



Epistemological Diversity and Education Research: Much Ado About Nothing Much?

by Harvey Siegel

Research in education and the training of education researchers are often said to require attention to *epistemological diversity*: Researchers ought to be familiar with different ways of knowing and diverse epistemological perspectives. But the notion is unclear. What is “epistemological diversity”? What exactly is *epistemological* about it? Why is it important for education researchers to be knowledgeable about it? In addressing these questions, I will argue that the call for epistemological diversity is not, where justified, as radical or significant as it is often taken to be; and that, where it is radical or significant, it is not justified.

Research in education, and so the training of future education researchers in graduate schools of education, is often said to require attention to *epistemological diversity*. Future researchers, it is claimed, ought to be familiar with many different ways of knowing, alternative methods of inquiry, diverse epistemological perspectives, and distinct cultural or group epistemologies.

The idea that different groups or cultures have their own distinct epistemologies is defended by an impressive range of scholars. For example, Dolores Delgado Bernal, in advancing a “Chicana feminist epistemological framework,” argues that

[e]pistemological concerns in schools are inseparable from cultural hegemonic domination in educational research. . . . Therefore, “endarkened” feminist epistemologies are crucial, as they speak to the failures of traditional patriarchal and liberal educational scholarship and examine the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. (Bernal, 1998, p. 556)

James Scheurich and Michelle Young report:

Respected scholars of color have suggested . . . that the epistemologies we typically use in educational research may be racially biased. They have argued that our epistemologies—not our use of them, but the epistemologies themselves—are racially biased ways of knowing, implicitly proposing, thus, a new category of racism that could be labeled *epistemological racism*. (Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 4, emphasis in original)

Molefi Kete Asante, discussing the “quest for truth in the Afrocentric enterprise,” argues that in that enterprise

language, myth, ancestral memory, dance–music–art, and science provide the sources of knowledge, the canons of proof and the structures of truth. (Asante, 1990, p. 10)

In these passages the clear suggestion is that cultural or group membership has epistemological consequences, that culture influences epistemology. But how epistemology might be so influenced is unclear. In this article I will address some basic issues raised by this suggestion, in a way that emphasizes its relevance to education research and the graduate education or training of future education researchers. These issues are insightfully addressed in a 2001 symposium issue of this journal,¹ which will serve as a touchstone in addressing them. What ought we to say about such diversity? Should we, as Lauren Jones Young suggests, “rethink and expand our conceptions of ways of knowing and modes of inquiry”? (Young, 2001, p. 5). If so, in what specific ways should we do this?

At first glance, the call to respect (and train future researchers to interact competently with) epistemological diversity seems as innocent and obvious as a call for researchers to be open-minded, broad-minded, and tolerant when dealing with unfamiliar practices and views concerning knowledge and inquiry. So understood, that call captures the anti-dogmatic spirit of the Enlightenment, and is uncontroversial. But advocates of epistemological diversity typically have more than this in mind. What more is not always clear. If our efforts to make such diversity central to the graduate training of education researchers are to be worthwhile, clarity is required. In what follows, then, I will explore that notion in an effort to answer the following questions: What is “epistemological diversity”? What exactly is the *epistemological* dimension and significance of such diversity? Why is it important for education researchers to be well trained with respect to it? In what specific ways ought we to “expand our conceptions of ways of knowing and modes of inquiry”? In answering them, I will suggest that the call for epistemological diversity is not, where justified, as radical or significant as it is often taken to be; and that, where it is radical or significant, it is, alas, not justified.

What Is “Epistemological Diversity”?

What does “epistemological diversity” mean? To what does the expression refer? What sort of diversity is at issue? The candidates for diversity include at least the following: beliefs and belief systems; research methodologies and methods of inquiry; research questions; researchers; cultures and “cultural epistemologies”; views of knowledge; ways of knowing; and “epistemologies,” “epistemological assumptions,” “epistemological premises,” and “epistemological perspectives.” Let us consider some of these central candidates for, or versions of, epistemological diversity.

Beliefs and Belief Systems

Some prominent authors in the multicultural education arena use “knowledge” as a synonym for “belief,” thus rendering “episte-

mological diversity” as a matter of systematic differences in belief. For example, James Banks writes:

I am using knowledge in this article to mean the way a person explains or interprets reality. . . . My conceptualization of knowledge is broad and is used the way in which it is usually used in the sociology of knowledge literature to include ideas, values, and interpretations. . . . Although many complex factors influence the knowledge that is created by an individual or group, including the actuality of what occurred, the knowledge that people create is heavily influenced by their interpretations of their experiences and their positions within particular social, economic, and political systems and structures of a society. (Banks, 1993, p. 5)

This sense of “epistemological diversity” is uncontroversial. Different people have different beliefs and systems of belief, to which they appeal in explaining and interpreting reality, and particular groups of people share belief systems that often differ in systematic ways from other such systems. For example, some extant belief systems hold that some natural phenomena are best explained in spiritual or supernatural terms, while other belief systems eschew such explanations, holding rather that legitimate explanations of natural phenomena must be couched in naturalistic terms.² Insofar as “epistemological diversity” refers to diversity of beliefs and belief systems, it is uncontroversial. No one disputes the diversity of beliefs held by the wide range of epistemic agents (i.e., believers), and Banks is surely correct that the factors that give rise to particular beliefs, and so explanations and interpretations of reality, include not just “the actuality of what occurred” but also believers’ “interpretations of their experiences and their positions within particular social, economic, and political systems and structures of a society.”

