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Epistemic Violence in the Process of Othering: Real-World Applications and Moving Forward

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Abstract

From the work of Pierre Bourdieu on symbolic violence came the study of epistemic violence, which is at the core of the process of othering marginalized groups. Epistemological scholars including Kristie Dotson, Miranda Fricker, Cynthia Townley, and Gayatri Spivak have done extensive work on the theory of the phenomenon; it is necessary to analyze the classifications of epistemic violence through their application in empirical settings. Addressing three case studies of “othering” highlights the importance of greater integration of marginalized groups into the education system as the necessary first step towards eliminating othering by targeting epistemic violence at a base level.

Introduction

The purpose of this manuscript is to investigate the use of epistemic violence in the process of othering through the analysis of empirical case studies. Beginning with the origins of epistemic violence, the following sections will analyze how key concepts of epistemic violence have been applied in three real-world cases. These case studies were chosen to represent three different types of othering: ethnic, in the case of the Romani people; religious, in the case of the Saudi Shiites; and the othering of a socially-constructed group, presented in the case of India’s Dalit caste. To conclude, I argue that in order for epistemic violence to be remedied, there must first be greater integration of othered persons into the educational system. For the purposes of this manuscript, I define the ‘Other’ as the out-group: those that are marginalized by a larger portion of the population and who

often maintain limited rights within society. Epistemic, here, refers to knowledge and the measure of its validation. When discussing terms such as ‘epistemic agent’ and ‘epistemic responsibility’, this definition should be taken into account for a thorough understanding.

The importance of understanding epistemic violence is two-fold. First, to be able to recognize the process of othering as it unfolds in societies today and second, through understanding the process, we may come closer to formulating a solution to combat this process and its outcomes. Finding a solution is a necessary goal in order to incorporate minorities into the greater population, and allow them a legitimized voice and the status of respected and trusted epistemic agents – producers of knowledge.

Symbolic Power, Epistemic Violence

In the mid-20th century, sociologist and intellectual Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of symbolic power as it exists in modern societies. For Bourdieu, this was a ‘worldmaking power’ (Swartz, 1997), giving those holding the power the ability to impose their vision of the social world, and its divisions, as legitimate. From this theory came that of symbolic violence. Bourdieu understood this to be synonymous with ideology, as having the ability “to impose the means for comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing economic and political power in disguised, taken-for-granted forms” (Swartz, 1997, 89). Expanding on his belief that all actions have a purpose, those with social power use this power to establish and impose norms through misrecognition – the disguising of the economic and political interests driv-

ing these practices. Stemming from the concept of symbolic violence is epistemic violence, which focuses on the discourse involved in the practice of othering. Othering, to this effect, is the marginalization of those who are distinctly different from the majority ‘us’, and uses differences between beliefs and customs to define them as the out-group (Rawls & David, 2003). Traditionally, societies have used the discourse of otherness to create a common bond within the in-group for example, feelings of patriotism or nationalism. Often in an asymmetrical conflict in which one group has markedly more symbolic power, the powerful will exercise this power through epistemic violence (Maoz & McCauley, 2008). The discursively-produced sense of division that follows deeply and negatively affects the oppressed and often leads to physical violence and conflict.

I have classified epistemic violence into three separate categories: discriminatory, testimonial, and distributive. Each presents a distinct way that epistemic violence is exercised by the in-group in the process of othering. These categories help to better describe different discursive aspects of epistemic violence by highlighting each explicitly.

Discriminatory

Discriminatory epistemic violence occurs primarily through the dehumanization of the out-group. In its most basic form, this is the construction of the Other. This often arises when the in-group perceives the out-group to be inferior, both essentially and morally, thus casting them as subhuman and thus not necessarily included in the majority’s realm of moral considerations (Maoz & McCauley, 2008). In doing this, persons are “excluded from being human, refused reciprocity and

excluded from intelligibility” (Rawls & David, 2003, 494). Discriminatory epistemic violence is often the first to be exercised as it creates the base – the Other – and is frequently used by those in power as a stepping stone to garner majority support for policies of separation from the Other. For example, the segregation laws that were in place to delineate India’s Dalit caste developed through political motions that deemed them untouchable. Seen strongly in the us-versus-them rhetoric of political leaders, this type of epistemic violence is spread through media and leaves, throughout history, an intergenerational legacy of maintaining the constructed and separate Other.

