bestowing special status in education on a theoretical orientation that is deeply problematic. As Heila Lotz-Sisitka claims, ‘education has a critical role to play in preparing children *to live in the world*’ (Lotz-Sisitka 2009, p. 71; emphasis added). This arguably requires that those who so prepare children live there, too. Frankly, I cannot see constructivism making a substantial contribution to this preparation process.

blurred”, the authors write, “then all rational argument is potentially undermined, including the very arguments [advocates of epistemological diversity] employ” (ibid., p. 42). In order to establish some kind of conceptual clarity, Levisohn and Phillips set out the following distinct understandings:

- 1) epistemology as a normative field of inquiry,
- 2) an epistemology as a normative theory of knowledge,
- 3) an epistemology as a descriptive account of how people acquire beliefs, and
- 4) an epistemology as a description of a set of beliefs.

The first of these refers to the classical philosophical understanding of knowledge. According to Socrates, in Plato’s *Meno*: “True opinions, as long as they stay, are splendid and do all the good in the world, but they will not stay long – off and away they run out of the soul of mankind, so they are not worth much until you fasten them up with the reasoning of cause and effect. [...] When they are fastened up, first they become knowledge, secondly they remain; and that is why knowledge is valued more than right opinion, and differs from right opinion by this bond” (Plato 1970, p. 65). And in Plato’s *Theaetetus* the (rhetorical) question is, “how can there ever be knowledge without an account and right belief?” (Plato 1978, p. 909).

Relevant distinctions are made here between knowledge and belief, between mere belief and well-warranted (or adequately justified) belief, and between true belief and justified true belief. The inquiry here is essentially normative, for example, evaluating beliefs and belief strategies, investigating what beliefs are trustworthy enough to be acted on, how researchers should validate their findings, what forms of argument and what kinds of justification are acceptable, who (if anyone) counts as an epistemic authority, etc. This is, incidentally, not an essentially or exclusively ‘Western’ philosophical understanding of knowledge. It should be noted, for example, that in Yoruba, too, pertinent distinctions are made between *gbàgbó* (belief; the subjective, private or personal component of knowledge) and *mò* (knowledge in the sense of ‘knowledge-that’). Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo observe that “*gbàgbó* that may be verified is *gbàgbó* that may become *mò*. *Gbàgbó* that is not open to verification and must therefore be evaluated on the basis of justification alone (*àlàyé, papò*, etc.) cannot become *mò* and consequently its *òótó* [truth] must remain indeterminate” (Hallen, Sodipo 1997, p. 81).

The second point concerns different epistemologies within the philosophical tradition. Levisohn and Phillips distinguish between foundationalist (e.g., rationalist, empiricist, and positivist) and non-foundationalist (e.g., pragmatist) epistemologies. Here, too, the inquiry is normative. As the authors inform us, all these coexist because philosophers still disagree about them, even though they are in agreement that only one position can be right. This is not the case with appeals to ‘diverse epistemologies’ – which (as their defenders contend) are all equally respectable and valid.

The third general use of ‘epistemology’ serves an essentially descriptive function – and belongs less in philosophy than in the so-called ‘sociology of knowledge’

(which might be called, more fittingly, the ‘sociology of belief’) and perhaps in the psychology of learning. The fourth sense of ‘epistemology’ is also descriptive, in that it is “sometimes extended to [...] encompass description of the specific *content* of beliefs that are held, or are accorded the status of being knowledge, by ethnic or cultural groups [...]. In this [...] usage, then, multicultural epistemologies are simply *those differing sets of beliefs held by different communities*” (Levisohn, Phillips 2012, p. 54).

The authors point out, plausibly I think, that within the *descriptive* senses, the notion of diverse epistemologies is unproblematic – given the interpretation of ‘epistemologies’ as ‘beliefs’ or ‘belief systems’. There is, however, no coherent *normative* sense in which the existence of diverse epistemologies (multicultural or otherwise) can be affirmed. (This is also the argumentational thread that runs through Phillips 2012, where he provides a critical review of several representative accounts of epistemological diversity that actually constitute misuses of the term ‘epistemology’).

### What is ‘epistemological diversity’?

Harvey Siegel examines a number of senses in which ‘epistemological diversity’ is often used:

- beliefs and belief systems,
- methodological diversity; diversity in research method(ology),
- diversity of research questions,
- diversity of researchers and their cultures, and
- epistemologies and epistemological perspectives.

