Psychologists and other folks: Comments on psychology as a science in between self-knowledge and otherness

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Abstract
Barbara Held (2020) discusses the claim that mainstream psychology tends to exert epistemic violence on so-called “othered” groups. Held shows, however, (a) that the idea of different epistemologies underpinning some such arguments is a difficult matter, (b) that folk notions (and theories) sometimes hailed as an antidote to the alleged othering might themselves at times be oppressive, and (c) that so-called mainstream psychology in fact can well serve progressive and critical purposes. Thus, Held problematizes the distinction made between psychology about (from above) and psychology of and from (from below); that is, she finds the distinction unconvincing and rather problematic as it stands. Yet, she does not seem to wish to do away with it all together. In this comment, I relate her discussion to a wider scientific debate on othering, and, by way of an ending, offer an alternative metaphor: psychology from the flank.

Keywords
epistemic objectivity versus relativity, epistemic violence, othering, philosophy of psychology, science from below

Barbara Held (2020) discusses the claim—or accusation—that mainstream psychology tends to exert epistemic violence on so-called “othered” groups. She is not wholly unsympathetic to this claim. However, she shows (a) that the idea of different epistemologies underpinning some such arguments is a difficult matter, (b) that folk notions (and theories) sometimes hailed as an antidote to the alleged othering might themselves at times be oppressive, and (c) that so-called mainstream psychology in fact can well serve progressive and critical purposes. In this way, she problematizes the distinction made between psychology about (from above) and psychology of and from (from below); that is, she finds the distinction unconvincing and rather problematic as it stands. Yet, she does not seem to wish to do away with it all together. In order to clarify this issue, I venture to offer an alternative metaphor: psychology from the flank. But in order to do that,

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I need to discuss the concepts of “other” and “othering” within a broader scientific context, and also engage with a few arguments that emerge from a more general philosophy of science discourse.

Othering as such is of course not a new phenomenon, neither as a psychological and social fact, nor as a research object. Classical studies in the othering of different social groups, people, and whole continents include Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946/1995), Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949/1997), Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/1967), and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978/2003). These important contributions investigate the instrumental role of constructing the other as other in the formation of the self, and highlight the often violent yet intricate relation of social domination within such a process. Most probably, they have been important sources of inspiration for today’s discussion of epistemic violence in psychology and elsewhere. But the recent othering problematic, as discussed by Held (2020), draws on other discussions as well, since it also involves the explicit question of the epistemic value of what could be called group or Indigenous knowledge. Now, this latter question (of the epistemic value of group or Indigenous knowledge), or one closely related to it, has been fundamental to the development of the self-understanding of the behavioural and social sciences during much of the 20th century and, arguably, it underpins the old—considerably defused yet still ongoing—debate regarding the merits and shortcomings of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Put bluntly, the question could perhaps be restated as follows: To what extent does the researcher need to take into account the knowledge claim raised, explicitly or implicitly, by those under study? Several influential authors, such as Peter Winch (1958) and Charles Taylor (1985), have argued that, unless you are prepared to satisfy yourself with a de facto piecemeal understanding of human beings by sticking to the Gordian solution of a version of behaviourism, you will have to take seriously the knowledge possessed by those people that you study, *since that knowledge is in fact part of what makes up the objects of study.* But what does it mean to take knowledge seriously? I think that Held (2020), by discussing rationality and relativism, rightly has pointed out (and further elaborated) two different ways of *not* taking this knowledge seriously (pp. 354–355).

The first way is simply and solely to register knowledge as a plain fact among other facts: *it is an ascertained fact that this group (or individual) thinks that X, and that this thinking can be related to factors Y, Z, and so forth.* This is indeed a somewhat crude “scientific” way of approaching the knowledge of the other; no doubt it is a kind of othering of the other’s knowledge (cf. Skjervheim, 1996). The claims would then not be understood as claims proper, and those raising the claims, that is, those thinking that X, would not (in this situation) be taken to be rational subjects ready to, when necessary, defend, refine, or perhaps—if confronted with the forceless force of better arguments—change their thinking.¹ Of course, this approach is often legitimate and appropriate for some scientific purposes. But it cannot, if Winch and Taylor are correct, form the basis for psychological self-understanding.