Philosophers do not typically understand “epistemology” in this way, taking it to refer rather to theories of *knowledge* (or more broadly, to that area of philosophy that takes such theories, and the issues they address, as its subject matter). There is no need to argue here about which meaning of “epistemology”—that is, as referring to beliefs, or to theories of knowledge or a central area of philosophy—is more appropriate. The main point to note is that if “epistemological diversity” is taken to refer to alternative beliefs or belief systems, the phenomenon in question is uncontroversial, because all are agreed that beliefs and belief systems do indeed differ.³

Research Methodologies and Methods of Inquiry

It is also widely agreed that researchers inquire in many different ways; they use a wide variety of methods or techniques as they go about their work. Some biologists rely on naked eye observation, others use microscopes. Some physicists use tunneling electron microscopes, others use infrared telescopes. Some sociologists and anthropologists rely on sophisticated statistical techniques, others endeavor to gain a more qualitative understanding of their subjects. This sort of “technique diversity” characterizes natural and social scientific research generally. As is well known, education research is also diverse in this way, as scholars often conceive of themselves as either “quantitative” or “qualitative” researchers. Within these two broad categories, there is a wide variety of more specific approaches.⁴

This sort of methodological diversity is both undeniable and uncontroversial. If we (education researchers) want to discover

the attitudes of a given population toward a proposed revision of school boundaries, we have to ask, by way of survey, interview, or the like. If we want to predict the consequences of those attitudes for the success of the proposal, we cannot rely solely on those surveys or interviews, but have also to consider (among other things) patterns of attitudes and outcomes in earlier, similar events. If we want to predict the likely effects of a proposed hot lunch program on student learning in a given student population, we have to consider a broad range of information, which will have to be gathered, processed, and manipulated in a variety of (statistical and other) ways. If we want to estimate the probability of success of a new approach to teaching reading, we have to engage in (among other things) careful observation and data collection, and sophisticated statistical manipulation of that data. If we want to understand differences in different local communities’ understandings of the meaning and significance of a new policy concerning, e.g., admissions requirements for a newly designed arts or science magnet school, we have to engage in a systematic, comparative ethnographic study of the interpretations of that policy held by the various members of those communities. And so on. The general thesis that there are many legitimate ways to conduct research is unexceptionable.⁵

Notice that this *methodological pluralism* is, on the whole, benign. Although such pluralism grants that there are many ways in which research can legitimately be conducted, it does not follow from it either that all research efforts are equally (il)legitimate or that any approach to (or product of) research is as good as any other. That is, *methodological pluralism* does not entail either *methodological skepticism* or *methodological relativism*. This is a good thing for all those concerned with the education of education researchers. For such skepticism or relativism would render graduate study of education research pointless: What would we teach future researchers, how would we train them, if no ways of conducting research could yield knowledge or justified belief (skepticism), or if all ways of conducting research, and so the fruits of all research, were equally legitimate or good (relativism)? Worse, what would be the point of such long and arduous graduate education if the results of all research were either worthless or equally legitimate? In these circumstances there would be no point in conducting research, because any result would either be worthless or stand on an equal epistemological footing with any alternative result.⁶

Of course, if we can distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate research, or between better and worse research, we must do so with reference to relevant *criteria*, in accordance with which such discriminations of quality or legitimacy can be made. A set of key epistemological questions concerning research involves such criteria; central among these questions are: What are these criteria? How are they themselves legitimated or justified? Do they apply equally to all instances or types of research? We shall return to these questions, which are among those routinely addressed by epistemologists.

Research Questions

This sort of diversity is also uncontroversial. Just as researchers in different disciplines pursue many different, worthwhile research agendas, so do researchers within the same discipline. This is especially true of education researchers, who pursue issues of many different sorts—from understanding the cognitive

processes underlying learning to devising efficient and fair ways of organizing, administering, and funding schools and school systems; from innovative ways of promoting equal educational opportunities to effective ways of teaching reading and enhancing student self-esteem; from understanding the nature, value, and legitimate demands of multiculturalism to determining the best ways to meet those demands. There is no special new kind of epistemological diversity introduced here.

Many scholars note the importance of culture or group membership in the determination of research questions actually pursued (and funded). For example, Patricia Hill Collins writes:

Because elite white men and their representatives control structures of knowledge validation, white male interests pervade the thematic content of traditional scholarship. As a result, Black women's experiences with work, family, motherhood, political activism, and sexual politics have routinely been distorted in or excluded from traditional academic discourse. (Collins, 1990, p. 201)

James Banks similarly contends that

[t]he biographical journeys of researchers greatly influence their values, their research questions, and the knowledge they construct. (Banks, 1998, p. 5; original emphasis deleted)

And Sandra Harding writes that

both "women's experiences" and "what women say" certainly are good places to begin generating research projects. (Harding, 1990, p. 142)

Although these citations include important differences, they are agreed that the research questions one asks, deems important, and pursues are influenced by one's cultural, racial, gender, or otherwise specified location. The point is undeniable, as (for example) the history of federal funding for breast cancer research in the United States makes clear (Braun, 2003, p. S101). But that there are a wide variety of research questions that could be pursued, and that researchers' and funding agencies' decisions concerning research pursuits are so influenced, leaves open the further question of the epistemic status of the findings produced by and the conclusions drawn from the research that is actually conducted. No special new kind of epistemological diversity is introduced by these important considerations concerning cultural and other influences on decisions concerning research agendas.