Although the use of ‘epistemology’ in the first four of these examples is arguably inappropriate (in that philosophers do not understand ‘epistemology’ in any of these ways), the use of ‘diversity’ is uncontroversial. Beliefs and belief systems vary, as do research questions and research methods (although Siegel is quick to point out that this should not be taken to imply some kind of methodological relativism, as advocated – for example – by Dani Nabudere<sup>3</sup>). Similarly, there is considerable variation in researchers’ backgrounds, their individual, ethnic and cultural identities, their interests, objectives and priorities. The ‘diversity’ in question becomes more controversial, and indeed problematic, in relation to ‘epistemologies and epistemological perspectives’. This, says Siegel, goes to the “heart of the matter” (Siegel 2012, p. 73).

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<sup>3</sup> Nabudere asserts that the “establishment of the Pan-African University should have as its overall goal the provision of opportunities for higher and advanced education for students and adult learners in the context of a new African-based epistemology and methodology” (Nabudere 2003, p. 1; see also pp. 8ff. and 23). The point Siegel wishes to make, I think, is that compelling judgements can be made about the quality of competing research methodologies. Some are better than others, and some are plainly invalid.

According to Pallas and others, critical evaluation of these different epistemological perspectives is impossible, and – if it *were* possible – undesirable or inappropriate. The question is *why* this should be so. Siegel examines this from a variety of angles.

Is it *epistemologically suspect* to criticize the epistemology of a particular community of practice, approach to research, or subordinated group? (Ibid., p. 75) This is not obviously the case. According to Siegel, epistemologies “that deserve to count as legitimate epistemological alternatives must prove their mettle in the give-and-take of scholarly disputation. Some will survive such disputation, others will not” (ibid.). Furthermore, it is doubtful whether epistemologies can be attributed to such communities or groups in a straight-forward one-to-one fashion, given the considerable variation within these communities, groups and subgroups. Siegel perceives a “problematic essentialism” in any such mapping (ibid., p. 78).

Is it *morally suspect* to criticize the epistemology of a particular community of practice, approach to research, or subordinated group? (Ibid.) Even if we *could* attribute epistemologies to different communities, groups and subgroups, Siegel does not consider criticism to be morally problematic: treating members’ ideas with respect means taking them seriously, by subjecting them to due critical consideration and interrogation, rather than ignoring them. Moreover, if disputation and evaluation follow relevant moral principles, if they are fair-minded, non-question-begging, neutral (in the sense not of ‘global’ but of ‘local neutrality’) and rational, then it is difficult to see how such criticism could be morally suspect.

Is it inevitably an *abuse of power* to criticize? (Ibid., p. 79) In other words, are these moral principles or criteria not themselves the creation and stipulation of the dominant social group? According to Siegel, hegemonic abuse of power is rejected on the basis of critical evaluation and compelling argument. It is not clear how any rejection of hegemonic imposition, any critique of dominant social power (for an example of such rejection and critique, see Code 2012, p. 93), can be coherent and consistent without advocates of alternative epistemologies employing these “tools of mainstream philosophical thought” (Siegel 2012, p. 80).

Is it *pragmatically suspect* to criticize the epistemology of a particular community of practice, or approach to research, or subordinated group? (Ibid., p. 81) Should education researchers, to the greatest extent possible, not be able to interact with all available research – mainstream and alternative alike? Siegel considers such all-inclusive engagement worth rejecting for ‘equally pragmatic’ reasons – lack of truth-content, lack of relevance, time constraints, and the like.

The call for epistemological diversity becomes problematic when it conflates epistemological pluralism and epistemological relativism, “which can only hamper the important project of rethinking the graduate education of future education researchers” (ibid., p. 83). For example, while Wajcman (2004) does recognize the dimension of epistemological relativism, she does not problematize it. Instead, she pleads both for epistemological diversity and for allowing several truths to exist



alongside each other. The following section examines the problem of relativism in the light of feminist critiques of epistemology, and feminist standpoint epistemology in particular.

