VICES OF THE PRIVILEGED AND VIRTUES OF THE OPPRESSED IN EPISTEMIC GROUP DYNAMICS

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1 Introduction

In Epistemology of Resistance (2013) I developed a critical epistemology of the oppressed, that is, a critical epistemology that, far from indulging in ideal conditions and ideal theory, was explicitly designed to apply to actual social contexts under conditions of oppression and to provide some guidance for resisting epistemic oppression (i.e. the exclusion, marginalization, or unfair treatment in epistemic practices). In the epistemology of the oppressed I previously developed (2013) I focused too heavily on how individual members of oppressed groups can exhibit specific forms of epistemic virtues that are grounded in their experiences of oppression, as well as on how individual members of privileged groups can exhibit specific forms of epistemic vices that are grounded in their privileged life sheltered from exposure to certain realities and experiences. Although I heavily qualified my claims about the epistemic virtues often found in the standpoints of the oppressed and the epistemic vices often found in the standpoints of the privileged, the individual subject remained the locus to which epistemic virtues and vices were to be ascribed, and the epistemic agency involved in the cultivation and exercise of those virtues and vices was thought of as the epistemic agency of individuals.

By contrast, in my more recent work and in this chapter, I shift the focus to collectives as the proper locus and address issues of collective epistemic agency in which individual members of the relevant groups simply partake. The individual and the collective levels of epistemic standpoint and agency are of course deeply intertwined and their separation is always somewhat artificial, so while addressing one level we are always addressing the other if only indirectly. Just like my previous work focused on the individual level but was not individualistic, my recent and ongoing analyses have a collective focus but are not collectivistic in any reductive way.

In what follows I will focus on the epistemic virtues and vices of collectives that arise and operate in contexts of oppression. More specifically, I will focus on collective epistemic vices that can be associated with privilege in contrast with collective epistemic virtues developed by oppressed or mixed groups. In Section 2 I will discuss how the epistemic vice of critical insensitivity with respect to racial bias takes different forms as an individual vice and as a group vice. In Section 3 I will further develop the distinction between individual epistemic vices and vicious epistemic group functioning by elucidating how an epistemic group vice
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associated with privilege can be detected in publics that function as *echo chambers*. Finally, in Section 4, I will suggest ways in which we can resist and counter epistemically vicious group agency through what I call *epistemic activism* and the *epistemic empowerment of the oppressed*.

2 The insensitivity of privilege and the epistemic lucidity of the oppressed in group dynamics

In this section my focus will be on groups or collectives. I will not talk about the epistemic virtues of the privileged or the epistemic vices of the oppressed in an individualistic way, but rather, as they can be ascribed to an entire group or collective, however these virtues and vices are distributed among the individual members of the group or collective in question. Since what I am most interested in here is particular (i.e. epistemically vicious and virtuous) forms of epistemic agency, my focus will be on the group’s collective epistemic agency, however this agency happens to be exercised and whatever form those groups happen to take.² I will view *groups or collectives* as comprising very diverse forms of groupings and social formations ranging from highly structured and rigidly organized groups (such as the Republican party) to diffused and changing networks or publics (such as Fox News’ viewership).

The significance of groups for epistemic behavior in general and for epistemic virtues and vices in particular cannot be overstated (see Tanesini’s chapter in this volume). Ample evidence in cognitive science³ has shown that individuals very often perform cognitive tasks differently by themselves and within a group; and their epistemic behavior can vary quite dramatically from one group setting to another group setting. In what follows I want to call attention to two crucial factors that prompt or inhibit epistemically virtuous or vicious behavior in group settings: (1) the composition of the group, and (2) the groups dynamics and epistemic norms of the group. Let’s consider an interesting case study in social psychology that can help us distinguish between the epistemic vice of critical insensitivity to racial bias in individuals and in groups.

