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# Chapter 3

## Charting the Reefs: A Map of Multicultural Epistemology

Jon A. Levisohn and D.C. Phillips

*“Avoid a strange and unfamiliar word as you would a dangerous reef”*

—Julius Caesar

### Introduction

Multiculturalism has been high on the agenda of many teachers, teacher-educators, educational researchers, educational policymakers, curriculum developers, and parents and students themselves for many years now – as well it should be. Multiculturalism involves important and fundamental issues about such matters as the respect that ought to be given to the beliefs and practices of the numerous ethnic and cultural groups that together make up modern pluralistic societies, and the ways that those cultures are or should be represented in school curricula. Furthermore, multiculturalism raises questions about society’s commitment to equity and the possibility of all children attaining fulfillment through education.

Typically, the intersection of multiculturalism and philosophy of education has been characterized by questions about autonomy, identity, and rights. For example, under what conditions do the interests and achievements and special talents of a minority cultural group have a claim to be recognized in the curriculum of a society’s elementary and secondary schools, or to be recognized in research funding opportunities? Do considerations of the good of a society as a whole justify enacting

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policies that might conflict with the good of a particular cultural or ethnic group within that society? To what degree is equality of educational opportunity to be judged in individual or communitarian terms? What is to be done when what is good for the group, *qua* group, conflicts with what is good for some individuals who are members of that group? What, indeed, constitutes a cultural group?

These are important questions, and there is much in this broad domain to which philosophers of education can contribute. It might seem strange, then, that two philosophers of education who are sympathetic towards the social and political agenda of the multiculturalism movement are setting sail in a different direction – namely, into the murky waters of so-called multicultural epistemology. As will become quite clear, our purpose in the following discussion is *not* to critique the multiculturalist educational reforms, many of which we would, in fact, endorse. On the whole, in our unsystematic assessment of the state of the field, educational systems are far more open to examining monocultural assumptions than they once were, and far more likely to seek guidance from a broad range of cultural representatives when challenges arise, and this is all to the good.

Instead, our present purpose as philosophers of education is to call attention to a trend among prominent contributors to the educational literature to argue on behalf of these reforms using the language of epistemology. This is not universal, of course; we have not attempted any statistical surveys, and this chapter makes no general claims about the field. But we will introduce and analyze a set of examples in which advocates indulge in a kind of rhetorical inflation that tends to obscure important issues rather than clarify them. When that happens – when the language of epistemology is used in an effort to advance political or curricular arguments – we believe that supporters of multiculturalism are doing their cause some disservice. Thus, our discussion is an effort to document this trend and provide a framework for its analysis.

Historically the term “epistemology” has referred to the branch of philosophy that investigates the “theory of knowledge,” with special focus upon the validation of knowledge claims. Past usage need not determine future usage, of course, but we believe that the now-popular way of talking that we wish to analyze has the effect of blurring a distinction that lies at the heart of this field of philosophy – one that should be of as much concern to those working in the broad field of multiculturalism as it is to educational researchers and philosophers. This is the traditional distinction between the set of beliefs which individuals actually hold and the subset of those beliefs that are well justified on the basis of sound and critical inquiry. This is just another way of saying that not all of a person’s beliefs or opinions are warranted enough to be labeled as “knowledge,” and that preserving the conceptual distinction is essential to inquiry.

All of us believe many things to be the case, more than we can enumerate. Some we can articulate in propositional form, and other beliefs are broader and more basic. Some we believe very strongly, and some are held less firmly. But what things do we know? Firmness of conviction cannot be the sole criterion of knowledge; we are all familiar with firm convictions that turned out to be unwarranted. To know something, to possess knowledge, we want this “something” to be warranted, to be accurate

or correct about the world, to not be misguided or based on a misinterpretation, to be true. Of course, truth itself is a notoriously complicated criterion for distinguishing knowledge from belief, and we have no intention of offering a comprehensive theory of truth in these pages. But we maintain that the distinction between knowledge and belief is essential: We have to admit that we actually know only some of what we believe to be the case. To use a trite example, one of us happens to believe quite strongly that some of our present US federal politicians are (as Woody Allen famously put it) “incompetent or corrupt – sometimes on the same day,” but he cannot be said to *know* the latter part of this double-barreled belief to be true. It might indeed be true that some present politicians are corrupt, but our coauthor cannot warrant or justify this belief enough for him to be able to claim that he actually *knows* this to be the case.