### **Feminist critiques of epistemology, and the problem of relativism**

“The starting point of standpoint theory”, writes Sandra Harding, “is that in societies stratified by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, or some other such politics shaping the very structure of a society, the *activities* of those at the top both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them” (Harding 2002, p. 357). She asserts that “the standpoint claims that all knowledge attempts are socially situated and [...] some of these objective social locations are better than others as starting points for knowledge projects challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions of the scientific world view and the Western thought that takes science as its model of how to produce knowledge” (ibid., p. 359). Standpoint theorists argue that thought, for example educational research, should start off “from the lives of marginalized peoples; beginning in those determinate, objective locations in any social order will generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives”. The idea is starting off research from the lives of women “will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order”. The lives and experiences of women “provide the ‘grounds’ for this knowledge, though these clearly do not provide foundations for knowledge in the conventional philosophical sense” (ibid., pp. 359-360).

Harding does not illustrate or provide further argument for her claim that starting off research from women’s lives “will generate less partial and distorted accounts [...] also of men’s lives and of the whole social order”. In a related move, she maintains that “standpoint theory does not advocate – nor is it doomed to – relativism”. It takes issue with “the idea that all social situations provide equally useful resources for learning about the world and against the idea that they all set equally strong limits on knowledge”. In opposition to universalist thinking, “standpoint theory is not committed to such a claim as a consequence of rejecting universalism”. It “provides arguments for the claim that some social situations are scientifically better than others as places from which to start off knowledge projects, and those arguments must be defeated if the charge of relativism is to gain plausibility” (ibid., 364). Harding goes on to distinguish between judgmental (or epistemological) relativism and sociological relativism. The former “is anathema to any scientific project, and feminist ones are no exception”, whereas the latter “permits us to acknowledge that different people hold different beliefs”. According to Harding, what is “at issue in rethinking objectivity is the different matter of *judgmental* or epistemological relativism”. She maintains

that standpoint theories are “neither hold nor are doomed” to judgemental or epistemological relativism (ibid., pp. 364-365). Harding claims that both “moral and cognitive forms of judgmental relativism have determinate histories; they appear as intellectual problems at certain times in history in only some cultures and only for certain groups of people”. However, she does not consider relativism to be “fundamentally a problem that emerges from feminist or any other thought that starts in marginalized lives; it is one that emerges from the thought of the dominant groups” (ibid., p. 365).

It may be correct that this problem does not *emerge* from feminist and other thought, but this does not mean that it does not present a *challenge* to these. Harding continues: “Judgmental relativism is sometimes the most that dominant groups can stand to grant their critics – ‘OK, your claims are valid for you, but mine are valid for me’” (ibid., p. 365). In a footnote (ibid., p. 382 n. 39), she approvingly refers to Mary G. Belenky and her colleagues (Belenky et al. 1986), who have pointed out that the phrase ‘It’s my opinion...’ has different meanings for the young men and women they have studied. For men this phrase means ‘I’ve got a right to my opinion’, but for women it means ‘It’s just my opinion’. Even if this study is accepted as providing ‘evidence’<sup>4</sup>, it is hardly enough to make any sweeping global claims about the social situatedness of knowledge and truth. As Levisohn and Phillips have pointed out, “Even for a self-proclaimed standpointist like Harding, the most we can say is that while different cultural standpoints play a significant role in the construction of knowledge, fundamentally *we all play by the same normative epistemic rules*” (Levisohn, Phillips 2012, p. 61).

Lorraine Code asserts that “Feminist critiques of epistemology, of the philosophy of science, and of social science have demonstrated that the ideals of the autonomous reasoner – the dislocated disinterested observer – and the epistemologies they inform are artifacts of a small, privileged group of educated, usually prosperous white men” (2012, p. 91). This is not at all obvious, one might respond. First, there is no such homogeneous group, nor has there ever been one; second, one of the few matters (if not the only matter!) epistemologists have reached agreement about is the basic distinction between knowledge and belief, where the former (propositional knowledge or ‘knowledge-that’) is anchored by the objective component of, i.e. the truth condition. Could feminists coherently and consistently reject this distinction?

Code presents the case against “traditional ‘S-knows-that-*p*’ epistemologies, with their ideals of pure objectivity and value-neutrality” (ibid., pp. 85, 86), on the grounds that epistemology would look quite different if it took as its starting

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<sup>4</sup> There are substantial reasons for doubting this. It has been pointed out by Susan Haack (1998, p. 125) that the authors informed their subjects prior to the interviews that they would be participating in a study dedicated to finding out more about their unique ‘women’s ways of knowing’. This makes it virtually impossible to know whether the responses given were not biased by the authors’ suggestion.

focus cases of ‘knowledge by acquaintance’, where the subjectivity and positionality of the knower might turn out to be epistemically relevant. But *are* subjectivity and positionality really relevant in most epistemologically important inquiries? Without wishing to belittle the sometime significance of ‘knowing a person’ etc., I suspect not.