Testimonial

Testimonial epistemic violence comes in two forms: reduced credibility and silencing. When credibility is reduced through epistemic violence, prejudice operates on the part of the listener to discredit the information they are receiving from the Other, despite any expertise they may have (Fricker, 2006). To engage in a successful linguistic exchange, the speaker must find reciprocity in their audience; the audience must understand the words and understand the intention behind those words (Dotson, 2011). The audience, in this case the in-group, effectively fails to recognize the speaker as a knower. Nancy Tuana discusses this as being “ignorance produced by the construction of epistemically disadvantaged identities” (Dotson, 2011, 243), which occurs when groups are understood only by their constructed and circulated stereotypes. The refusal to acknowledge an actor’s contributions to the broader epistemic community, or to bar them from it altogether, impairs their epistemic agency.

Silencing is discussed at length by Gayatri Spivak (1988) in her text “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and defined as the damage to a group’s ability to speak and to be heard. Often, this is most prevalent in instances of physical harm from the in-group against the out-group. It becomes difficult for a member of the out-group to report crimes when institutions are run entirely by the in-group. Also referred to as testimonial smothering, this occurs when the speaker from the out-group truncates their testimony “in order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which [the] audience demonstrates testimonial competence” (Dotson, 2011, p. 244). Another aspect of silencing occurs when a group is put at a disadvantage because of their exclusion from participating in the creation of social meanings (Fricker, 2013). This exclusion makes it difficult for them to understand significant portions of their social experience.

The profound negative effects of testimonial epistemic violence are recognized by several scholars: Miranda Fricker (2013) notes the harm that it inflicts on intellectual courage; Cynthia Townley (2006) addresses the impairment of epistemic agency; and Patricia Hill Collins discusses the damage caused to the intellectual traditions of entire groups (Dotson, 2011). The extent to which entire populations can be denied linguistic reciprocity institutes epistemic violence.

Distributive

It is important to recognize that the damage caused by epistemic violence are rarely confined to specifically epistemic matters (Dotson, 2011). Often, harm spills over into more material aspects. Distributive epistemic violence refers to the re-

fusal of resources for the out-group. In particular, the lack of education both in and about marginalized communities is damaging to all parties involved. Denial of education can often be in the form of structural violence, which frequently accompanies distributive epistemic violence, as the two are functionally connected. The perception of these communities as undereducated only further divides them from the in-group and prevents them from engaging in and contributing to the larger epistemic community. A lack of educational instruction in a common language also serves to keep the out-group marginalized from participation in society.

There is often also a lack of proper education about the out-group; it is either inaccurate or absent entirely. This contributes to pernicious ignorance which “follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources” (Dotson, 2011, 238). The resulting state of reliable ignorance ensures that members of the in-group will consistently fail to track certain truths and to investigate claims about the out-group.

It can be said that an important determinant of state-executed violations of human rights, especially in democratic states such as India, is public support (Maoz & McCauley, 2008). In modern, progressive societies, there is the question of how leaders are able to convince citizens that an entire group or culture is worthy of discrimination. Economist Edward Glaeser looks in particular at the propagation of group-level hatred as the bases for this, proposing that it arises from stories manufactured by “entrepreneurs of hate” (Glaeser, 2005, 46). Most commonly, in-group power figures such as politicians and corporations, will emphasize stories of out-group crime

to make them seem more frequent and heinous. Hatred is a primitive emotion which “marks for attack or avoidance those things which we perceive as a threat to our survival or reproduction” (Glaeser, 2005, 50). Its formation involves a cognitive process in which the evidence found in the propagated stories is processed into a belief that a person is inherently evil. The cognitive error occurs when one takes the assumption of evil about a specific person, then applies it inferentially to the entire group.