In “Race and the Decision Making of Juries” (2007), Samuel Sommers presents powerful evidence for how *context-specific white ignorance of racism* operates at the level of joint thinking or group cognition in jury deliberations. Sommers recorded the deliberations of 29 mock juries after being shown a video of a trial of a black defendant accused of sexual assault. Half the juries were all-white; the other half included both white and black members. Concerns about racism playing a role in the case were raised more frequently in the racially diverse juries than in the all-white juries. What is also interesting is that critical sensitivity to racism was expressed not only by black jurors but also by white jurors in the racially diverse juries. In fact, white jurors in racially diverse juries were more likely than black jurors to raise the issue of racism (Sommers 2007: 605–6). As Elizabeth Anderson puts it in her elucidations of Sommers’ study, “the presence of blacks on the jury may have activated whites’ knowledge of antiblack racism in the criminal justice process, while this remained latent in all-white juries” (Forthcoming: 15). Not only does the evidence strongly suggests that the presence of non-white subjects triggers white jurors’ critical sensitivity with respect to racism, but it also strongly suggests that the presence of a white homogeneous composition—that is, the exclusive presence of racially privileged subjects—in the jury inhibits expressions of such critical sensitivity:

> every single time whites mentioned racism in all-white juries, other jurors called them out for raising the issue, claiming that this was irrelevant to the task at hand [...]. By
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contrast, in racially diverse juries, whites and blacks alike actively considered racism as a possibly relevant factor in the trial. (Ibid.)

In her elucidation of Sommers’ study, Elizabeth Anderson emphasizes that the results of the study have to be understood in terms of *group belief* rather than in terms of *individual belief*:

> The jurors in all-white juries were not individually ignorant of the existence of anti-black racism. [...] Instead, jurors in all-white juries were enforcing a norm of white ignorance about racism, a group-level lack of belief—a joint determination to act, as a body of white people, in ignorance of racism. (Ibid.)

This is further supported by the evidence that in racially diverse juries white jurors had no problem in raising the issue of racism—doing so in fact more frequently than black jurors—and participated actively in deliberating about the role of racial bias in the case. As Anderson points out, in racially diverse juries the norms of white ignorance did not apply; and, we could add, a norm of critical sensitivity with respect to racism did apply and carried force for all jurors, especially white jurors. The epistemic malfunctioning of the all-white juries is to be attributed to two factors that converge in triggering the epistemic vice of critical insensitivity: the homogeneous composition of the group, and the skewed epistemic norms of the group.

First, the racial composition of the jury had a deep impact on the epistemic quality of the deliberative behavior exhibited. For Anderson, the group composition determines group belief and knowledge: “Racially diverse groups know some things that all-white groups do not” (ibid.). However, I do not think it is so much a matter of belief and knowledge, but a matter of epistemic behavior and epistemic virtue, that is, the exercise of an epistemic skill such as critical sensitivity. Indeed, if it were simply a lack of knowledge that characterized the epistemic deficiency of the all-white jury, the fitting response to raising the issue of racial bias would be simply to ask the speaker who raised the issue to explain it, but the actual response was to dismiss the issue as irrelevant out of hand. What the all-white jury seemed to lack as a group was the relevant critical sensitivity in that area and the ability to enrich the group discussion and improve the quality of the deliberations by seriously considering racial bias. What the racially diverse composition of the juries adds to those groups is not simply knowledge in the sense of more items to add in the repertoire of group beliefs (individual white jurors prove to be perfectly capable of adding those items); rather, it is a practical knowledge or sensitivity, a skill or practical ability that we can appreciate in virtuous epistemic functioning, in virtuous deliberation. This is what I call *epistemic lucidity* with respect to racial bias, which, the empirical evidence suggests, is only present in racially diverse groups but not in homogeneous, racially privileged groups.

Second, what distinguishes all-white juries from racially diverse juries is the implicit epistemic norms that shape their group behavior. For Anderson, the normative backdrop of the white ignorance of the all-white jury consists in a norm that skews the assimilation of evidence: “group-level ignorance of R is instantiated by a group norm against entering evidence for R into group discussion” (ibid.). This assimilation bias filters out evidence that can enrich the deliberative process. Although I do not disagree that this assimilation bias is operating in the group dynamics of the all-white juries, it cannot be the whole story since considerations of racial bias were not fully filtered out and indeed entered the discussion even though infrequently. Besides an evidential norm, what is operating here is also a relevance norm: a group norm of relevance that deems considerations of racism irrelevant and thus
inhibits the exercise of critical sensitivity in that area. This is a norm that is very hard to maintain in the presence of racially oppressed subjects whose communities have daily experiences of discrimination in the US criminal justice system and have developed epistemic lucidity in this area. But, as the evidence suggests, the epistemic and discursive norms that keep racism out of consideration are not hard to maintain in a group homogeneously composed of racially privileged subjects. The epistemic vice of critical insensitivity with respect to racism exhibited by such a group is clearly tied to having been sheltered from racial bias and having the privilege of being inattentive to racism, a luxury that most people of color cannot have in their daily lives. Racially diverse groups bring with them not only a richer repertoire of experiences of racial oppression, but also the possibility of cultivating critical attentiveness to racial bias and the virtuous skill of factoring in such bias in deliberations.