According to Code, “A realistic commitment to achieving empirical advocacy that engages situated analyses of the subjectivities of both the knower and (where appropriate) the known is both desirable and possible” (ibid., p. 97). Code’s own case study, John Philippe Rushton’s empirical investigation into the purported superiority of Orientals over whites, and of whites over blacks, arguably fails to illustrate what she intends (see Rushton 2000). Contrary to what she asserts, ‘Rushton knows that blacks are inferior’ does *not* invalidate the ‘S-knows-that-*p*’ formula. ‘Rushton *claims* to know that blacks are inferior’ would be a more appropriate rendition<sup>5</sup>. It is a knowledge claim that is fairly swiftly disposed with, on the grounds of adequacy of evidence (or lack thereof), as well as arbitrary construction of a scale of superiority/inferiority.

### The argument from epistemic injustice

Malegapuru Makgoba’s account of “the changing and competitive world of knowledge, values and norms’ and his view that ‘knowledge, values and ideals’ are always, and necessarily, those of a particular society” (2003, p. 1) betray a comprehensive relativism, epistemological, cultural and moral. As they stand, they are logically questionable and epistemically inconsistent. Most significantly, Makgoba’s assertions about the ‘changing’ world of knowledge and knowledge being societally relative are presented as knowledge-claims and – as such – presumably as unchanging and as universal, or at least as transsocietal. Similarly, when Annette Lansink argues, following Harding, that “it should be acknowledged that all knowledge is culturally local” (2004, p. 133), the obvious rejoinder is: What about this particular piece of knowledge, then? Is it also ‘culturally local’? If so, why should anyone who is not a member of Lansink’s ‘culture’ be impressed by this claim? If it is not, i.e. if this is indeed a translocal knowledge claim, then why should there not be other knowledge that transcends culture and locality? Moreover, if values and norms are essentially subject to change as well as relative to particular societies and cultures, then one could not consistently condemn human rights abuses, racist and sexist

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<sup>5</sup> Either way, it would appear that this is an incorrect attribution. When Rushton was asked during a live televised debate at the University of Western Ontario in 1989 whether he believed in racial superiority, he denied this emphatically. He added, “from an evolutionary point of view, superiority can only mean adaptive value – if it even means this. And we’ve got to realize that each of these populations is perfectly, beautifully adapted to their own ancestral environments” (Knudtson 1991, p. 187).

attitudes, let alone unjust legislation, in societies other than one's own. On the other hand, the moral injunction to respect other cultures' values and norms is clearly transcultural and *unchanging*, and therefore contradicts Makgoba's account. And if democracy and justice transcend culture, as is (correctly) implied by De Sousa Santos et al (2008, p. xx), then why should propositional knowledge not transcend social and cultural practices?

But does the account of knowledge and epistemology I endorse here not amount to a denial of epistemic justice? Take, as a further possible example, Siegel's no-holds-barred response to Claudia Ruitenberg's question regarding "indigenous African women's epistemologies" (during a roundtable discussion held in San Francisco in April 2010; see Code et al. 2012, p. 137): "They're not epistemologies. If students don't understand that by the end of their graduate education, they haven't been well educated" (ibid., p. 138). Could this possibly constitute some kind of epistemic harm *vis-à-vis* indigenous African women?

"Epistemic injustice", argues Miranda Fricker, is a distinct kind of injustice. She distinguishes between two kinds, 'testimonial injustice' and 'hermeneutical injustice', each of which consists, "most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (2007, p. 1; see also p. 21). Central to her analysis is the notion of (social) 'power', which Fricker defines as "a socially situated capacity to control others' actions" (ibid., p. 4). Power works "to create or preserve a given social order", and is displayed in various forms of enablement, on the one hand, and disbelief, misinterpretation and silencing, on the other. It involves the conferral on certain individuals or groups, *qua* persons of that kind, 'a *credibility excess*' or 'a *credibility deficit*' (ibid., p. 21). Fricker's interest resides specifically with 'identity power' and the harms it produces through the manifestation of 'identity prejudices'. The latter are responsible for denying credibility to, or withholding it from, certain persons on the basis of their being members of a certain "social type" (ibid.). Thus, testimonial injustice involves rejecting the credibility of their knowledge claims, while hermeneutical injustice involves a general failure of marshalling the conceptual resources necessary for understanding and interpreting these knowledge claims. The result is that these people are hindered in their self-development and in their attainment of full human worth: they are "prevented from becoming who they are" (ibid., p. 5). In white patriarchal societies, these "epistemic humiliations" (ibid., p. 51) carry the power to destroy a would-be (black or female) knower's confidence to engage in the trustful conversations (ibid., p. 52-53) that characterise well-functioning epistemic communities. As Fricker suggests, they can "inhibit the very formation of self" (ibid., p. 55). Although they are experienced (and may be performed) individually, testimonial and hermeneutical injustice constitute not only individual harms: they originate within a social fabric of which the biases and prejudices that enliven and perpetuate them are a characteristic part. Contesting such injustices and harms, according to Fricker, requires "collective social political change" (ibid., p. 8).