Comparable to the adage, “if you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth”, the power of these stories in the public comes not from their accuracy, but from repetition. Using a cost-benefit analysis similar to an economic model, Glaeser (2005) concludes that people will only investigate the truth behind the stories if they perceive private benefits in learning the facts. These stories are complemented by policies that limit contact with the minority, isolating them further. Glaeser (2005) developed a model to track this process, beginning with politicians deciding whether to broadcast a hate-creating message. These messages create signals to members of the in-group about the harmfulness of the minority. They will decide whether or not to investigate the truth behind the stories, then to engage in self-protection by supporting policies of exclusion. This string of events is particularly likely to be seen when out-groups are both politically relevant and socially segregated (Glaeser, 2005). This aligns with Bourdieu’s concept of misrecognition (Swartz, 1997) as the imposition of certain policies relies directly on disguising them as a means of protecting the in-group. To further illuminate the use of

epistemic violence in the process of othering, I will discuss three specific instances in which it has been employed in recent history. Each will focus on a different type of out-group and will analyze the use of the types of epistemic violence described above. In all three cases, the effects can still be seen today.

Case Study: Ethnic Othering

The Romani people are an ethnic group known to many by the exonyms ‘gypsy’ or ‘cigány’. Collectively, they make up 3 to 5% of the population of Eastern Europe and Spain. 18th century Western scientists have traced their genetic heritage to parts of northern India, though the Romani are traditionally a nomadic people. As a consequence of their lack of a bordered country or homeland, Romanis have suffered broad persecution and discrimination. In early modern Europe, Romani were known to be blacksmiths and musicians, both of which were ‘infamous’ professions considered to be polluting or socially dangerous (Darity, Jr. ed., 2008). Their oppression was particularly harsh during the Inquisition in Spain and in territories of the Holy Roman Empire, at which time they were expelled from Spain, France, and German-speaking countries. Policies in European countries during the 18th and 19th centuries were largely driven by concerns that “they represented a hard-to-identify, unsettled population” (Darity, Jr. ed., 2008, 278) of thieves and heretics.

During the Third Reich, their persecution intensified after Adolf Hitler registered the entire German Romani population before deporting more than two-thirds of them to camps in the occupied east. Seen as a genetic contaminant threatening the gene pool of Hitler’s

‘master race’ (Hancock, 2005), Romanis were the only group besides the Jews that were ordered to be exterminated unconditionally. Sterilization programs, mass deportations, and systematic massacres led to the deaths of over 100,000 Romani. This was between half and three-fourths of their total population in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Most times, ethnic groups are marginalized due to a perceived threat. In the case of the Romani, this stemmed from their lifestyle. In many newspapers, their arrival has been referred to as an ‘invasion’ (Hancock, 2005), and their lack of a native country has only added to their reputation as outsiders, especially in countries where “nationality is judged more by one’s ethnicity than passport” (Hancock, 2005, 921). Their nomadic culture was thought to be representative of loose, transient morals. It has also been acknowledged that the Asian component of Romani heritage has proved to be “an overriding factor in the pervasive discrimination against them” (Hancock, 2005, 921). Particularly during what would come to be called the Romani Holocaust, those with large amounts of symbolic power relied on methods of discriminatory epistemic violence to cast the Romani people as a threat to the greater good of society by propagating stories of their immorality and penchant for crime. The self-imposed separateness of Romanis further lowers the perceived benefit within the in-group of investigating these stories, and a self-perpetuating cycle of stigma, marginalization, unemployment, illiteracy, and poverty becomes increasingly unbreakable.

The othering of the Romani people is evident even in the language used to describe them; the exogenous terms ‘gypsy’ and ‘cigány’

are abusive and have strongly negative implications. The term ‘gypsy’ conjures an image of a fictional persona: a romanticized, wandering band of thieves with a penchant for the supernatural and fortune-telling. Before their genetic origins were discovered, Romani were even thought to have come from such fantastic places as Atlantis, Nubia, and the Moon (Hancock, 2005). These gaps in Westerners’ knowledge about the Romani people were filled easily by politicians casting them as dirty, reprehensible villains in a striking example of discriminatory epistemic violence. Still today, despite the presence of two young Romani members of the European Parliament, prejudice is evident. In former communist countries in particular, governments suffer from a type of ‘policy schizophrenia’ under which ethnicization of public policy is encouraged across the board, yet the ‘Roma problem’ is represented as an issue of national security (Darity, Jr. ed., 2008). These governments play to the public’s fears of a demographic explosion of the minority coupled with a demographic collapse of the majority.