There are groups that have epistemically vicious normative structures, groups whose epistemic and discursive norms are set up so that normative problems such as racial biases are left unexamined. Such groups operate as echo chambers with respect to the issue of racism and are responsible for propagating a vicious sensibility that is resistant to learning and to the development of epistemic virtues such as criticality and open-mindedness. I follow here C. Thi Nguyen (2020) in his characterization of the phenomenon of echo chambers as distinct from the phenomenon of epistemic bubbles (see also Gunn’s chapter in this volume). An epistemic bubble can be defined as a closed epistemic environment that prevents exposure to certain kinds of information, evidence, and reasons. By contrast, an echo chamber is an epistemic environment in which subjects lack the capacity for virtuous listening and for learning from certain kinds of information, evidence, and reasons. While epistemic bubbles are characterized by the exclusion of certain voices and perspectives, what characterizes echo chambers is the highly precarious inclusion of and extremely dysfunctional engagement with—indeed, typically the vilification of—certain voices and perspectives. Clearly it is echo chambers, rather than epistemic bubbles, that present the most serious epistemic challenge since it calls for more than the inclusion of voices and perspectives, more than simply expanding available forms of information, evidence, and reasons. In fact, echo chambers do contain exposure to the voices and perspectives with which it maintains a dysfunctional relation, but it is the wrong kind of exposure, a biased exposure intended exclusively to stigmatize those voices and perspectives and render them intrinsically untrustworthy in the eyes of the participants in the echo chamber. Unlike the bursting of an epistemic bubble which can be achieved through more epistemic exposure and inclusion, the overcoming of an echo chamber requires the deactivation of epistemic resistances or vices and the instilling of epistemic virtues and adequate sensibilities. As Nguyen puts it, “Mere exposure to evidence can shatter an epistemic bubble, but may actually reinforce an echo chamber. [...] Escape from an echo chamber may require a radical rebooting of one’s belief system” (2020: 141).

I will focus on the phenomenon of echo chambers to analyze how an epistemic vice that we can associate with racial privilege, such as critical insensitivity to racial bias, can be exhibited in group behavior and can be attributed to the epistemic functioning of the group. What I want to emphasize in my analysis is that the epistemic vices of groups that become echo chambers are often not reducible to the individual attitudes and habits of their members, but have to be understood as epistemic group traits that are sustained by the epistemic and discursive norms of the group, that is, by the epistemic-communicative ecosystem in which the group operates. This is often obscured by psychological models that explain the epistemic failures of such groups in terms of the epistemically deficient cognitive processing of individual minds.
3 The epistemic group vice of critical insensitivity in echo chambers

One may naively think that epistemic advocacy to promote critical sensibility with respect to racism in the criminal justice system consists simply in providing information about racism in law enforcement, as activists and community leaders often do in their media appearances. However, it is not that easy because large parts of the public may be communicatively insulated from this information even if it is widely circulated. And for some such publics, even if the information reaches them, they may assimilate it in distorted ways, so that the evidence about racial discrimination in law enforcement is discounted or reinterpreted and justified as fair treatment. This is what happens in publics in which racist stereotypes of criminality function as informational filters and norms which in some cases prevent information about racism in law enforcement from coming in (filter bubbles) and in other cases reinterpret, distort, and discount information as it comes in (echo chambers). There are different models for explaining how biased group thinking of this sort emerges and is maintained. I will briefly consider the psychological models and then focus in more detail on two additional models proposed by Elizabeth Anderson (Forthcoming): the group cognition model and the discursive model of biased group thinking. I will briefly discuss how these models shed light on epistemic bubbles and, more importantly, on echo chambers that promote critical insensitivity with respect to racial discrimination.

