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Article

Epistemological Allyship

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Abstract

Discussions about decolonising psychology now abound. A key perspective from which these commentaries have been written relates to a confrontation of the gatekeepers in global psychology. While this approach is valuable to end epistemological violence and other forms of injustice, it also ends up alienating influential scholars in hegemonic psychology who can magnify the impact of the decolonisation effort. In this article, I borrow from the anti-racism literature the concept of allyship to put forward a new concept of epistemological allyship (EA). I position EA to invite, but not to demand, support from and to provide guidance to gatekeepers who truly wish to support the decolonisation efforts. However, unlike the past experiences with ending slavery in which Black people were portrayed to or required to beg for freedom, this concept of EA is not to be understood in this light. Rather it should be understood to imply that while academics from the majority of the world (AMWs) are fighting their own epistemological battles, any helpful support is and should be welcome.

Keywords

Epistemological violence, epistemological allyship, decolonising, gatekeepers

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Introduction

It has been argued that psychology needs to be decolonised to ensure that it becomes a truly global science of human behaviour (Malherbe & Ratele, 2022; Oppong, 2019b, 2020b, 2022b; Rad et al., 2018). Thus, decolonisation becomes a means to making psychology a global science. Decolonisation is often used interchangeably with indigenisation. However, decolonisation involves attempts at dismantling the colonial institutional structures that confer the status of epistemic centres on certain groups of people or their countries of origin or languages (Oppong, 2022b). Indigenisation, on the other hand, involves accepting the local ways of knowing embedded in a particular culture as valid ways of knowing (Oppong, 2022b). Indigenisation can be offered as one of the means to decolonisation (Oppong, 2022b; Pickren & Taşçı, 2022). However, it is also possible to decolonise by ensuring adequate representation of the marginalised (Albertus, 2019) as part of the institutions is the people who work in them. This is because institutions tend to be 'people not places' given that people create and enact the structure, policies and procedures of the institution. Thus, one way to decolonise is to open up institutions to those who previously have not had an adequate institutional presence in a multiracial space (such as a country, state, university, or community of people). Oppong (2022b) defined multiracial space as both the coexistence of people in a certain space and the uneven distribution of power in such spaces. This means that decolonisation would not apply to issues of inclusion like ensuring gender diversity and inclusive workspaces for persons with disabilities.

Several empirical studies and commentaries have been published on diversity or institutional representation in the sociology of knowledge with respect to the demographic characteristics of actors in the knowledge production and dissemination process (Clay, 2017; Diener et al., 2014; Eagly & Miller, 2016; Haggbloom et al., 2002; Palser et al., 2022). These studies have concluded that psychology is dominated by White males at the upper echelons of the discipline. This implies that women and academics from the majority of the world (AMWs) are unrepresented at the upper echelons of psychology in terms of professorial rank, editorial presence or established scholars. Indeed, these studies have often drawn our attention to the lopsided distribution of prestige and power in the discipline of psychology in favour of White males in the United States of America at the Ivy League or prestigious institutions (Clay, 2017; Diener et al., 2014; Eagly & Miller, 2016; Haggbloom et al., 2002; Palser et al., 2022).