Not only have they continued to be faced with discrimination, but the Romani people have also suffered as a result of testimonial epistemic violence in the form of silencing. This was of particular importance throughout the course of the Nuremberg Trials after World War II. Held by the Allied forces, this series of military tribunals tried leaders of the Third Reich for their crimes against humanity. Despite the large number of Romani massacred across the occupied territories, there was no recognition of German violence against them, nor were Romani bodies empowered to speak out for reparation. It is important to recognize this fact, as it is vital that “in-

stitutional bodies to whom citizens may need to contest must, on pain of facilitating domination, achieve epistemic justice in their hearings” (Fricker, 2013, 1326).

Case Study: Religious Othering

In the Middle East, many conflicts are based on the stark division between Sunni and Shia Muslims. This ancient religious divide has been the fuel behind a resurgence of clashes in Muslim countries. Struggles between Sunni and Shia forces powered a Syrian civil war that threatens to alter the regional map, spurred violence that is shattering Iraq, and widened fractures in a number of Gulf countries. Growing sectarian conflicts have also stimulated the revitalization of transnational jihadi networks that pose a threat to the global political sphere. Islam’s schism, seething for fourteen centuries, is an issue that has arisen again and again. Though in several Muslim nations there is a Shia majority, they make up only 10 to 15% of the population of Saudi Arabia. As the minority, they face discrimination under the absolute monarchy that has ruled the country since its establishment.

Saudi Arabia is often thought to be the leader of the Sunni world as a religious state which derives its legitimacy from a form of Islam which is almost definitively anti-Shiite, and throughout history, the “Shiites have paid the price of the Saudi family’s quest for religious legitimacy” (Teitelbaum, 2010, 2). Wahhabi and Salafi ideology teaches an intolerance of any other interpretations of Islam and therefore refuse to bless any greater integration of Shiites into religious and political society (Beranek, 2009). The proclamations of radical clerics have cast

Shiites as polytheists and non-believers. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Shia persecution reached a climax when many important religious shrines were destroyed by Sunni Muslims in the cities of Mecca and Medina (Commins, 2006). In the early 20th century, zealous warriors of the Ikhwan insisted that Wahhabi ideals should prevail in domestic politics and forced conversion of many Shiites. Shia religious leaders were gathered and vowed to cease observance of Shia religious holidays, shut down their places of worship, and stop pilgrimages to holy sites (Commins, 2006).

Though in reality the minority does not pose a threat to the Saudi state, their treatment is greatly influenced by the recent rise of Iran and Shiites in Iraq and Lebanon. The Saudi government fears this will empower their own Shia population. Pressure from Wahhabi ulama serve only to further this as they lead clerics to publish anti-Shiite fatwas, sanctioning their killing (Teitelbaum, 2010). Along with the presence of Shiites in some oil-rich areas, the two sects coexist in a climate of asymmetric violence in Saudi Arabia in which there is increased support within the stronger party for retaliatory aggression against that which is more vulnerable. The perceived threat of a Shia uprising is cause for support of aggressive and belligerent retaliatory policies, as is often the case when there is an alleged collective threat (Maoz & McCauley, 2008).

The official statement given by the Saudi government posits that while they do not believe Shiites should be killed, expelled, or converted by violence, they should “renounce their fallacious beliefs voluntarily and embrace the right path of Islam” (Beranek, 2009, 5).

After their forced conversion by the Ikhwan, Wahhabi ulama took over teaching and preaching positions at the remaining Shia mosques, and so the dogma of polytheistic, non-believing Shiites has for many years been a part of official school curriculum (Teitelbaum, 2010). In this way, the othering of Shia Muslims continues to be discursively produced through the construction and propagation of knowledge in the educational system under all three methods of epistemic violence. Because of the influence that this has had on many generations of students, Shia Muslims continue to be the victims of violence, attacks, mass killings, bombings, and the destruction of homes and religious shrines. They remain discriminated against in the workforce and have very little socio-economic mobility. We can also see an erosion of many Shia epistemic traditions over time due to the silencing of their religious practices and teachings.