Two prominent psychological models of biased group thinking can be found in Cass Sunstein’s group polarization theory and in Dan Kahan’s cultural cognition theory. According to Sunstein’s (2017) group polarization theory, individuals entrapped in epistemic bubbles assimilate information through biased processes that include a confirmation bias that leads them to seek and believe evidence that confirms their beliefs, and a disconfirmation bias that leads them to repudiate evidence that disconfirms their beliefs. As Anderson explains, “Sunstein’s theory predicts group polarization entirely through ingroup processes: each relatively segregated group is separately driven to extreme beliefs on opposite sides of a particular claim” (Forthcoming: 5). By contrast, Kahan’s (2012) cultural cognition theory explains the communicative insularity of polarized groups and the reluctance to learn and correct beliefs of their members in terms of hostile intergroup processes. Cultural cognition theory explains group polarization as an intergroup phenomenon produced by culturally antagonistic images and stereotypes that foster hostility between members of the groups in question: the members of one group stigmatize the members of the other group as epistemic adversaries who are not worthy of trust and have to be excluded from epistemic cooperation and collective learning altogether.

Whether it is through assimilation biases or through antagonistic biases, the psychological models of polarized groups explain the dysfunctions of these groups in terms of the distorting cognitive attitudes of their individual members. If these psychological explanations were the whole story, it would be impossible to understand why some networks and self-segregated groups are more vulnerable to becoming polarized than others and why individuals exhibit cognitive biases and dysfunctional epistemic functioning while operating within some groups but not while operating in other groups or by themselves. So, for example, the psychological models would explain that viewers of Fox News are resistant to learning from information about racial discrimination in law enforcement whereas viewers of MSNBC are not because the former exhibit assimilation and antagonistic biases in this domain, whereas the latter do not. Although this is definitely part of the story, it does not seem to be the whole story. This individualistic explanation fails to account for how these TV networks constitute their viewership through the epistemic group functioning that they foster and the discursive norms that they use to frame and package information.
Underscoring the explanatory limitations of the psychological models that conceptualize polarization in individualistic terms, Elizabeth Anderson argues that the analysis of polarized group thinking needs to get more social and more political “by modeling cognitive biases not as operating inside individuals’ heads, but as operating collectively and externally, via group epistemic and discursive norms” (Forthcoming: 1). Accordingly, Anderson proposes two additional models to supplement the psychological models: a group cognition model and a discursive model. According to the group cognition model, Anderson argues, “participation in a group that enacts biased social norms for information processing is all that is needed to explain entrapment in [epistemic] bubbles” (Forthcoming: 14), independently of whatever cognitive attitudes and habits the individuals in question happen to have outside the group. The group cognition model distinguishes norms of assertion from norms for individual belief: “To play one’s role in manifesting a group belief, one need only obey the group’s norms of assertion when one speaks qua group member” (Forthcoming: 17). So if, for example, a group is committed to remain ignorant with respect to racial discrimination in law enforcement, all the group needs to do is to enforce the epistemic group norm that evidence to that effect be filtered out or automatically dismissed.

Finally, Anderson also offers a discursive model that explains the communicative dysfunctions that ensue when a group follows discursive norms that arbitrarily render certain communicative contributions devoid of assertoric force and content, thus transforming, for example, an assertion that expresses a criticism or a complaint into an attack or an insult. Anderson describes this phenomenon as “discursive entrapment in an ‘epistemic’ bubble.”

What she calls “a discursive ‘epistemic’ bubble” is characterized by identity-expressive discourse that affirms and celebrates in-group members (or their creed) while rejecting and denigrating out-group members (or their discursive contributions). Discursive “epistemic” bubbles transform empirically informed and learning-oriented discourse into ad hominem discourse. Therefore, these bubbles are not strictly speaking epistemic (hence the quotation marks around the term), but their functional equivalent, since epistemic force and content disappear as a result of the discursive distortions: through manipulations of the rules of the language game being played, a game of collective learning is transformed into “a game of insults and pokes in the eye” (Forthcoming: 19). What Anderson calls “a discursive ‘epistemic’ bubble” is what I would call, following Nguyen (2020), a discursive echo chamber: a group or environment which, through distorting discursive mechanisms, instills in subjects epistemic vices (such as critical insensitivity) and resistances to listen properly and to learn.