Researchers and Their Cultures

There is considerable, and increasing, diversity in the community of education researchers (which is not to say that more wouldn't be better). Researchers differ in interests, education, temperament, curiosity, ambition, originality, beliefs, values, and so forth. In these respects, at least, diversity among researchers is much like diversity among people in general. Are there *epistemological* dimensions or ramifications of such diversity?

Many theorists have argued that specific sorts of diversity among researchers—in particular, diversity with respect to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and the like—are indeed epistemologically significant. The inclusion in the education research community of those whose groups have traditionally been the victims of exclusion or marginalization has brought new issues to the fore, and has provided new voices, approaches, and substantive and methodological presuppositions to the conversations in which both new and more

familiar issues are addressed. That inclusion—of large numbers of nontraditional (i.e., not White, male, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied) new and future researchers, who can be separated into distinct groups on the basis of such categories—has suggested to many that such groups can and should be distinguished on the basis of their respective epistemological orientations. For example, Young urges that graduate students in education research doctoral programs "bring with them their own cultural histories and ways of knowing and being in the world" (2001, p. 4), and that

[i]n the same ways that we acknowledge epistemological diversity across practices of research, we also see a diversity of epistemology among the practitioners, the community groups, and the family members we and our students study. We need only look at our students to see how values and cultures influence the sense we make of our observations and the meanings that we give them. (Young, 2001, pp. 4–5)

Aaron M. Pallas likewise suggests that "traditionally subordinated groups" have their own "epistemologies" (2001, p. 7).

Although I am sympathetic toward the sociological point, my own situation as a member of the traditionally dominating group—White, male, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and, more generally, privileged—leads me to doubt the idea that one's group significantly influences (let alone determines) one's epistemology, because the "bad guys"—those in that dominating group—have a terrifically broad range of epistemological commitments and predilections. I won't argue the case in any detail, but the thesis that groups systematically share epistemological outlooks or presuppositions seems to me dubious. There is just too much within-group difference in epistemological orientation. Within my own group, advocates and critics can be found of more or less every epistemological stance yet articulated—as a casual glance at the *Journal of Philosophy*, *Philosophical Studies*, the *Philosophical Review*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, or any of the other leading philosophy journals that regularly publish important work in epistemology will reveal.⁷

But I think my dissent from the view here articulated by Young and Pallas hinges crucially on our respective understandings of the key terms of our claims. What exactly does it mean to say that the new voices in the education research community provide that community with new "ways of knowing" or "epistemologies" or "epistemological perspectives"? What exactly are *epistemologies* or *epistemological perspectives*, such that previously excluded individuals and groups bring these to the table?

Epistemologies and Epistemological Perspectives

The essays under discussion are, I think, obscure on just this crucial point. Young, for example, seems to equate "research methodology" and "epistemology," such that every different approach to research has, or amounts to, its own epistemology:

Metz, for example, writes of the importance of researchers learning to "read each others' work across different kinds of research" and of researchers learning "to build on work from traditions other than the one in which they find their intellectual home base." Yet significant caveats to constructing such opportunities remain. For example, how many epistemologies should students encounter, which ones, at what point in the doctoral experience should these be introduced, and to what level of expertise should students be prepared? (Young, 2001, p. 4)

In her article (an earlier version of which Young here cites), Metz is clearly discussing alternative research methodologies—such as “deductive” versus “inductive,” quantitative versus qualitative, those involving rules versus those that don’t—that Young here calls “epistemologies.” As already noted, it is uncontroversial that there is a broad range of alternative ways of conducting education research, that is, different research methodologies. If this is what it means for education research to involve different epistemologies, the existence of these differences is obvious and unproblematic. In this sense, making a fuss about “alternative epistemologies” is indeed much ado about nothing much. Here the question is not a deep philosophical one, but only the practical (although nonetheless difficult) one of the desirability of education for students’ breadth versus depth: Should their graduate education be such that they become deeply competent in one research tradition, at the risk of narrowness; or should they rather be exposed to a broad range of research methodologies, at the risk of superficiality? This is the familiar “depth versus breadth” trade-off familiar to all fields. Insofar as “epistemological diversity” refers to the range of extant methodologies in use in the education research community, worrying about how to deal with it in the graduate education of future education researchers is nothing new.

Similarly, Pallas engagingly speaks of “the cacophony of diverse epistemologies” (Pallas, 2001, p. 6). But his discussion makes clear that he does not mean by that phrase to refer to alternative research methodologies, but rather to the key epistemological assumptions underlying those methodological approaches.⁸ He defines “epistemologies” as “beliefs about what counts as knowledge . . . , what is evidence for a claim, and what counts as a warrant for that evidence” (p. 6). Noting the intimidating range of these present in contemporary education research, Pallas addresses himself to “the consequences of this diversity” for education research and for the education of future researchers. These consequences are far from trivial, because

Epistemologies are central to the production and consumption of educational research. Since epistemologies undergird all phases of the research process, engaging with epistemology is integral to learning the craft of research. Moreover, epistemologies shape scholars’ abilities to apprehend and appreciate the research of others. Such an appreciation is a prerequisite for the scholarly conversations that signify a field’s collective learning. (p. 6)

In light of this centrality of epistemology to the education of researchers and the conduct of research, and the diversity of epistemologies among communities of researchers, how should graduate education in education research be conducted? Pallas’s answer is eloquent and clear:

If educational researchers cannot understand and engage with one another, both within and across at least some educational research communities, the enterprise is doomed to failure. Thus, to prevent a recurring pattern of epistemological single-mindedness, educational researchers will need to engage with multiple epistemological perspectives to the point that members of different communities of educational research practice can understand one another, despite, or perhaps through, their differences. Preparing novice educational researchers for such epistemological diversity is one of the most important things that the faculties of research universities can do. (Pallas, 2001, p. 7)

How should this preparation for epistemological diversity be accomplished? Pallas analyzes the situation in terms of Etienne Wenger’s (1998) notion of “community of practice,” thus reformulating the problem of epistemological diversity into that of enabling graduate students to interact successfully across diverse communities of practice of education research, because “the preparation of educational researchers largely takes place within local communities of research practice” (Pallas, 2001, p. 9). Significantly, in Pallas’s analysis, these local communities—several of which live side by side in graduate schools of education, the main sites of the education of future researchers—are united by their own epistemologies and diverge from the others, which also have their own epistemologies, thus providing a model of epistemological diversity in graduate schools of education.⁹ As Pallas puts it,

Novices who are learning educational research through participation in a particular local community are destined to negotiate *the meaning of what counts as knowledge* through interactions with others in the same community, as well as through exposure to reifications (e.g., books and articles), which are often interpreted in local terms. If there is a connection between community and epistemology, then a local community of research practice is not likely to reflect *within itself* a deep understanding of multiple epistemological perspectives. The more a newcomer is drawn toward the center of such a community, the less likely he/she is to develop a more variegated understanding of the epistemologies of educational research. This is largely because being drawn to a community’s center is at odds with the possibility of being drawn into other communities whose practices are defined in different epistemological terms. A novice who, over time, deepens his or her understandings of educational research practice in the terms of a particular epistemology in a particular community—as we usually expect doctoral students to do—is unlikely to develop a first-hand feel for diverse epistemological framings of educational research. (Pallas, 2001, p. 9, first emphasis added)

In other words, new students apprentice and experience “intense participation” (Pallas, 2001, p. 9) in a community of research practice—for example, the community of quantitative educational psychology, or of qualitative anthropologically oriented educational ethnography—and embrace the epistemology of that community of practice, while getting relatively little and only superficial exposure to the alternative epistemologies of other communities of practice. On the basis of this analysis of epistemological diversity in the graduate education of future education researchers, Pallas offers several promising practical recommendations for the reform of that education, including (a) elevating the consideration of epistemology by both faculty and graduate students, (b) making the discussion of epistemology the responsibility of the entire faculty, (c) linking discussions of epistemology to the practice of education research, (d) placing discussions of epistemology in historical context, (e) designing social spaces in which epistemological experimentation is safe and encouraged, and (f) acknowledging the inevitability that some doctoral students will not be deeply engaged in reflection concerning alternative epistemological perspectives (Pallas, 2001, pp. 9–10). These suggestions are, I think, to be applauded.

Epistemology and Diversity: The Heart of the Matter

However, Pallas’s suggestions, and his discussion more generally (as well as those of Young, Metz, and Page), treat epistemologi-

cal diversity itself somewhat uncritically, as if the critical evaluation of these diverse epistemological perspectives is impossible, undesirable, or inappropriate. The idea seems to be that the many epistemologies available—those of diverse research traditions and communities of practice, and those of particular, subordinated social groups—are held by actual persons and groups, and therefore are not to be held up to the light of critical scrutiny. Rather, they are to be accepted at face value as legitimate, and integrated into the graduate study of future researchers. To champion epistemological diversity, apparently, is to strive to enable graduate students to understand and interact meaningfully with as many alternative epistemologies as they can manage.

Why think that the epistemologies of all such groups are worthy of curricular inclusion, and the attention of all future researchers? Why presume that they cannot be subjected to critical scrutiny and found wanting? The possibilities here seem to be three: Criticizing the epistemology of a particular community of practice or subordinated group is either *epistemologically*, *morally*, or *pragmatically* suspect. The authors being considered here do not say this, but their discussions, I think, presume it. For consider: Why is it important that we strive “to prevent a recurring pattern of epistemological single-mindedness” (Pallas, 2001, p. 7) in our students? Presumably, because such “epistemological single-mindedness” is a bad thing, something to be deplored and avoided in our graduate students. But why? Presumably, because the many alternative epistemologies available and in use are, because in use, worthy of the serious consideration of graduate students and future researchers, whatever their own epistemological outlook might be. But why does the fact they are in use by some relevant group render these alternatives automatically worthy of attention, or beyond critical rejection as unworthy of the attention of future researchers? Let us consider each possibility in turn.

1. Is it epistemologically suspect to criticize the epistemology of a particular community of practice/approach to research/subordinated group?

At first blush it seems not, because the philosophical subjects of epistemology and philosophy of science do just this. Courses in epistemology and philosophy of science routinely subject alternative epistemological positions and theses to critical scrutiny; some survive rather well, others do not. For example, “foundationalism” and “positivism” are routinely bashed by contemporary education researchers who are theoretically and methodologically oriented. This bashing may well be justified. But it is somewhat troubling that the views being bashed are often rather badly mischaracterized by the bashers.¹⁰ Epistemological positions such as these are complex and multifaceted; one cannot address a plethora of them in a one-semester course and expect theoretical sophistication to result. More to the point, they cannot adequately be grasped without at least a bit of philosophical training. Understanding and criticizing epistemological and methodological positions takes time, effort, and expertise; the serious coming to grips with “alternative epistemologies” requires the serious inclusion of philosophy in the graduate education research curriculum.