The second way of not taking the knowledge in question seriously is quite opposite in tone, often more or less honestly dressed up in a parlour of respect. Nevertheless, it too entails a kind of othering: *this group (or individual) thinks that X and thus X is knowledge to them and should be respected as such.*² Surely, taking the other’s knowledge
seriously must mean something else. Yes, but what? I believe that Jürgen Habermas’ work can help us here. Habermas is one of the best-known combatants in the 20th-century Positivismusstreit and I would like to return to one of the central arguments of his Theory of Communicative Action (1981/1984). In this work, Habermas shows (among other things) that, in order to understand any (communicative) proposition, you have to understand under what conditions this proposition is true (or false). That means you have to position yourself at the same neither privileged nor underprivileged epistemic level as the one you try to understand (cf. Held, 2020, pp. 355–356). But if this is so, what about the question of a psychology from below?

An early systematic and programmatic from-below approach was developed among French and British historians (e.g., Thompson, 1963/1982), but it could of course be found in other disciplines as well (e.g., Smith, 1974/2006). The thrust of the approach was the urge to tell another story, to bring to light hitherto neglected experience, problems, agency, and importance of nonprivileged groups in history and society. This by all means justified idea, perhaps merging with other intellectual currents and projects, soon came to not only “just” tell another story, but also to some extent challenge a “mainstream” conception of objective knowledge. On the one hand, history from below self-critically started to question its own ideas of below, working class, ordinary people, and the like, a questioning that brought forth or awoke a suspicion toward any such general (collective) concepts. But what is left of history as a science if all history turns into particularistic microhistory (cf. Sharpe, 2001)? On the other hand, in some feminist writings the idea of an epistemic standpoint was developed, which, despite the sometimes explicitly declared intentions to avoid this (e.g., Harding, 1993/2006), could justifiably be taken to imply epistemic relativism. The key factor here is probably whether one understands the from-below perspective as a methodological heuristic (i.e., a possible starting point for, or rule of thumb when, approaching a particular subject), or as part of an epistemological theory proper. The first alternative seems to me to be perfectly legitimate; the latter not.

Held (2020) discusses two particular forms of epistemic violence against othered groups: disparaging interpretations of empirical findings and conceptual omissions. However, “respecting” the knowledge of these othered groups threatens, as we have seen, to undermine the idea of science as a project of universal knowledge. Of course, one might ask whether or not there could still be an “objective” way for psychology to handle this dilemma. What about, for example, the theory of the Fundamental Attribution Error? And the Actor Observer Effect? Couldn’t we turn their (or kindred) critical gaze to psychology itself? I think not. And that is for the same reason why we cannot have a sociology of knowledge investigating the sociology of knowledge itself (Skjervheim, 1973): the kind of objectivity that science, all to its merits, produces is itself blind to the question of validity of science itself. But there is no reason to despair. The crux is to see that in fact all objectivity and all kinds of formal knowledge are built upon nonformal everyday knowledge (on the Lebenswelt, as it is called in German). This building can be better or worse and it has to be discussed and evaluated according to its merits, which is, in fact, precisely what the critics of epistemic violence and Held are doing. And it is important to see this as a fully legitimate and necessary part of psychology itself!
We could perhaps approach our topic from quite another direction: Why do we have psychology at all? It seems to me that, ultimately, psychology is one of those disciplines developed to understand ourselves. But we always already do understand ourselves, don’t we? Yes, to some extent. This knowledge, however, is seldom perfect, neither on the individual, nor on the collective or general level. And this, of course, makes room for psychological investigations and knowledge. However, the relation between scientific psychological and pre-existing lay (or folk) knowledge is not only at times blurred (cf. Held, 2020, pp. 353, 357); it is also somewhat strained. On the one hand psychology and psychological knowledge is, and necessarily constitutes itself as, an autonomous branch of science. On the other hand, it is bound to start from and with our often imperfect, unclear, and perhaps even contradictory lay knowledge—there can really be no other point of departure. And to lay knowledge it must, for matters of validity and legitimacy, also return. Psychology thus necessarily involves a moment of distancing, of othering. But also, ultimately, an effort to overcome this othering, a recapturing one might say, of the self in the other. Certainly, this epistemic process is not without its risks and dangers, and the discussion about epistemic violence makes at least this clear. Now, one way of handling the dangers would be to flatly deny the whole problem and the accusations put forth by those whom Held (2020) calls “critical-cum-Indigenous psychologist[s]” (p. 350) and other critics of “mainstream” bias. But this would be an utterly arrogant and unacademic approach. Another way would be the reverse: a denial of any need for othering in psychology whatsoever. However, this would, as I see it, ruin the psychological project all together; it would amount to throwing out the baby with the (other) bath water (cf. Held, 2020, pp. 364–365). Better, then, to scrutinize the concept and practice of othering in order to find a reasonable way of handling it. As a possible tool in this project I suggest to complement the idea of a psychology from below with the idea of a psychology from the flank.