The group cognition model and the discursive model that Anderson offers can overlap. The example of biased group thinking shaped by racist stereotypes of criminality can illustrate this. The venue of public discourse that is Fox News and the group constituted by its viewership can be characterized as an echo chamber with biased epistemic and discursive norms that create the group dysfunctions explained by Anderson’s two models. When activists and community leaders give information about racial discrimination in the US criminal justice system, networks such as Fox News often depict them as the defenders of “criminals” and the attackers of the protectors of public order. They do this, for example, by associating members of Black Lives Matter with criminal life and attacking them with the opposing slogan Blue Lives Matter. In this discursive frame, activists are negatively stereotyped in such a way that everything they say is depicted as baseless insults and attacks on the defenders of public order or so-called “blue lives.” This negative stereotyping discursively positions viewers in such a way that the only uptake that they are encouraged to give to the activists’ utterances is dismissal and name-calling since their criticisms of and challenges to the criminal justice system have to be understood as concealed attacks and insults to “blue
lives.” What the stigmatization of activist organizations such as Black Lives Matter through racist stereotypes of criminality accomplishes is the systematic discrediting of its members and spokespersons, so that they are considered dangerous to talk to, intrinsically untrustworthy, and are thus excluded from epistemic transactions. And note here the convergence of discursive entrapment with epistemic entrapment: the discursive activation of stigmatizing stereotypes provides an excuse or alibi for epistemic exclusion; the discursive framing creates an epistemic environment in which the activists’ evidence is filtered out or automatically rejected and presented as intrinsically flawed.

Both the discursive frames deployed by Fox News and the epistemic group functioning of its viewers cast out-group interlocutors as adversaries with whom no epistemic cooperation is possible. Discursive adversaries are typically also epistemic adversaries, and neither discursive adversaries nor epistemic adversaries are considered eligible for engaging in fruitful epistemic interaction, cooperation and collective learning. How are discursive and epistemic adversarial relations overcome? How do we put pressure on publics so that they become open to listen to opposed viewpoints and to critically engage with them so that there can be epistemic friction among perspectives and collective learning? In short, how do we fight against the collective vice of critical insensitivity produced and maintained by an echo chamber?

The different dysfunctions in biased group thinking highlighted by the different models we have reviewed clue us in as to the different kinds of remedies that can be mobilized against echo chambers: in particular, psychological, discursive, and epistemic remedies. At the psychological level, the goal is to eradicate the cognitive biases of individuals (overcoming assimilation biases and antagonistic biases); but at the level of group cognition and structures of public discourse, the goal is to suspend dysfunctional epistemic and discursive norms and replace them with better ones. At the discursive level, we need to unmask and denounce ad hominem discourse, and promote the introduction of norms against deploying discursive frames that activate stigmatizing stereotypes that turn interlocutors into adversaries with whom no fruitful discussion can be had. At the epistemic level, we need to speak against the filtering-out and automatic rejection of information and promote norms against dismissing speakers and bodies of evidence out of hand. Of course there will be discursive-epistemic environments and publics resistant to admit these changes, but the very attempt to introduce them can spark critical discussions that can facilitate the achievement of meta-lucidity about the epistemic and discursive norms that those environments and publics are following, typically without any awareness of how these norms work or of their implications. We need collective and concerted efforts to fight against forms of epistemic marginalization and oppression such as the ones that echo chambers produce or protect. In the final section I will provide a preliminary sketch of how to think about collective epistemic resistance and what I term epistemic activism.

4 Resistant epistemic group agency: the epistemic empowerment of the oppressed and epistemic activism

In order to fight against epistemic group vices, we need to go to the supra-individual level and look at forms of collective agency that exert resistance against group failures in epistemic dynamics. As Lorraine Code has pointed out, addressing questions about epistemic responsibility requires engaging with epistemic subjectivities and epistemic communities: “It is about the ethics and politics of knowledge, and indeed about epistemic subjectivity in its multiple instantiations” (Code 2013: 90). As Code and others have emphasized, epistemic responsibility concerns the accountability and responsivity of individual knowers, but also of
groups or publics and of institutions. In her discussions of “the politics of epistemic location” (2006), Code has argued that *epistemic advocacy* is required to unmask our complicity with ongoing injustices and to mobilize publics to fight against them. Code’s concept of advocacy is a key component of what I have called *epistemic activism,* namely, the kind of activism that can mobilize differently situated subjects and publics in order to resist epistemic dysfunctions and pathologies of public discourse (see Medina 2019; Medina Forthcoming A and B; Medina and Whitt 2021).

