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Abstract

This commentary acknowledges Barbara Held's (2020) idea that knowledge of, from, and for people can create epistemic violence. We look at this through the idea of binaries and how binaries distribute a particular sense in knowledge. We argue that the researcher's engagement with uncertainty offers possibilities of becoming for the researcher, the researched, and the research process in a way that opens up such binaries and the distribution of the sensible.

Keywords

assemblage, becoming, distribution of the sensible, research, uncertainty

We are sympathetic to Barbara Held's (2020) argument that knowledge of, from, and for people can create epistemic violence. We want to focus this short commentary by highlighting some nouns and pronouns that Held uses throughout her article. She writes about the I, we, us, them, their(s), as well as (non)folks and (non)othered, amongst others, highlighting the person. Her emphasis on the person allows us to acknowledge that the method is influenced by the individuals who engage with it, whether that individual is applying the method, or whether she is the one the method is being applied to. Thus, although allowing the influence of people in the research equation is a progress from Francis Bacon's claim that the (scientific) research process should work "as if by machinery" (Bacon, 1905/2011, p. 256), Barbara Held invites us to consider that what was introduced to remove epistemic violence (the acknowledgment of subjectivity) could nonetheless be contributing to it. It is almost as though research, knowledge, science, and psychology are inherently oppressive.

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Our reflection falls on the role of the researcher during the research process. We think that the role of those who research, whether of/from or for, is pivotal, yet we think that this is not very often recognized. Of course, there has been much written about the power of the researcher. But we would like to draw attention to the becoming(s) of the researcher as part of the research process. This idea of becoming, influenced mostly from a Deleuzian–Guattarian perspective, questions some of the binaries that Held points out in her article. We often find ourselves presented with such binaries: research from-above (about the folk) and research from-below (of, from, for the folk); othered folk and nonothered; objective and subjective. They are presented as alternatives of each other, whereas Derrida argued that these terms rely on each other for their own definition and being (Derrida, 1976). Jacques Rancière’s (2006) writing about the “distribution of the sensible” further explains that both sides of these binaries are perpetuating the same, so that which presents as an alternative nonetheless functions within a closed economy (see Derrida, 1992; Standish, 2005). In such a closed economy (Standish, 2005) everything is made to fit. Even concepts of otherness and othered are imbued with frameworks of identity(ies) and they function within that which they are trying to escape and deconstruct. The distribution of the sensible has a totalizing effect, where the researcher often approaches research with preconceived meanings and layers of understanding. Thus the researcher, working within the established procedures surrounding the research process, approaches her research “think[ing] of it as an order that is all inclusive in that everyone has a particular place, role, or position in it; there is an identity for everyone” (Biesta, 2006, p. 48). This is strengthened by the consensus generally shared in the research community around these processes and systems that “distribute” a way of doing things, of understanding issues, and of addressing them—the system places everyone in a particular place, role, or position (see Biesta, 2006). Everyone’s identity within the system is assigned according to this distribution and it is assumed that this “distribution” reflects an inclusive democratic community, both of which are fundamental in research about sameness and otherness (see Mercieca & Mercieca, 2019).

Yet democracy, for the philosopher Jacques Rancière (2006), involves a critique of this “distribution of the sensible.” He terms such critique as dissensus, which he claims is ultimately more democratic than the more complacent consensus. Held’s dissenting contribution enables us to see cracks within the totalizing research process. In our teaching of research methods and supervision of students we have noted that research is perceived to be an ordered effort to see the meanings and implications of the various linear layers of the researched within particular contexts. These solid established procedures come with a promise of safety in the certainty they provide the researcher who is faced with parameters and deadlines. In such scenarios the researcher can easily be led to resist uncertainty as this can be unsettling. Lindely (2006) argues that “uncertainty is everywhere” (p. xi). Our suggestion is for the researcher to engage with the possibilities that this unsettling brings. When a researcher tolerates the sensations that accompany the state of uncertainty (see Mercieca, 2011; Mercieca & Mercieca, 2013), it can be possible, even if only for a short period of time, to open up the distribution of the sensible. When this happens, and we are able to give attention to what would have been sidelined, we can “allow ourselves to be provoked” (Standish, 2001, p. 503) by it.

This provocation could be a force of attraction for the researcher. If we follow Deleuze (1983), bodies (of the researcher but also the research process per se), are defined as any whole composed of parts, where the reality of these bodies “is already a quantity of forces” (p. 40). Colebrook (2002) draws upon Deleuze’s work and argues, “there ‘is’ nothing other than a flow of becoming. All ‘beings’ are just relatively stable moments in a flow of becoming-life” (p. 125). In this flow, it is important to note how one affects and is affected (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xvi): “[A]ffect is not reduced to why not a feeling or emotion but is a powerful force influencing the body’s ability to exist” (Semetsky, 2010, p. 4). These parts which constitute bodies stand in some definite relation to one another and have the capacity to be affected by other bodies (Deleuze, 1988, p. 123). Difference between the parts is seen as fundamental as it is that which attracts the other forces. The uncertainty that we are encouraging the researcher to engage with can be a force of attraction for the researcher and the research process. Whereas the aforementioned binaries refer to distance and proximity (Levinas’ influence on Derrida), we are encouraging an engagement that offers possibilities of becoming(s)-researcher.

Through this engagement, boundaries which are so carefully protected are opened for the permeation of forces, so that an assemblage is created. This sees the research as an opportunity of becoming for everybody involved in the process, research in which everybody is giving and taking, rather than one where the researcher takes from the researched with the promise of giving in the future (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2010, 2013, p. 237). Instead of staying distant and distinct from the research process and the researched, we encourage the researcher to engage with the intensities and the complexities of the research process, allowing it to lead her into new territories yet uncharted, thus engaging in a process of continuous becomings.

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Duncan P. Mercieca is a senior lecturer in the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Dundee. His research draws upon French poststructuralist philosophers to think through educational issues, in particular those related to diversity and otherness; inclusion and disability; and critiquing education research and its methods.