Held asks whether “knowledge of, from, and for the (othered) people” can solve the problem of epistemic violence. But this is not the kind of problem that could ever be “solved.” This problem is, for epistemic reasons, part of the psychological project itself. Therefore, a psychology from the flank should not be understood as an alternative solution. This may perhaps sound a bit disappointing; the metaphor offers, for example, by itself, no obvious directions for new research programs. But a psychology from the flank would at least have the advantage of not trying to position itself at an epistemic level different from the everyday lives of everyday people of one sort or another (neither below nor above), while, at the same time, distancing itself from lay knowledge of every kind and brand (“scientific” or not, malign or not). Or rather, it distances lay knowledge from itself. In fact, it would itself be a project of de-, and later recentring, the everyday knowledge subject; from the flank—neither opposingly confronting, nor secretly attacking from behind—it would try to see the self in the other and the other in itself; it would try to see the self as other and the other as self.

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Notes
1. On the epistemological and ethical aspects of this, compare Fricker (2003).
2. In an interesting paper, Löfmarck and Lidskog (2017) discuss the problem when, within the UN’s platform on biodiversity and ecosystem services (IPBES), scientific and Indigenous local knowledge shall not only coexist but also fruitfully co-operate.
3. For an early and important discussion about whether to “take the side of the underdog” or not, that relates not to questions of epistemology, but to plain sociology of knowledge, and that deals with the dilemmas and (self-) perceived legitimacy of the scientist, see Becker (1967).
4. Compare the ongoing discussion within the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS; cf. Söderberg, 2017).
5. But the question of relativism is complicated here, since this position seems to presuppose absolute knowledge about existing societal power relations, up and down, and so forth.
6. I do believe that the so-called replication crisis in psychology (cf. Flis, 2019) to some extent testifies to the nonobjective foundation of objective knowledge.

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For a knowledge with the other in psychological science

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Abstract

In our comment on Held (2020) we attempt to deepen her criticism and reflection about epistemic violence while addressing the need for its elimination in psychological science. We acknowledge her argument about the prepositional divisions that emerge between two large groups of psychologies or psychologists (mainstream psychology vs. Indigenous and critical psychologies): from above and from below. In relation to these prepositional problems, we agree that the explanations derived from these divisions in terms of of, for, and about are confusing. However, we consider that Held’s reflections concerning the set of prepositions in the production of knowledge based on “of, from, and for the other” neglect another alternative that is “with the other.” According to this last point, we briefly present Bakhtin’s theoretical notion of co-authorship to argue that generally, epistemic violence is committed by not recognizing the voices of the participants involved. In addition, we use examples of our work with Indigenous