One of the sequelae of the nonrepresentation of AMWs is epistemological violence (EV). Introduced by Teo (2008, 2010) into the language of the social sciences, EV occurs 'when speculative explanations for observed group differences present one of the groups as inferior or weaker relative to the other while, at the same time, those speculations appear as facts' (Oppong, 2020a, p. 468). EV is more likely to occur when the marginalised people are not represented in the science of psychology as people on whom research is conducted (Arnett, 2009; Rad et al., 2018; Thalmayer, et al., 2021) and knowledge creators (at least by way of publication) (Clay, 2017; Diener et al., 2014; Eagly & Miller, 2016; Haggbloom et al., 2002; Rad et al., 2018) or as gatekeepers of knowledge dissemination (Palser et al., 2022). This is because there shall be no voice from the marginalised group to counter the narrative of the mainstream when results of data analyses are being interpreted in ways that commit EV against them. For instance, as a gatekeeper (editors or reviewers), persons on the periphery of knowledge will be able to point out errors in the interpretations as well as suggest better ways to present the same to respect alternative ways of knowing and being. Of importance are the two sub-types of EV Oppong (2020a) has identified, namely: intentional EV (a calculated or premeditated form that seeks to promote a specific agenda) and accidental EV (mistakes that occur because of limited knowledge about members of the marginalised group). The absence of persons on the periphery of knowledge will mean that either type of EV will be committed. However, it is much easier to address accidental EV when members of marginalised groups are present in the research process (from conception to execution to dissemination to editorial decision-making). On the other hand, intentional EV may be difficult to address even with the presence of marginalised people in the research process. This is because people who are inclined to promote a certain agenda will always fail to thoroughly consider the alternative perspective. An example is the debate between the globalists (e.g., McCoy et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2017, 2021) and the contextualists (e.g., Morelli et al., 2017; Oppong & Strader, 2022; Scheidecker et al., 2021, 2022) about the dangers of exporting early childhood development evidence based on mostly Western samples to communities existing outside of Western settings. While the contextualists argue for a more thorough and nuanced consideration of the cultural resources in designing and implementing early childhood interventions, the globalists favour a more decontextualised approach to childcare interventions.

Calls have also been made to reform institutional arrangements to allow for a more diverse workforce in knowledge production and dissemination (Clay, 2017; Diener et al., 2014; Eagly & Miller, 2016; Haggbloom et al., 2002; Palser et al., 2022). Some of these proposals have included expanding editorial boards of journals to include marginalised groups (Palser et al., 2022), ending colonial science or parachute research/science or 'helicopter research' through meaningful collaborations (Adame, 2021; Odeny & Bosurgi, 2022; Smith, 2018), and having more non-English language journals feature in the databases like Scopus and Web of Science (Liu, 2017). Other proposals include making use of non-English language publications for global science (Amano et al., 2021; Bahji et al., 2022; Márquez & Porras, 2020), supporting non-native English authors to publish in the English language (Geiger et al., 2022), and inclusion of more participants outside of Western settings in psychology research and publication (Arnett, 2009; Rad et al., 2018; Thalmayer et al., 2021). Thus, we can realise that some of the proposals target the journal editorial boards (Palser et al., 2022) and editorial policies (Geiger et al., 2022; Rad et al., 2018) while other proposals target researchers and science practitioners as well as their practices (Adame, 2021; Amano et al., 2021; Bahji et al., 2022; Márquez & Porras, 2020; Odeny & Bosurgi, 2022; Smith, 2018). Though a lot has been said about meaningful collaborations (Adame, 2021; Odeny & Bosurgi, 2022; Smith, 2018), the suggestions seem to be about researchers who wish to conduct studies outside of the geographical locations of their origin. However, there has been little or no focus on what influential scholars who genuinely wish to support marginalised academics can do to assist.

In the rest of the article, I discuss the difficulties associated with sharing power or letting go of one's power. I also borrow from the anti-racism literature the concept of allyship to put forward a new concept of epistemological allyship (EA). I position EA to invite support from and to provide guidance to gatekeepers who truly wish to support the decolonisation efforts.