But the more important point is this: Epistemologies are not all born equal; those that deserve to count as legitimate epistemological alternatives must prove their mettle in the give-and-take of scholarly disputation. Some proposals will survive such disputa-

tion; others not. As suggested above, the scholarly education research community should endorse *pluralism*, not relativism.

When it comes to research methodologies, this point is readily accepted. It is uncontroversial that there are legitimate forms of “qualitative” as well as “quantitative” research; of “inductive” as well as “deductive” research; of efforts aimed at nonquantitative understanding as well as those aimed at deriving significant findings from the sophisticated statistical manipulation of large sets of data. It is equally uncontroversial that some approaches to research are illegitimate or otherwise problematic, for example, those that pretend to be thoroughly value neutral,¹¹ or that fail to place adequate controls on key variables, to control for placebo, halo, and other well-known effects, or to protect against experimenter bias. It is simply a mistake to think that criticism of “alternative epistemologies”—understood either as research methodologies or as their basic underlying assumptions—is in any way epistemologically suspect.

My claim here is that “alternative epistemologies” themselves admit of critical evaluation. As noted above, such evaluation will itself be conducted in terms of relevant *criteria*, such criteria being the property not of any given epistemology but rather of an overarching epistemological and philosophical perspective (or “meta-perspective”) that is *neutral* with respect to them all.

I can well understand the incredulity that this boldfaced appeal to neutrality will undoubtedly provoke. How can *any* perspective be neutral? After all, contemporary research across the humanities and social sciences has unambiguously rejected any sort of “view from nowhere” or “God’s-eye perspective” that is alleged to be free of the influence of the language, culture, conceptual scheme, gender, race, or class of the person or group whose perspective it is. Any such allegedly neutral perspective, it is commonly held, is nothing more than a cover for the hegemonic imposition of the perspective of the dominant group upon dominated others.

There is much in this commonly held rejection of neutrality that I endorse. I agree, of course, that any such hegemonic imposition is to be rejected. I agree, as well, that there is no God’s-eye view, no “perspectiveless perspective,” from which we can judge. But such a *global* neutrality, suggested by a God’s-eye perspective, is not required for the sort of neutrality in question. All that is needed is a *local* neutrality, that is, one that affords the possibility of fair-minded, non-question-begging evaluation of the issue, or epistemology, in question. Consider positivism, an epistemological orientation widely rejected by the contemporary education research community. Is that rejection warranted? Are we right to reject positivism? If so, it is because we have good reasons for thinking it defective. But these good reasons must themselves be neutral, in that they do not beg the question or otherwise prejudice the case against the rejected view. That is, they must be such as to establish the deficiencies and so the rational rejection of positivism, and moreover to do so in a way that could, in principle, incline a fair-minded advocate of that view to agree that rejection is indeed rational and appropriate. Such neutrality is a necessary condition of any fair, effective evaluation, both of alternative epistemological presuppositions and theses in particular and of any sort of serious scholarly inquiry more generally. Insofar as education researchers, of any epistemological orientation, actually establish any research findings, their doing so requires that those findings are in fact supported by reasons and

evidence that are neutral in this sense. Any researchers who take themselves to have established any such finding—most of us, I dare say—are committed to the possibility of such neutrality.¹²

It is perhaps worth noting that the neutrality just defended receives support from what may initially seem an unlikely source: *standpoint epistemology*. The basic idea of standpoint theories is that “in a socially stratified society, different social positions yield distinctive epistemic positions, and some are better than others” (Antony, 2002, p. 472). Sandra Harding’s important account of what she calls “strong objectivity” argues that “a feminist standpoint theory can direct the production of less partial and less distorted beliefs” (Harding, 1991, p. 138). As Harding states the crucial point,

A feminist standpoint epistemology requires strengthened standards of objectivity. The standpoint epistemologies call for recognition of a historical or sociological or cultural relativism—but not for a judgmental or epistemological relativism. They call for the acknowledgment that all human beliefs—including our best scientific beliefs—are socially situated, but *they also require a critical evaluation to determine which social situations tend to generate the most objective knowledge claims*. They require, as judgmental relativism does not, a scientific account of the relationships between historically located belief and maximally objective belief. So they demand what I shall call *strong objectivity* in contrast to the weak objectivity of objectivism and its mirror-linked twin, judgmental relativism. (Harding 1991, p. 142, first emphasis added)

There is much in this passage, and in Harding’s work more generally, that deserves extended consideration; I regret that I cannot consider it further here.¹³ But the central point is clear: In Harding’s view, feminist standpoint theories require and insist upon the possibility of a robust (though not “perspectiveless” or “unsituated”) objectivity, and the possibility of fair critical evaluation of competing knowledge claims, in order to establish that particular social situations do in fact “tend to generate the most objective knowledge claims.” Such determinations of objectivity depend on fair critical evaluation of the relevant evidence and so depend on the sort of neutrality argued for above; for without such neutrality, we would have no reason to think that a given social situation does (or does not) in fact yield less distorted, more objective knowledge, or that claims to that effect are themselves sufficiently objective. In this way, Harding’s call for “strong objectivity” both supports and requires the possibility (and actuality) of locally neutral, fair-minded evaluation of claims and the reasons and evidence alleged to support them.

Among the criteria (neutral in the “local” sense just specified) in terms of which alternative epistemologies can be critically evaluated are those expressed by the following questions: Does the epistemology in question use research methods that reliably produce reliable evidence? Do its methods require evidence sufficient in quantity, quality, and variety to warrant the conclusions or findings it produces? Do those methods require adequate sample size? Do they control for subject and experimenter bias? Does the epistemology in question possess the conceptual resources to afford adequate explanations of the phenomena it addresses? Does it take adequate note of counter-evidence and criticism?