Considering how prejudice affects various levels of credibility, and also considering that scepticism about ‘diverse epistemologies’ has sometimes been part of a hegemonic discourse and constituted epistemic injustice, the question might now be raised whether my critique of this notion (and its affiliates, like ‘indigenous knowledge’ or ‘local ways of knowing’) is not part of this discourse. I do not think it is. If ‘credibility deficit’ is a matter of epistemic injustice, then why should ‘credibility excess’ (giving previously ‘epistemologically humiliated’ people or groups excessive credibility) not also constitute epistemic harm? More fundamentally, and this point pertains to Siegel’s response to Ruitenberg (concerning “indigenous African women’s epistemologies”), surely there is a difference between criticizing someone’s view on the mere grounds that she is black, or a woman, and criticizing the views held or expressed by someone, who happens to be black or a woman, on the grounds of faulty or fallacious reasoning. Nonsense is not culturally, racially or sexually specific. Indeed, although she gestures in the direction of a basic ‘do no harm’ principle (Siegel 2012, p. 85), Fricker herself insists that a “vulgar relativist” resistance to passing moral judgment on other cultures “is incoherent” (Fricker 2007, p. 106).

### **The value of diversity for knowledge**

More recently, Emily Robertson has argued that diversity is both an epistemic and a moral virtue, but that this argument “does not support alternative epistemologies, cognitive relativism, or the replacement of truth as an epistemic goal by, for example, beliefs that have progressive consequences” (2013, p. 300). The value of diversity for knowledge resides in the possibility of different groups having ‘different experiences that lead them to know or believe things that escape others’ attention: reports of their experiences may function as data that allows researchers to examine the social system or structure from their social location (*ibid.*, p. 304).

While postcolonial theory arguably errs in postulating the existence of diverse knowledges and truths, the diversity in question is conceivably generated by (characteristically) practical epistemic priorities – priorities that emanate from different lived experiences, individual as well as social and cultural. A plausible view appears to be that knowledge and truth do not fluctuate, that they remain invariant across individuals, societies and cultures, but that there may well be distinctive sets of epistemic concerns that arise from particular personal, historical and socio-political circumstances. If it is correct to assume that practical epistemic and educational priorities will emerge from life experiences and from the ways these are socially articulated, then one might assume that, given that the different life experiences of people across the globe, the practical epistemic and educational priorities will also differ.

For example, as Elizabeth Anderson has put it (2002, p. 325), “No one disputes that personal knowledge of what it is like to be pregnant, undergo childbirth,

suffer menstrual cramps, and have other experiences of a female body is specific to women”. Gynecology has made substantial progress “since women entered the field and have brought their personal knowledge to bear on misogynist medical practices”. According to Anderson, the “claims get more controversial the more global they are in scope”. Some writers “claim that women have gender-typical ‘ways of knowing’, styles of thinking, methodologies, and ontologies that globally govern or characterize their cognitive activities across all subject matters”. For example, “various feminist epistemologists have claimed that women think more intuitively and contextually, concern themselves more with particulars than with abstractions, emotionally engage themselves more with individual subjects of study, and frame their thoughts in relational rather than an atomistic ontology”. Anderson contends, quite plausibly, that there is “little persuasive evidence for such global claims” (ibid.). Interestingly, too, she does not “suppose that women theorists bring some shared feminine difference to all subjects of knowledge” (ibid., p. 326).