Sharing Power or Letting Go of One's Power

Asking people who previously wielded power over others to share the same power with people over whom they had the power is not natural for many. Yet, this is what I ask of those influential scholars in knowledge creation and dissemination. I do so not because there is something wrong

with wielding power over others. This is because it is commonplace to find in every human society a social hierarchy such that some people wield power and that it is only natural that some people will lead. Contemporarily, sharing power with others has been presented as empowering (Chen et al., 2014; Edelmann et al., 2020). Evidence shows that sharing power with others leads to a greater sense of ownership (Edelmann et al., 2020), stronger bonds and cooperation (Bloom & Bloom, 2020), and improved productivity (Chen et al., 2014). Despite these salutary impacts, it remains unnatural for human beings to share power. For instance, sharing power leads to loss of influence and control and sometimes part of one's identity. Thus, to ask people to share their power is asking so much from them. This is to say that I do not ask for power-sharing as a demand or as a plea but to draw on the collective human conscience to assist in ending EV and other forms of injustice. Again, I also present this call as necessary for making psychology a truly global science of all humans (Oppong, 2019b, 2020b, 2022b; Rad et al., 2018). Sharing of power shall contribute to better practice by all psychologists as it will enable other perspectives to be presented and inform research and practices (Oppong, 2022b).

I cast the call for power-sharing by influential scholars in psychology in a different light (as opposed to a call for power-sharing as a demand or as a plea). As has been indicated already, it can be emotionally painful to let go of the power one has over things. As a result, the quest for power-sharing should not be seen as an easy call on the part of the powerful. Those with power have every right to resist as in every human community, regardless of race and culture, there shall be those in charge and that power-sharing can lead to the currently powerful group being replaced by the marginalised in a role reversal. Thus, power-sharing is not neutral. Decolonising psychology appears to be a political practice because, for instance, decolonisation in Africa reduces to 'a struggle for power between a Black elite (predominantly educated, middle-class males) and the Western elite' (Oppong, 2022b, p. 5). We need to recognise and accept the tensions and political struggles that are inherent in decolonising any discipline for what they are—tensions and political struggles for power. These political struggles lead to loss of power on the part of those who previously wielded power, and this must be understood in the context of every human community always having social structures. Thus, if the quest for power-sharing is presented as revolutionary it is going to be faced with resistance for the fear that the marginalised desire to rule only marginalises the once powerful in return. This is likely the case in many multiracial spaces around the world. For instance, despite

the promise of a rainbow nation, South Africa suffered an exodus of White South Africans immediately after the fall of apartheid (Griffiths & Prozesky, 2010) and currently (BusinessTech, 2021) for the fear of facing retribution, marginalisation, or simply the idea that the once ruled shall have power over them. This implies that power-sharing can alienate influential scholars in hegemonic psychology who have the capacity to magnify the impact of the decolonisation effort. But why is the influential scholar in hegemonic psychology relevant for decolonisation? There is evidence that the prominence or prestige of co-authors (e.g., co-authoring with Nobel Laureates) leads to more favourable peer reviews and increases the chance of a manuscript being accepted (Huber et al., 2022). Again, co-authoring with influential scholars and merely collaborating with highly cited authors result in more citations (Elgendi, 2019; Tahamtan et al., 2016; Talaat & Gamel, 2022) and this impact is greater in the social and behavioural sciences (Abramo & D'Angelo, 2015). The implication is that collaborations lead to greater visibility, something AMWs often need to disseminate their ideas. Thus, marginalised academics stand to benefit from association with influential scholars in the social sciences. Prominent authors have the capital to confer on marginalised academics certain attributes through mere association. This resembles a case of classical conditioning; the neutral stimulus (the marginalised academic) by being paired repeatedly (in this case, just once) with an unconditioned stimulus (the influential scholar), and the marginalised academic seems to be viewed to have similar positive attributes as the influential scholar.

However, this wish for power-sharing through collaboration must not be misconstrued as begging to be relevant or a need to be saved. This idea of Black people being expected to beg for freedom occurred in the context of ending slavery, apartheid and colonialism as Black people were portrayed as begging for their own freedom (Orelus, 2012; Taylor et al., 2019). This call must not be understood as a plea for help or begging for freedom. Rather, while AMWs are fighting their own epistemological battles, any helpful support in the struggle is and should be welcome. It is in this strategic understanding of the higher education ecosystem that I argue for seeking and accepting genuine EA.

