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Pluralism as an antidote to epistemic violence in psychological research

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Abstract

The debate on objectivist versus relativist epistemologies in psychology and their relation to “othering” should consider a third stance that espouses epistemic pluralism. In order to understand the human experience, we must simultaneously explore the universal–humanistic, cultural, and idiographic aspects of the individual. Each of these aspects entails a different epistemic stance (objective, intersubjective, and subjective) and each assigns different meanings to “othering.” In addition, a pragmatic epistemology that posits “progressivism” as its sole agenda risks the epistemic violence of discounting other sets of values and moral foundations that matter to many (often othered) people. Additional steps are needed in order to truly diversify psychological study.

Keywords
both/and reasoning, diversity in psychology, epistemic pluralism, epistemic violence, moral foundations

Professor Held’s compelling article (2020) addresses the complex relationship between “objectivity” and “othering” in psychological research. Indigenous and critical psychologists posit that psychology’s claims to objectivity lead to epistemic violence towards othered peoples. By way of solution, they advocate a psychology for the folk rather than about them, call upon researchers to relinquish the pretense of objectivity, and encourage them to research concepts “from below” rather than “from above.”

In her paper, Held (2020) offers two counter-arguments: (a) some form of epistemic objectivity (“non-true-for relativism”) is both needed and implicitly assumed...
in psychological research because even relativist “true for” statements depends on objec-
tivist “true about” knowledge and (b) folk notions may denigrate others while main-
stream “scientific” psychology may elevate them.

To me, Held’s (2020) first argument is particularly compelling, and I would like to
address it in my comments. Her argument can be framed as a question: Does the homog-
henization implied in Western “objective” psychology, that is, holding all people to a
single (Western) psychological yardstick, lead to more or less epistemic violence than
the relativist stance promoted by Indigenous and critical psychologists? Held’s answer is
that the epistemic violence-by-omission implicated in allowing false folk and scientific
beliefs to remain unchallenged is no less harmful than that of objectifying the other.

I would like to make two arguments: First, that the debate on the merits of objectivist
versus relativist research in the field of psychology is so heavily context dependent that
it makes little sense to offer a single answer for all topics of psychological exploration.
Second, that upon careful scrutiny, both options are, regrettably, more homogenizing
than we might have hoped. Additional steps are needed in order to truly diversify psy-
chological study.

The role of context in the objectivist versus true-for
relativist debate

In positioning her arguments about epistemic violence in relation to those who accuse
psychological science of this transgression, Held (2020) outlines a series of dichotomous
juxtapositions: Indigenous/critical psychology versus mainstream psychology, epistemic
objectivity versus epistemic relativity (or nonobjectivity), knowledge from below versus
knowledge from above, progressive versus oppressive goals, and so forth. While such
theoretical dichotomies are helpful in outlining the contours of the field, they can also
hide from view important middle grounds, third options, and both/and possibilities.

I would like to posit the existence of a third epistemic possibility: epistemic pluralism
(Berlin, 1998; James, 1909/1997; Novis-Deutsch, 2018; Tetlock & Gardner, 2016),
which opens up some of the aforementioned dichotomies. This perspective suggests that
multiple interpretations, but not necessarily all interpretations, can be considered true for
different groups.

Epistemic pluralism is based on the proposition that multiple, fundamentally different
perspectives on reality, values, and lifestyles are both inevitable and desirable. They are
inevitable because of the contingent, contextual, and subjective nature of knowledge.
They are desirable because human diversity is pragmatically useful, intellectually stimu-
lating, ethically worthy, and aesthetically pleasing (Novis-Deutsch, 2018).

There are two ways to interpret this in the context of research epistemologies: the
first, mentioned by Held (2020), is to append a pragmatic limitation to the true-for crite-
rria: “only so long as their beliefs have sanguine consequences for them and do not
oppress [others]” (p. 354), thus removing them from the realm of relativism.