Given, to use a further example, the experience of ‘indigenous’ Africans of a wide-ranging credibility deficit, it stands to reason that they would have as priorities matters of epistemic transformation and redress. If epistemic and educational concerns and priorities arise from different forms of social life, then those that have emerged from a social system in which a particular race or group has been subordinate to another deserve special scrutiny. Given the (especially vicious) history of physical and psychological colonization, it is plausible that one of the epistemic and educational priorities will be to educate *against* development of a subordinate or inferior mindset, as well as *against* a victim and beggar mentality, despite the continuing economic crisis and low level of economic growth. An additional priority arises with Africa’s low literacy quotients. In many countries, the language of conceptualization and education is the official language of administration: English, French or Portuguese, in which the majority of children and learners are not primarily competent. Consequently, there exist few successes in learning; quality and efficiency suffer; and high repeat and dropout rates mean a squandering of available resources. While it does not follow that particular historical and socio-economic circumstances yield or bestow automatic validation or justification of (the content and objectives of) an ‘African epistemology’, an idea like ‘decolonization of the African mind’ has a particular resonance here. Rather than implying a ‘post-truth’ epistemology, it involves ‘going back to one’s language’ in ‘thinking about thinking’, examining one’s ‘own ways of conceptualization’ – in short, ‘philosophizing’ (Wiredu 2008).

If what has been established above is cogent, it follows that so-called ‘epistemological diversity’ refers neither to a multitude of truths nor to an ‘anything goes’ conception of justification, but rather to different experiences connected to particular social locations, or – as Robertson puts it – to different social pathways to knowledge (note the singular!). In this sense, reference to ‘epistemologies’ – like reference to “plural systems of knowledges” (De Sousa Santos et al. 2008, p. xxxix)

or to indigenous, local or subaltern ways of knowing – is not only unhelpful but also misleading.

\* \* \*

The promise of an educationally relevant epistemology, an epistemology for the real world, then, has in part to do with context and locality – but not in terms of any exclusionist, ‘hands-off’ approach. Rather, it appears to be plausible that the particular historical, geographic and socio-cultural experiences of people give rise to particular priorities that shape their epistemic theory and educational practice – and also yield conceptual tools that are likely to enrich epistemology as a whole.

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## „ZRÓŻNICOWANIE EPISTEMOLOGICZNE” W EDUKACJI. ROZWAŻANIA FILOZOFICZNE I DYDAKTYCZNE

**Streszczenie:** Niedawno powstałe, ale już szeroko rozpowszechnione przekonanie utrzymuje, że grupy etniczne i kulturowe mają swoje własne, wyróżniające je epistemologie i że epistemologie także mają płeć, a fakt ten był dotąd przeważnie ignorowany przez dominującą grupę społeczną. Konsekwencją tego przekonania jest pogląd, że badania nad edukacją są prowadzone w ramach obejmujących pewne założenia na temat wiedzy i jej uzyskiwania, nakreślonych przez dominującą grupę i odzwierciedlających jej interesy i historyczne tradycje. Nawoływanie do epistemologicznego zróżnicowania staje się problematyczne, gdy łączy w sobie epistemologiczny pluralizm i relatywizm. Bardzo często argumentacja za innymi, zróżnicowanymi, alternatywnymi, zdekolonizowanymi czy zdemaskulinizowanymi epistemologiami nadal nie rozwiązuje, a czasem wręcz całkowicie pomija istotne kwestie filozoficzne. Co dokładnie oznaczają twierdzenia dotyczące epistemologicznego zróżnicowania? Czy te sposoby ustanawiania wiedzy są w stanie przetrwać próbę krytycznego badania? Ponadto, jaki jest ich związek z tradycyjnymi rozróżnieniami epistemologicznymi, np. między wiedzą a wiarą i między dociekaniem deskryptywnymi a normatywnymi oraz takimi podstawowymi komponentami epistemologicznymi, jak dowód/uzasadnienie i prawda? Niniejszy artykuł analizuje niektóre błędy i mylne pojęcia, które można odnaleźć w nawoływaniu do rozwijania zróżnicowanych epistemologii. Stawiane tu pytanie nie ma na celu jedynie ustalenia, czy słowo „epistemologia” jest lub nie jest poprawnie używane, ale także (co jest znacznie ważniejsze), czy zagadnienia, którymi się zajmuje ta dziedzina filozofii, nie są traktowane pobieżnie lub wręcz całkowicie pomijane.

**Słowa kluczowe:** badania nad edukacją, zróżnicowanie epistemologiczne, pluralizm, relatywizm.

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