Epistemological Allyship

Inviting or accepting EA can be seen to be beneficial to both AMWs and Western academics in their quest to disseminate their ideas. But what

constitutes EA? First, I present the concept of allyship in the anti-racial literature to give us a sense of how it has been constituted and how I apply it here. Usually, an ally is an outgroup individual who wants to support and take action for and on behalf of members of a marginalised group. Oluo (2018) defines allyship as

> an active, consistent, and challenging practice of unlearning and reevaluating, in which a person of privilege seeks to work in solidarity with a marginalized group. Allyship is not an identity – it is a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalized individuals and/or groups of people. Allyship is not self-defined – work and efforts must be recognized by those you are seeking to ally with. (p. 134).

Atcheson (2018, para. 7) argues that allyship provides a prospect for members of the privileged group to grow and learn about themselves while they build confidence in members of the marginalised groups. Thus, allyship is performative and expressed in actions rather than identity and a perfunctory act. There is also a danger of it being misused or abused by some members of the dominant group who wish to exploit the plight of the marginalised group for their own benefit instead (Bourke, 2020; Nixon, 2019; Saad, 2020). On the other hand, how allyship is depicted in the anti-racial or inclusion literature and work also makes it so burdensome that those who desire to be allies must think twice about assuming that role (Estrellado et al., 2021; Nixon, 2019; Saad, 2020). This is because one cannot be oneself in expressing one's thoughts without some form of self-censorship or self-policing (or censorship by the societal moral police) or one needs to be constantly mindful of one's language to be respectful of members of the marginalised groups (Atcheson, 2018; Estrellado et al., 2021; Nixon, 2019; Reason & Broido, 2005). However, refusing to accept such a burden invites criticism of fragility, apathy and tokenism (Bourke, 2020; Saad, 2020). For instance, Saad (2020, p. 127) argues that 'the intentional nonaction of white apathy is just as dangerous as these intentional actions of racism' and attributes this apathy to white privilege, white fragility, white silence, white exceptionalism, colour blindness, and anti-blackness and racist stereotypes. Besides, Saad (2020, p. 164) suggests that members of the privileged group ought to 'listen, apologize, and do better going forward' when called out or called in. I agree with Nixon (2019) that those who care to enact allyship should practise *critical allyship* in order not to use the role to enhance their personal power. Similarly, I also discourage

white saviourism and optical allyship in the way it portrays persons outside of Western settings as hopelessly helpless in order to increase the power or privilege of the actor (Nixon, 2019; Saad, 2020; Sachs & Oppong, 2022). Though Estrellado et al. (2021) alluded to the emotional burden on the part of the members of the marginalised group, it is also fair to say that members of the dominant group are equally burdened by the restrictive nature of meaningful engagement, barring the social norms they are used to. Thus, it appears that marginalised groups seem to invite allies but set restrictive rules that make engagement difficult to enact. These parameters alienate people who can assist but are not ready for these rules. It is likely that such persons may be called out as cowards and fragile. However, they do not owe any member of the marginalised group a hand of help and they can continue to live their lives normally without bothering about them. Thus, it reduces to: if you help wrongly, you are accused and if you refuse to help, you are equally accused. This has implications for the extent of meaningful engagement some members of privileged groups would desire to have with members of marginalised groups. It also shows that trust is required for meaningful collaboration and engagement.

However, I strip the traditional concept of allyship off the insidious blame placed on people simply because of the racial group into which they have been born. I view 'race' as a social construct as there is no evidence of biological categories in terms of DNA (Duello et al., 2021; Mersha & Beck, 2020; Umek & Fischer, 2020) and I use 'racial group' to reflect groupings we have created based on this social construct of race. I agree with Mersha and Beck (2020) that, in spite of no evidence of biological race, we should continue to use the term to quantify and close racial differences, where we can. There is no need for people to be ashamed of one's race over which they have no control; after all, one has no choice in the matter of which people decide to copulate and which racial group into which one will be born. Therefore, I submit EA as genuine assistance received in support of one's epistemic agency. Here, I refer to EA as genuine assistance not because I want it to be as restrictive as its past depictions, but to suggest that it is that which is enacted by influential scholars or simply scholars from the dominant groups who genuinely want to see another *human being* progress rather than seeing the one in need of assistance as merely a member of a marginalised group. It is important we understand that being seen as a human being as opposed to being a member of a marginalised group helps in understanding that the influential scholar who chooses to be an ally should be allowed