As Code (2006) suggests, we need to engage in *epistemic advocacy* that denounces dysfunctional epistemic dynamics and public discourses that protect the privileged and marginalize the oppressed. But what is needed in order to overcome epistemically dysfunctional group dynamics is not simply speaking up against epistemic vices. The eradication of widespread epistemic vices requires something more than a critique. It requires epistemic resistance not only in word but indeed, that is, *epistemic resistance in action,* what I call *epistemic activism.* Epistemic activism has two principal aims and there are two kinds of activist moves and techniques associated with these aims: first, epistemic activism aims at the *epistemic empowerment* of the oppressed, that is, at gaining or augmenting epistemic agency for those who have been marginalized or disempowered in epistemic dynamics; and second, epistemic activism aims at *restructuring epistemic environments,* that is, at transforming and meliorating the structural conditions and frameworks that mediate epistemic interactions. I have discussed the structural and institutional side of epistemic activism elsewhere (Forthcoming A and B).

In what follows I will briefly discuss only epistemic empowerment since this chapter has focused on the epistemic vices of groups and it is appropriate to conclude it with a brief discussion of interventions in epistemic group agency that can mitigate such vices.

As explained by Medina and Whitt (2021), we can think of *epistemic activism* as concerted efforts and interventions in epistemic practices that aim to “augment the epistemic agency of unfairly disadvantaged subjects, amplifying their voices and facilitating the development and exercise of their epistemic capacities.” (309) Epistemic activism can take many different shapes and forms. Its strategies and tactics will be dictated by who engages in it, in what contexts, and against what patterns of interaction and institutional frameworks. Differently situated subjects, both oppressed and non-oppressed subjects, can become epistemic activists. “Oppressed subjects can become epistemic activists—sometimes by necessity if not by choice—when they actively fight against their epistemic marginalization and work towards forms of self-empowerment that can achieve the epistemic agency they are unjustly denied” (Medina and Whitt 2021: 312). Consider as an example the epistemic activism within the prison system examined by Medina and Whitt (2021) as a response to the phenomenon of the *epistemic neglect* experienced by inmates in carceral contexts when their complaints and grievances go unheard or are given defective uptake. Within carceral contexts, inmates themselves can (and often do) become epistemic activists by denouncing and trying to resist unfair patterns of epistemic neglect, and by expressing epistemic solidarity by backing up one another’s testimonies, so that they mitigate the harmful consequences that individual acts of protest typically encounter. A good example of epistemic activism cultivated by jail inmates at the Durham County Detention Facility (DCDF) is provided by Medina and Whitt:

At DCDF an unknown number of detainees recently organized the “First Five Grieving Committee,” a “non-violent” and “non-gang affiliated” cooperative that anonymizes and amplifies the grievances of individual detainees. By working together, the members of the Committee have successfully directed their concerns to the Durham County Sheriff, whereas individual grievances are typically heard—if they are heard at all—by
subordinate staff members. This is an instance of epistemic activism, within the context of the jail, starting to ameliorate the testimonial disadvantage that detainees face.” (Medina and Whitt 2021: 312–3)

Note that the formation of the First Five Grieving Committee exemplifies the development of collective epistemic agency: inmates form a collective voice by pooling their agential resources and coordinating their epistemic actions. Inmates organize their voices and interventions in such a way that their individual epistemic acts become mutually supportive and protective of each other, thus becoming part of a collective action. This way of gaining and protecting epistemic agency through epistemic activism illustrates well how epistemic self-empowerment can take place even in the most adverse conditions.