Case Study: Othering of a Socially Constructed Group

Not all out-groups are as easily classified as the Other based on differences in ethnicity or religion; there exist groups which are outwardly much the same as the majority, yet still face persecution as the out-group. One widely applied and frequently contested model for systems of birth-attributed rank is that of caste, originating from the example unique to India where the jati is the standard for societal division. Jati in India refers to interdependent, hierarchical, birth-attributed groups. This socially-stratified system divides communities into hereditary groups and has long been considered to be “one of the pillars of the Hindu social order in India” (Lerner, Lerner & Lerner, 2006, 396). Important

to this system are the concepts of purity and pollution, which govern intrapersonal relationships including food, occupation, marriage, and religious rituals.

Under this hierarchical system, the upper castes are privileged and rewarded, while the lowest caste – Dalit – are excluded from their surrounding communities. During their colonial rule, the British took advantage of this system, imposing policies which favored the upper castes and solidifying its power over Indian society (Iyer, 2009). It was primarily during the 19th century that Dalit began to be referred to as ‘Untouchables’, at which time they were denied basic civil rights and subjected to atrocities (Lerner et. al., 2006). They were also banned from many public spaces, including temples, and prohibited from interaction with members of higher castes.

In the 20th century, India saw Dalit movements for caste reform, and untouchability was abolished in the Indian Constitution in 1950 under the secular democratic republic (Iyer, 2009). However, the caste system has not yet been eradicated and remains deeply ingrained in society today. In 1999, the Human Rights Watch reported that over 160 million Dalit faced severe discrimination and were still being denied basic human rights such as access to drinking water, education, and jobs (Lerner et. al.). There has been a rise in violence despite anti-untouchability acts and the government’s official commitment to equality. Cultural critic Rustom Bharucha discusses the system’s continuing presence in modern society, “For whom is it possible to elide the stigmas attached to a low caste genealogy, heredity-determined occupation, poverty, social ostracism,

and untouchability? These markers of dalit identity continue to deepen even as the politics around this identity are in the process of being problematized and internationalized” (Bharucha, 2003, 4240).

The historic othering of Dalit is apparent even in the etymology of the term. Dalit can be traced to the ancient language Sanskrit, in which dal means to split or crack. Dal in Hebrew means something low, weak, and poor (Lerner et. al., 2006). They are victims of discriminatory epistemic violence through dehumanization as they are perceived to be subhuman and are the targets of feelings of disgust and contempt. A study run by social psychologists Ifat Maoz and Clark McCauley (2008) found that “dehumanization is an instigator of support for interethnic violence” (105). Even within a society which endorses democratic norms, the historic discourse emphasizing out-group dehumanization has continued to legitimize aggression against the vulnerable.

The Indian government is reaching out to the Dalit in attempts to integrate them into society through a policy of affirmative action. However, the epistemology of violence is so profoundly entrenched in societal thought and discourse that higher castes are morally opposed to this policy, claiming that it propagates reverse discrimination (Iyer, 2009) and that it will lead to brain drain as intellectuals leave the country (Lerner et. al., 2006). Dalit are victims of all three types of epistemic violence and until the public discourse can change to include Dalit voices as legitimate contributors, India will remain stratified.

Conclusion: Non-Oppressive Ways of Knowing

I have presented but three examples of how the practice of epistemic violence has been used to construct and maintain the Other. Despite growing awareness and support for the marginalized groups, the idea of the Other has been generationally ingrained in societal epistemologies. In order to reverse these fixed ideas, communities must actively engage in the development of non-oppressive ways of knowing persons across different ethnicities, religions, genders, and social positions. Feminist theory of epistemology recognizes the need for the awareness of the ‘epistemic responsibility’ (Townley, 2006) held by both the individual and groups in order to overthrow the oppressive ways of knowing that have been and are still globally present. Those who ascribe to this theory would suggest that epistemologists need to take more seriously issues of group differences because the social hierarchies that they often encourage can “both limit the spheres of action available to agents from non-privileged groups and discourage those from privileged groups from being accountable for their actions when they seek and claim knowledge” (Townley, 2006, 40).