to behave normally around you. If not, that influential scholar owns no one an explanation for not wanting to be an ally or for avoiding spaces where such issues are discussed. And accusing such influential scholars of being fragile shows how entitled members of the marginalised groups present themselves to the public. I repeat, no one owes anyone any support to gain visibility in one's research career. Rather, influential scholars shall mentor those they can work with and not those who are themselves too fragile that they want to define the exact nature of interactions enacted in the mentorship. Influential scholars who do not want to enact EA should not and cannot be ridiculed or called out: it is their choice and right not to do anything or to do something. They should be allowed to live their quiet lives. This, therefore, calls for dissenting viewpoints and not only those that agree with our preconceived view of one's world.

Noting that most of the calls to ensure a more diverse workforce in knowledge production and dissemination have focused on institutional arrangements (Clay, 2017; Diener et al., 2014; Eagly & Miller, 2016; Haggbloom et al., 2002; Palser et al., 2022), I submit EA as complementary to the focus on the individual knowledge worker. In what ways can this EA (stripped off the blame games) be enacted? First, influential scholars who have the time and the resilience to withstand the emotional burden of allyship (allyship may also provide an ally with a fountain of enormous energy as well) may provide access to visibility to marginalised groups through mentorship. In the area of historical scholarship in psychology, I called on the members of Division 18 of International Association of Applied Psychology: History to consider providing mentorship as a way of assisting with historical scholarship in psychology by AMWs (Oppong, 2019a), a subfield which is almost non-existent in the majority of the world. Mentorship is required to show academics of marginalised backgrounds how to publish, particularly the language of publication. It has already been established that collaborating with influential scholars has a salutary effect on one's visibility (Abramo & D'Angelo, 2015; Elgendi, 2019; Tahamtan et al., 2016; Talaat & Gamel, 2022). Therefore, mentors can open doors for AMWs needing visibility. The mentor can also be one's advocate, championing the mentee's cause. Thus, those who genuinely want to assist in reforming knowledge production and dissemination and have the time to do so may opt for availing themselves to mentor. However, it should be said that the request for mentorship can come from the prospective mentee or an invitation to mentor can also be made by the mentor. It should also be noted that mentors are more likely

to concentrate on those already doing 'original, daring, stimulating' work (Lamont, 2019, p. 34). Thus, doing exciting work can attract attention and invitation as no one want to waste her or his effort and resources on those whose initial work does not appear to be on a trajectory of prominence. Similarly, epistemological allies may use their voice to create a psychologically safe environment for AMWs to flourish. This does not mean that academics from dominant groups must be mindful of the language they use but to suggests that they can (or not should) validate AMWs and their ideas. This will represent an important aspect of the mentorship.