Epistemic activism aimed at the epistemic empowerment of the oppressed so that their voices and perspectives are properly heard can also be exercised by groups or networks that include non-oppressed subjects. Consider here the work of epistemic resistance of the Inside-Outside Alliance (hereafter IOA), a local activist organization that describes itself as “a group of people trying to support the struggles of those inside (or formerly inside) Durham County jail, and their families and friends.” IOA members—friends and family of incarcerated subjects, formerly incarcerated subjects, and activists—engage in epistemic interventions, programs, and initiatives, which they subsume under the heading Amplify Voices Inside. In their coordinated actions IOA members use their collective voice and epistemic agency in order to procure epistemic standing for inmates’ perspectives and some degrees of epistemic agency for their voices in the outside world. As Medina and Whitt put it,

detainees’ voices rarely reach places of political authority without being distorted, translated into other idioms or discourses, or ventriloquized by others. For this reason, it is important to have forms of epistemic activism in which outside allies lend their voices as instruments or extensions of the detainees’ own, without interpreting or translating them. (Medina and Whitt 2021: 313–4)

IOA members do this “by reading detainees’ letters in City Council meetings and County Commissioner meetings, disrupting ‘business as usual’ with the testimonies of individuals who have been excluded from the sites of official power” (314). Other ways in which IOA members seek to amplify detainee voices include publishing their letters on their website or in a print magazine. In these different ways IOA members try to ensure that the voices of inmates are heard in the outside world and their stories, problems, and concerns neglected inside the jail can reach other institutions and authorities as well as the general public. These are examples of epistemic empowerment of marginalized groups and ways of gaining epistemic agency through epistemic activism.

Through their epistemic activism, activist organizations such as IOA fight for the epistemic empowerment of oppressed groups (such as incarcerated subjects) whose voices and perspectives often encounter structural obstacles and become unable to be heard or be given due weight and consideration. Epistemic activism is used to put pressure on publics and venues of public discourse to stop following epistemic and discursive norms that stack the decks against the perspectives of oppressed subjects and trigger dysfunctional epistemic dynamics. A case in point is the phenomenon of echo chambers that keep publics actively ignorant and resistant to learn from certain marginalized perspectives such as those of subjects who experience racism in the US criminal justice system. In this sense it is not surprising that a key goal in the epistemic interventions of prison activists is to stop the circulation of stigmatizing (and
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often racist) stereotypes of criminality that discredit the perspectives of incarcerated subjects. For example, it is common practice among US newspapers and TV news channels to introduce the testimony of prison inmates by describing the crimes of which the testifier has been convicted even though that information is utterly irrelevant to the story, thus using a narrative frame that activates stigmatizing stereotypes of criminality and triggers dismissive attitudes and defective forms of epistemic engagement with the testimony.

We need concerted efforts to put pressure on publics—especially self-segregated and homogeneous publics—to become critically aware of (meta-lucid about) their epistemic group attitudes and habits and the epistemic and discursive norms underlying their group dynamics. This kind of epistemic advocacy and activism is necessary in order to hold publics accountable for the exercise of their epistemic agency and to demand epistemic melioration at the level of epistemic group dynamics (both intra- and intergroup dynamics). This kind of critical attentiveness to epistemic group dynamics and the emphasis on collective epistemic responsibility that epistemic activism tries to spur are necessary if we want to discontinue the exercise of epistemic vices associated with privilege and begin the hard work toward the cultivation of epistemic virtues under conditions of oppression.

Notes

1 I am grateful for the detailed feedback I received from the editors on prior versions of this chapter.
2 I will not get into a discussion of the composition of groups and, in particular, of whether such collectives can be viewed as summative or non-summative groups (that is, reducible or non-reducible to the attitudes of its members). For such discussion, see Lackey (2015).
3 See, for example, Palermos (2016).
4 See esp. p. 120 and pp. 186–206 of The Epistemology of Resistance (2013).
5 This is my own expression, which I will use and explain through an example below.
6 As Anderson puts it:

Identity-expressive discourse expresses the speaker’s group identity, and positions the speaker in relation to people with the same or other identities. It may signal whose side one is on, who is the enemy, or doesn’t belong, who is illegitimate, who is superior to whom. (Forthcoming: 17)

7 For an elucidation of the notion of “epistemic friction,” see Medina (2013).
8 Note that this list is far from exhaustive and focused very heavily on the cognitive side of the dysfunctions of biased group thinking. In particular, a crucial element that I am not considering here is the affective dimension of the dysfunctions in question and the emotional resistances that keep critical insensitivity in place. I have discussed elsewhere the affective side of resisting epistemic vices and dysfunctions in terms of exerting “emotional friction” that can disrupt and displace forms of antipathy and emotionally based epistemic resistances (Medina 2019).

References


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