The second possibility is to advocate multiple epistemic stances between researchers
and also within them, by domain. This involves a willingness to be objectivists in some
domains, subjectivists in some, and intersubjectivists in others. This perspective has
been promoted in other disciplines and perhaps it is time to adopt it in research psychol-
ogy as well.
What might such epistemic pluralism look like? It would involve acknowledging the tremendous diversity of issues and perspectives within the field of psychology, and then allowing that different aspects of this endeavor require different prioritizations of objectivity, subjectivity, or intersubjectivity. This stance would avoid *either/or* reasoning, a point made by Suzanne Kirschner (2019) who calls upon psychology to be simultaneously more culture-inclusive and universal:

One can study ethnopsychologies without assuming that people are their ethnopsychology “all the way down.” I am not saying that “local” indigenous psychologies should be discounted as systems of healing and knowledge. . . . But recognizing the value and validity of such “epistemic pluralism” (Gone, 2012) is not the same thing as claiming that any of our “local” vocabularies are the only significant influences molding us into the people we are. (p. 101)

As a useful rule of thumb for choosing between different epistemic positions, I turn to Kluckhohn et al.’s (1953) pertinent observation: “Every [person] is in certain respects – a) like all other people, b) like some other people and c) like no other people” (p. 53).³ This short insight expresses a deep truth: there are multiple aspects to being human, and all can be true simultaneously.

First, each of us is like *all* of us in some critical ways. This is certainly true for the “subpersonal-level” (Held, 2020, p. 351), that is, subconscious structures and mechanisms, but it also reaches all the way to the spiritual, sense-making, and meaning-making aspects of the human psyche (Novis-Deutsch et al., in press). These shared ways of being human form the underpinning of a universal–humanistic perspective. They also allow us to empathize, to enjoy the literature of other cultures, and to feel solidarity with all humans. We relinquish exploration of this part of being human at our peril.

Second, each of us is like *some* other people: we share critical attributes with groups to whom we belong and identify. As social animals, this accounts for a huge part of the human experience, including language, collective memory, values, beliefs, and even the way we process stimuli. It is impossible to fully understand humans separately from their sociocultural context, and as a result, true-for relativist explorations of the human experience are important. Cultural psychology has been charting many of these true-for experiences (Heine, 2011; Henrich, 2010; Kitayama & Cohen, 2010; Shweder, 1991) and Indigenous psychologies have an important role to play in this endeavor (Chakkarath, 2012).

Finally, each of us is like *no* other person. This reflects our unique, individual character. It is an aspect of our personhood expressed in our subjectivity and typically explored ididiographically. Narrative and phenomenological psychology are two examples of fields that focus on this aspect of our experience. It is important to explore all three perspectives of personhood—the universal–humanistic, the cultural, and the idiographic—and focusing on one to the exclusion of the others can be empirically and ethically detrimental.

Each conception of personhood also involves different forms of othering. “Othering” can become an adverse consequence of “objective” psychology when the category of “*some* other people” is either ignored or derogated, as Held (2020) described. In other cases, “othering” might be the detrimental outcome of the essentialist mindset of folk psychologies that expand the category of “*all* other people” beyond its legitimate boundaries, as when intersubjective attributes (nationality, religion) are not only taken to be objective but are essentialized. And there is a third kind of “othering” which, to my mind, is so
inseparable from the concept of subjectivity, that it should not be considered problematic. To study any individual through the lens of the “no other people” category, we must acknowledge their otherness. Not doing so would constitute a different form of epistemic violence: a presumption to fully know the other, an impossibility in any case, according to Levinas (1961/1969). Complete understanding entails controlling the other, but in actuality, “the face resists possession, resists my powers” (p. 197). Thus, the other is destined to remain not fully known to us and we must respect this “alterity,” or otherness.