When it is not possible to actively engage in mentorship, the epistemological ally may opt for other activities like reading and citing sources outside of Western settings. Scholars tend to read and cite themselves (King et al., 2017) or read and cite more persons in their social networks (Tahamtan et al., 2016; Talaat & Gamel, 2022; Wagner et al., 2015). Why should anyone expect this pattern in readership and citation to change? Lamont (2019, p. 34) is still relevant here; if you are not doing 'original, daring, [and] stimulating' work, why should anyone bother to cite your work in any serious discourse? It appears that visible researchers are more likely to be cited for theoretical and methodological contributions than merely as a related empirical study. This is because 'original, daring, [and] stimulating' work (Lamont, 2019, p. 34) is more likely to occur in the form of theoretical and methodological contributions (Oppong, 2022a; Yankah, 2012). Thus, as much as epistemological allies are being called upon to expand the scope of what they read and cite, AMWs also have a responsibility to write about things that contribute unique perspectives. However, this call is to encourage epistemological allies to search databases beyond their usual focus to include non-mainstream ones like African Journals Online and many similar others to locate relevant papers related to their work. This will enable them to begin to question established facts with cross-cultural evidence so as to improve the generalisability of their research beyond the Western contexts (Oppong, 2022; Wang et al., 2016). Though evidence exists that mentioning settings outside of Western contexts in the titles of research articles often leads to lower readership and citation (Kahalon et al., 2022), epistemological allies should take this as an opportunity to rather screen for more relevant research papers outside of Western settings to read and, if possible, cite.

Another way epistemological allies can support academics from marginalised groups is through funding. Here, I do not speak of the

common practice where funding agencies require Western applicants to have AMWs as part of the research team to qualify for the funding. Rather, I speak of situations where Western scholars collaborate meaningfully with their AMWs to conceptualise the study and jointly draft the research proposal as well as the grant application documentation. This will help to transfer valuable grant writing skills to AWMs. Of course, this can be seen as a form of mentorship, but funding issues deserve special attention. Again, Western scholars with funding may decide, within the limits of the funding, to support mini projects that focus on and involve issues of concern to AMWs. Given that some funders will frown upon such a practice, it may be better for the epistemological ally to discuss with the funders and jointly work out the best way to frame this *sub-funding* to support work related to the broader theme of the major funding by AMWs. I am not in any way demanding that this should be done in every case of major funding, but that, where it applies and is feasible as well as it can improve our understanding in a particular domain, allies should consider such an assistive practice. On the other hand, allies who happen to be part of major funding adjudication committees may use their power to advocate for such reforms or at least support grant proposals that comprise some form of sub-funding to support work by AMWs. It will be a bizarre practice to mandate that every grant proposal must contain sub-funding focused on topics of relevance to the majority of the world. Thus, institutional reform involving sub-funding as a criterion will not be helpful. After all, Western scholars can be just fine without being bothered by concerns of relevance to the majority of the world in her or their grant proposal. Similarly, the funding agency will be just fine without being concerned with issues of relevance to the majority of the world. After all, funding decisions have been made in that manner in the past without much of a problem for the funding agencies.

Conclusion

In this article, I submit EA as complementary to various calls for reforms that target the institutions of knowledge production and dissemination. While the various calls focus on the structures, EA targets the individual psychological scientist as the leverage for change.

Thus, leveraging EA can introduce reforms at the institutional level from the bottom up if the behavioural changes become strong enough to be institutionalised. Regardless, EA can amplify decolonisation efforts while contributing to ending EV. I suggest that EA can be enacted through mentorship, increasing readership and citations of sources outside of Western settings, and sub-funding practices. These ways of enacting EA are meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. Therefore, I encourage other researchers and concerned individuals to work out new ways of enacting EA that can be used by allies who genuinely wish to support the decolonisation effort. As much as it is acceptable for members of the dominant groups to fashion out new ways to enacting EA, I will call on AMWs to lead the discourse rather than to be led. This will ensure that whatever new ways of enacting that are fashioned out will be owned by AMWs and that Western scholars will become more comfortable with enacting such forms of EA. Unfortunately, there is evidence that often AMWs are led and some proudly wish to be led (Oppong, 2019b; Ssentongo, 2020), denying themselves of epistemic agency (Oppong, 2017, 2019b). Therefore, AMWs are expected to begin to do for themselves what they expect others to do for them. After all, heaven helps those who help themselves. Thus, this scholarship should not be misconstrued as undermining other efforts at decolonising psychology but as it calls on AMWs to change their behaviours to be ready in order to take advantage of reforms, institutional or individual level.

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