While Francesco Caselli and John Coleman suggest that ethnic conflict automatically accompanies visible group differences (Glaeser, 2005), I would argue that hatred also arises between groups that closely resemble each other, such as between the upper and lower castes in India. To this end, what is vital to ending hatred between both visibly different and visibly similar groups is integration. As stated above, Glaeser (2005) rightly posits that people will investigate the truth behind propa-

ated stories if there is the perception that they will benefit from putting forth the effort. Greater integration between groups could effectively deter the spread of hatred by creating a demand for the correct information and reducing the cost of searching for it. The existence of group differences, instead of being used as a crutch for marginalization, must be used to justify extending the benefit of the doubt (Rawls & David, 2003) by giving these differences legitimacy in their own right.

Often, those uninformed will argue that minorities tend to other themselves on the basis of racial consciousness – failing to recognize that this self-segregation is generally the product of pre-existing and historic patterns of discrimination (Bharucha, 2003). In the case of the Romani, the self-imposed separateness comes not just from their cultural beliefs, but also, and much more prominently, from their history of slavery in the 16th through 19th centuries and policies of social distancing established by their European host societies (Hancock, 2005). It is evident, especially in the example of the Romani people, that “when people are systematically excluded, or rendered in subordinate roles, they are forced to erect boundaries of their own to create protected situations that offer them the possibility of mutual reciprocity and trust within those boundaries” (Rawls & David, 2003, 471). This creates a serious problem for democratic societies in particular, as persons are excluded from situated interactions essential for the overall development of a country’s economic, political, and social transactions (Rawls & David, 2003).

Though modern societies, through technological advancements, are becoming increasingly

engaged and cohesive, old notions of the segregated Other are still prevalent through discourse and generational education. It is for this reason that integration must start in the education systems. Drawing once again on Glaeser's (2005) cost-benefit analysis, if education reduces the cost of learning the truth, then less-educated individuals will have a higher likelihood of accepting false hate-creating political stories. There is a need for educators to make use of post-structuralist perspectives pioneered by Michel Foucault, among others, in order to address the diversity and situatedness of oppression through teaching and learning (Kumashiro, 2000). President of the National Association for Multicultural Education, Kevin Kumashiro (2000), defines two types of knowledge which are harmful to the Other. The first is knowledge about only what society's majority defines as 'normal' and 'normative'. This causes what constitutes otherness to be known only by inference and comparison, which leads to misconceptions. The second is knowledge about the Other which encourages a "distorted and misleading understanding of the Other that is based on stereotypes and myths" (Kumashiro, 2000, 32). In response, he suggests the first approach to addressing oppression is to improve the experiences of those who are othered through their inclusion in the educational system. Many times, the harm is not in the propagation of biased knowledge but in an inaction entirely. Kumashiro (2000) notes that a number of researchers have documented shockingly substandard conditions in the educational institutions serving marginalized groups, including unsafe buildings and insufficient instructional material. I would also argue that along with

their integration into the education systems, the marginalized students, along with in-group students, need to be provided with unbiased knowledge about the Other, and about the legitimacy of different cultural practices. Education must also be used to make available to the out-group the language of self-representation. This will allow them the possibility of contestation, which is required for non-domination (Fricker, 2013).

Overall, there needs to be an effort made to cultivate an environment of responsible trust. This implies that all epistemic agents are treated with appropriate respect (Townley, 2006). However, we must assure that this is not taken advantage of by politicians and other entrepreneurs of hate; we must avoid exercising responsible trust blindly in these situations. As a global society, we need to start a new discourse about the causes and results of epistemic violence. It is time to progress past historic prejudices and protect minorities from the damages done by othering. They must be given the right, as epistemic agents, to legitimacy in their practices and methods of thought.

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