Homogenization shows up in both camps

Throughout her article, Held (2020) advances the idea of a “pragmatic epistemology.” This means that a concept’s knowledgeable value is measured by a consequentialist ethical yardstick. Note that these ethical consequences reflect a very specific set of Western values. The value-laden term for this set of values, appearing 15 times in the paper, is “progressive” (e.g., “some mainstream research has progressive implications,” p. 356; “efforts to advance progressive agendas might be impeded by rejection of objectivist warrant,” p. 355; “those who seek progressively informed epistemologies may renounce all psychological knowledge,” p. 364). What are progressive goals or agendas? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2000), progressivism indicates support for or advocacy of social reform. It tends towards political liberalism or radicalism, and is based on humanistic and egalitarian principles.

In the academic world, progressivism may at times be considered a given, a fact more than an attitude, a sacred value (Tetlock, 2003). However, this term reflects a specific set of values. Setting “progressive” as the single end-goal of all psychological research blurs the distinction between the ethical and epistemological domains and replaces the danger of epistemological violence with that of ethical monism. When Held (2020) speaks of progressive values as the yardstick against which various psychological theories are held accountable, both by Indigenous/critical psychologists or by objectivists, alternative value systems are not being acknowledged or considered. Graham et al. (2013) identified three moral foundations among non-Western cultures (also prevalent among conservative and religious groups in Western societies), which have little to do with the progressive ideals of nonharm, egalitarianism, and freedom. These foundations are loyalty, authority, and sanctity. A research agenda focused on these goals might look very different from a progressive one.

In an ideal pluralistic metaepistemology, there would be various pragmatic epistemic criteria, reflecting the diversity of values held by various people. This diversity need not be infinite but it should represent more than one vision of the good life. Berlin (1998) explains:

> There is a plurality of ideals, as there is a plurality of cultures and of temperaments . . . I am not a relativist. I do not say: “I like my coffee with milk and you like it without; I am in favor of kindness and you prefer concentration camps” . . . but I do believe that there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek. (p. 11)

There is an important difference, according to Berlin, between a finite number of “values which I can pursue while maintaining my human semblance” (p. 12) and an infinite number of them:
And the difference this makes is that if a man pursues one of these values, I, who do not, am able to understand why he pursues it or what it would be like, in his circumstances, for me to be induced to pursue it. Hence the possibility of human understanding. (p. 12)

Held (2020) describes epistemological violence as the consequence of omitting concepts of othered peoples and framing interpretable group differences as objective knowledge (e.g., interpreting the lower IQ scores of Black people as inevitably heritable), and this is undoubtedly a form of violence. But another form of epistemic violence is forcing a monistic standpoint on a plurality of perspectives. Garbe (2013) describes epistemic violence as “a forced delegitimation, sanctioning and repression of, or negating, certain possibilities of knowing, while attempting to enforce, or obligate, other possibilities of knowing” (p. 3, author’s translation).

How to create a research agenda that allows more than one ultimate set of values to guide its epistemic stance is a challenge. Solutions can include encouraging people of different cultures and values to research topics that are close to their hearts, eschewing single answers to research questions, and, for those of us who carry the Western legacy of dichotomous, either/or reasoning, opening up to both/and reasoning (Novis-Deutsch, 2018). Promoting a metaepistemic attitude of pluralism will allow others to be fully included, while respecting them in their alterity.

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Notes
1. Harari (2014, pp. 131–133) distinguishes between objective, subjective, and intersubjective realities by arguing that whereas an objective phenomenon exists independent of what people experience and believe, and the reality of a subjective phenomenon depends on the consciousness and belief of a single individual, intersubjective realities exist in communication networks that connect the minds of many. Intersubjective realities such as law, religion, nations, and human rights exist in a third space, neither objective nor subjective.
2. See Ruiz Abou-Nigm (2019) on the role of a pluralistic epistemology in private international law: “Pluralistic thinking goes to the very core of the discipline’s identity. For some of us, pluralism is inherent not only to the methodologies and techniques of the discipline but to the very understanding of what the discipline is about” (p. 369).
3. The original statement refers to “every man” which I modified here to “person.”

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