The proper understanding and application of such criteria are complex and require not only statistics and qualitative methods courses but also epistemology courses in which the careful artic-

ulation and critique of such criteria are themselves a focus of concern, and philosophy of science courses in which their place in a full understanding of scientific research and its appropriate methods and constraints is itself an object of study. I do not mean to suggest that these criteria are themselves unproblematic or uncontroversial; they are neither. Nevertheless, without an appeal to some such criteria, there can be no critical appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses either of diverse epistemological approaches or of the criteria in terms of which those approaches are evaluated. The anticipated result of such appeals is that some, but not all, “alternative epistemologies” will meet the criteria: that is, pluralism.

It is worth repeating that the criteria in question are neither unproblematic nor uncontroversial; such criteria are always in principle open to challenge, and in fact are often likely to be contested. They are manifestly not beyond criticism. But if such contestation can be even potentially effective—if it is possible in principle for the criticism to show a given criterion to be defective—that can only be because fair, legitimate appeal has been made to other criteria or “meta-criteria.” Fair criticism of any particular criterion requires appeal to other criteria (or meta-criteria) that are themselves applicable in a way that is locally neutral, and so does not beg the question against the criterion being criticized.

Although the sort of epistemological criticism of alternative epistemologies just discussed is most obviously relevant to alternative research methodologies and approaches to research, it is equally relevant to the epistemologies of marginalized or traditionally subordinated groups. This leads directly to the next point.

2. *Is it morally suspect to criticize the epistemology of a particular community of practice/approach to research/subordinated group?*

I suspect that much of the call for incorporating “epistemological diversity” in the curriculum is motivated by this concern. The communities of education researchers and of graduate students in graduate schools of education are increasingly populated by members of “traditionally subordinated groups” (Pallas, 2001, p. 7). It is often thought that criticizing the epistemologies of such groups is *morally* inappropriate—a failure to treat the members of these groups with respect.

I have already expressed my reason for doubting the very idea that epistemologies can be ascribed to such groups in a straightforward, one-to-one way. There is simply too much within-group variation to think that each such group (women, people of color, nonheterosexuals), or even specific subgroups within such groups (Chicana feminists, African men, White Jewish gay men), can be neatly assigned their own epistemology. Indeed, such an assignment smacks of a problematic essentialism.

But even if we could correctly ascribe unique epistemologies to such groups, criticizing those epistemologies would not necessarily be morally problematic. To be sure, treating the members of such groups with respect is a moral requirement—as it is to so treat all persons. But treating the members of a group with respect does not prohibit the criticism of their ideas in general or their epistemologies in particular. Treating people with respect requires taking their ideas seriously, rather than ignoring them or regarding them as unworthy of serious consideration. But it does not require taking their ideas to be correct, or correct “for them,” or as good as any alter-

native ideas. This general point applies in particular to their epistemologies. There is nothing suspect about criticizing the epistemological views of the members of a subordinated group, in terms of relevant criteria, including those mentioned in the previous section. Of course, to be taken seriously themselves, such criticisms must be offered in a spirit of cooperative inquiry. Nevertheless, respecting the group and its members does not require making their epistemologies immune to criticism.¹⁴

Readers might well think that this answer, while perhaps good as far as it goes, does not go far enough, because it does not squarely address an issue that has been lurking just below the surface for some time now: that of the use or abuse of *power*. Let us address it squarely now.

3. *Is it inevitably an abuse of power to criticize the epistemology of a particular community of practice/approach to research/subordinated group?*

I have argued that alternative epistemologies can be legitimately criticized by appeal to suitable, locally neutral criteria. But can such allegedly legitimate critique be distinguished from the imposition of the criteria of the dominant perspective on dominated alternative perspectives? If not, then criticism of alternative epistemologies appears to be nothing more than the hegemonic abuse of power.

This is a deep and serious problem that the position I have been defending must satisfactorily address. Happily, it does so, by making clear that charges of hegemonic abuse of power, just like criticisms of alternative epistemologies, must be justified on the basis of reasons and evidence, and so must themselves appeal to relevant criteria.

I agree, of course, that the hegemonic abuse of power, in the guise of allegedly neutral criticism of alternative perspectives, must be rejected. This danger is real, and must be avoided. Cases in which critique is indeed an abuse of power must be exposed and seen for what they are. But this is not a flaw inherent in critique *per se*; it is rather a danger of dominating imposition masquerading as fair critique. The only way to expose and overcome such abuse is to deal with it by way of critique—by making the case (by way of appeal to legitimate criteria, locally and neutrally applied) that the “critique” in question does not stand up to critical evaluation but is rather a matter of inappropriate imposition. What alternative is there? Isn’t this precisely what critics of domination (e.g., feminists, anti-racists) do? The feminist case is instructive: To establish that particular “male” criteria were in fact objectionable, gendered impositions, feminist scholars offered compelling arguments and evidence that the criteria in question, or systematic applications of them, were objectionably biased in favor of “male” interests. In this way, illegitimate dominant impositions were made visible, subjected to fair critique, and eventually overcome (or are at least on the way to being overcome).¹⁵

To this line of response, it might be replied that it is itself an instance of hegemonic imposition and therefore an abuse of power. The imposition in question is that of imposing “the very tools of mainstream philosophical thought as the standard for determining the merits . . . of alternative epistemologies.”¹⁶ In this view, if we are to make a serious attempt to make room for alternative epistemologies, we must not hold such alternatives captive to mainstream, dominant criteria of epistemic evaluation.

To the extent that such criteria are in fact wielded hegemonically, and so are abusively applied to alternative epistemological perspectives, the appeal to them is indeed inappropriate. But consider: To what criteria could we appeal in sustaining such a charge? To be epistemologically effective, such criticism depends upon appeal to the criteria embedded in directives such as, “Don’t beg the question against the position you are attempting to criticize”; “Be fair in your criticism”; “Don’t assume without justification what your opponent denies”; and so forth. (In other words, the critic is claiming that the imposition of dominant epistemological values upon dominated others problematically violates these very criteria, in finding fault with alternative epistemological perspectives by begging the question against them, criticizing them unfairly and prejudicially, assuming the truth of what they reject, and so forth.) There is no logical alternative to so appealing.

But notice that these criteria are among the very “tools of mainstream philosophical thought.” Without appeal to such “tools,” it is not possible to defend alternative epistemologies from defective critiques that rest on the illegitimate, hegemonic imposition of dominant criteria. Advocates of alternative epistemologies must rely on these very same tools in making their criticisms of “mainstream philosophical thought” and defending those alternatives from hegemonic imposition masquerading as legitimate critique. In other words, these aspects of mainstream thought cannot coherently be rejected by the advocates of alternative epistemologies (Siegel, 1987, 1997, 2004).

Education research should indeed make room for alternative meanings, values, and ways of knowing. All of this is captured by pluralism. But saying this, or indeed making any claim about education research, requires appeal to “the very tools of mainstream philosophical thought.” Consequently, the appeal to such tools is not necessarily or inevitably a hegemonic abuse of power. Sometimes it is; in these cases the appeal is flawed, and can be shown to be so by arguments that demonstrate the flawed nature of the appeal. In other cases the appeal can be shown to be legitimate, by way of arguments that establish the non-question-begging nature of the appeal, or the need of the proponent of the alternative perspective to appeal to those very same tools in order to make her case. To forbid or reject all such appeals is to embrace not pluralism but relativism, the difficulties of which have been noted above. The call for “epistemological diversity,” therefore, is defensible only within limits: pluralism, but not relativism.

4. *Is it pragmatically suspect to criticize the epistemology of a particular community of practice/approach to research/subordinated group?*

Here, the idea is straightforward. Such criticism might be thought to be pragmatically suspect simply because all of the alternative epistemologies that are in use are, in fact, in use; education research as a field is the sum total of all the research conducted from these alternative perspectives; education researchers should, to the greatest extent possible, be able to interact meaningfully with all available research. Given the general difficulty of uncontroversially showing a particular epistemology to be deficient, the pragmatic course is simply to take all of those currently in use as legitimate, so that present and future researchers will be able to communicate with maximal effectiveness, thus maximizing the research output

of the education research community as a whole. This will have the added significant benefit of enhancing all research, from whatever perspective, by allowing it to benefit from the insights of all other perspectives (Pallas, 2001, pp. 6–7).

With this pragmatic point I am in considerable sympathy. The more communication and understanding we can get across diverse communities of research practice, the better. Insofar as the motivation for enhancing epistemological diversity in the education research community is this pragmatic one, it is difficult to see any reason for rejecting it, other than equally pragmatic considerations, e.g., the multiplicity of extant epistemological perspectives and the shortage of time in a typical graduate student's schedule for mastering both the epistemologies of multiple communities of research practice and the philosophical knowledge and skills required to evaluate them. But I would be remiss not to note that this pragmatic point is itself somewhat superficial, amounting to little more than: "There are lots of ways to conduct good research; let's teach our students as many as we can, and help them to become open-minded with respect to the insights of those that they do not themselves master, thereby helping them to become skilled in conducting research themselves."

Conclusion

I have argued that the expression "epistemological diversity" is unclear, and that the possible understandings of it considered thus far are either familiar and uncontroversial, or philosophically untenable; and that our efforts to foster such diversity ought to proceed in a way that is fully cognizant of the philosophical cost of straying beyond a viable pluralism into problematic forms of epistemological relativism or skepticism.

Young, in introducing the articles by Pallas, Metz, and Page, writes:

All three authors . . . argue especially for thoughtful, intentional, and reflexive consideration of systematic experiences that prepare novice researchers in education to deal with epistemological diversity. Each author calls for rich occasions where students have opportunities to learn multiple epistemological perspectives in order to be able to engage meaningfully with members of other communities of education practice. (Young, 2001, p. 4)

Understood as calls for students to have substantial familiarity with at least some of the many approaches to research used by the various members of the contemporary education research community, such calls for epistemological diversity face practical objections concerning available time and the need for students to specialize and master a particular approach to research, but are otherwise unproblematic. For scientific research, including education research, has always been pluralistic in that researchers bring different knowledge bases to their work, appeal to many distinct types and sources of evidence, and use many legitimate approaches to gather, evaluate, and infer from that evidence.

Understood as calls for students to learn to see things from the perspectives of alternative communities of research practice and alternative cultural groups, such calls for epistemological diversity are likewise unproblematic, because this sort of tolerance—involving open-mindedness, openness to objections and alternative points of view, a willingness to take into account alternative points of view and to take seriously criticisms of one's own point

of view—is part and parcel of the traditional "Enlightenment" epistemology that calls for epistemological diversity are often intended to challenge.

The call for epistemological diversity and for students to engage multiple epistemological perspectives becomes problematic just at the point where it suggests the sorts of skepticism or relativism that I attempted to discredit earlier. The suggestion that there is no fair way of evaluating any given sort of research, so that any piece of research is as good as any other, is both incorrect philosophically and undermining of the very activity of education research. The quite different suggestion that different cultures or communities have their own, unchallengeable "epistemological perspectives," such that what counts as knowledge or as acceptable research varies from group to group—so that a given research finding counts as knowledge, or as established, for men but not for women; for African Americans but not for Anglo Americans, Cuban Americans, Korean Americans, or Haitian Americans; or for gay and lesbian consumers of education research but not heterosexual consumers—is equally incorrect philosophically and equally undermining of the very point of conducting or reading such research. So understood, the call for epistemological diversity is one that should be resisted by education researchers.

To say this is not to call for the silencing of alternative voices or alternative approaches to research. On the contrary, openness to new voices and approaches should be both welcomed and encouraged by education researchers and incorporated into the education of future researchers. But conflating epistemological pluralism with a problematic relativism or skepticism can only hamper the important project of rethinking the graduate education of future education researchers. Keeping these distinct calls for epistemological diversity clear is a key step in the process of rethinking and ultimately enhancing the graduate education of current and future students of education research.

NOTES

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¹"Research for Doctoral Students in Education" (Metz, 2001; Pallas, 2001; Page, 2001; Young, 2001) in *Educational Researcher*, 30(5).

²For examples, discussion, and references, see Siegel, 2001, 2002.

³It is perhaps worth pointing out that philosophers' emphasis on knowledge allows them to regard epistemology as a *normative* domain, because it leaves room for consideration not only of what people in fact believe, but also of what they *should* believe, of what is *worthy* of belief.

⁴For example, Mary Haywood Metz identifies "qualitative sociology" and "anthropologically inclined ethnography" as two sorts of qualita-

tive approaches used in her own department at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She mentions “traditional experiments,” “quasi-experiments,” “survey research,” “ethnography,” “history,” “critical theory,” and “postmodernism” as approaches to research treated in the Research Education Program in that department (2001, p. 12).

⁵Many philosophers of science take this sort of “technique diversity” to show that there is no such thing as *scientific method*—no one method to follow in pursuing scientific research. Understood as either an algorithmic procedure or a universal technique, there is surely no such thing. But my own view is that this is the wrong way to think about scientific method. Scientific method is best understood in terms, not of a unique technique or procedure, but rather of its reflection of a systematic *commitment to evidence*. For the fuller story, see Siegel, 1985. Interestingly, Metz posits “an underlying research process common to very different kinds of work” (2001, p. 13); and Page refers to a common “logic of inquiry” consisting of basic “philosophical issues that inform any systematic inquiry” that different methodological approaches address in distinct ways (2001, p. 22). In these ways both Metz and Page acknowledge a commonality of purpose and method (not technique) across the wide range of methodologies taught and practiced by researchers in graduate schools of education.

⁶For more on relativism see Siegel, 1987, 2004.

⁷Much depends on the degree to which group membership is alleged to influence one’s epistemology. All the authors discussed suggest that the one seriously influences the other. I offer my own case of within-group variation as a counter-example to any claim of significant influence; I suggest that other groups, for example, women and people of color, also harbor extensive within-group variation, thus again undermining the claim of significant influence of group membership on epistemology. I intentionally leave “significant” and “serious” vague here.

⁸In addition to her using it as an expression equivalent in meaning to “research methodology,” Young also understands “epistemology” in this broader way when she writes of the call for faculty “to assume responsibility for explicating the assumptions, goals, and epistemologies that undergird their research, their courses, and their initiation of doctoral students into professional life in the field of education” (Young, 2001, p. 4).

⁹Here Pallas, like Young, equates “epistemology” with something like “research methodology.” That is, both authors use “epistemology” equivocally, using it sometimes to mean “research methodology” (or “research method”) and sometimes to refer to the epistemological assumptions or presuppositions underlying such methodologies.

¹⁰I particularly recommend D. C. Phillips’s (1987, 2000) documentation of the misunderstandings of “positivism” and other “epistemologies” in the education research literature.

¹¹That is, that fail to acknowledge either cognitive or contextual values (or both) that they presuppose and that guide their research agendas and trajectories.

¹²There is obviously much more to be said about the character of such neutrality than I can say here. As the anonymous reviewers have forcefully reminded me, such “neutrality” is difficult to articulate. For a recent attempt, see Siegel, 2004, pp. 750–754; cf. also Siegel, 1987, 1997. My thanks to the reviewers, whose criticisms prompted the preceding two paragraphs. I borrow the “local/global” neutrality distinction from my former student Timothy Mosteller, who introduced it in his PhD dissertation *Epistemological Relativism: MacIntyre, Putnam and Rorty* (University of Miami, 2002; forthcoming as Mosteller, 2006).

¹³Harding develops her account of “strong objectivity” in several places; see particularly Harding, 1991 (chapters 5–7); 1993; and 1998 (pp. 18–19, chapter 8).

¹⁴This point deserves much more attention than I can give it here. For further discussion, see Siegel, 1997, 1999, 2001, and especially 2002, pp. 812–813. One further matter I have yet to address is the moral complexity of the classroom situation, and in particular the fact

that the teacher’s authority makes criticism of students’ “alternative epistemologies” especially tricky. My thanks to Judith Suissa for this important point.

¹⁵For further discussion see Siegel, 1997, especially chapter 12.

¹⁶As suggested by a reviewer.

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