As we proceed, we will also call attention to a related distinction between (i) what we will label as *descriptive* inquiries (although it is important to note that these may analyze and study in various ways, as well as describe), which focus on those things that individuals believe (irrespective of whether these beliefs are well founded or not), and on the other hand (ii) what we will call *normative* inquiries, which focus on issues concerning the types of warrants or justifications that are offered to support claims that individuals actually know certain things (that is, that support claims that the beliefs in question can count as knowledge).

Those things that we believe and which are well justified, and hence are things that we can correctly say are known by us,<sup>1</sup> are in an important sense things that we *ought* to believe (because they are justified). And of course this highlights the fact that there are many other things that we *ought* to believe (because they also are well warranted) but which nevertheless we do not believe. Some individuals do not believe that Elvis is dead or that humans have walked on the moon. Some do not believe that the Earth is about five billion years old. But if the evidence for these beliefs is decisive, then the point is that they *ought* to believe these things.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the traditional epistemological analysis has three conditions for claiming that an item is *known*: The item must be believed, there must be a justification or warrant for it that stands up to scrutiny, and it must actually be true. Mere mortals, of course, cannot actually determine if an item is actually true; instead, we make judgments based on our assessment of the justification or warrant. This is worth emphasizing. The project of normative epistemology is one in which we seek to understand what knowledge is and what it is not, what makes some inquiries successful and some inquiries unsuccessful, and what we even mean by these terms. It does not seek to be the final arbiter of truths. Another way of putting the point is this. Even if all the philosophers of science in the world came to consensus on a theory of scientific knowledge, that epistemological theory would not tell us which scientific theory is warranted and which is not. It would not advance scientific knowledge one iota. That’s what the scientists are for. The same can be said for any field of inquiry. Even if all the philosophers of literature in the world came to consensus on a theory of literary interpretation, that epistemological theory would not tell us which interpretation of a work is warranted and which is not. It would not advance our knowledge or understanding of literature one iota. This is the task of the literary critics and interpreters.

The most basic argument in what follows is that if the distinctions we have mentioned above are blurred, then all rational argument is potentially undermined, including the very arguments that the supporters of multiculturalism wish to employ in order to advance their cause. To accomplish our goals, we start by offering a mapping of the dangerous philosophical reefs surrounding “multicultural epistemology”; then we shall attempt to identify the most promising route through these reefs, one that may lead those interested in multiculturalism into more tranquil philosophical waters beyond. In light of the previous statements, it should be clear that it is not part of our agenda to engage in a sweeping discussion of the issues involved in research on multiculturalism. Instead, we will attempt to maintain focus on matters which are epistemological.

### Three Preliminary Examples

Some of our readers may be skeptical that such a navigational assignment is worthwhile. Perhaps no sailor is foolhardy enough to venture into such challenging waters; perhaps no map is required! Others may wonder whether modifying “epistemology” with any kind of adjective (“multicultural,” “feminist,” “Chicana,” and so forth) makes sense. But some might take the other tack and regard the modifying of “epistemology” as unproblematic and as a commonsense thing to do. At the outset, then, three examples will help us define key points of the compass. These examples are not outliers; they are selected from widely cited and influential works in the field of multicultural education. Naturally, the passages we quote are not to be taken as being a complete summary of the positions of the individuals we cite.<sup>2</sup>

1. In a 1997 article in *Educational Researcher*, James Scheurich and Michelle Young began by wondering whether our “research epistemologies [are] racially biased,” and proceeded to argue that they are.

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*. (p. 4; the first emphasis is ours.)

It hardly needs to be said that these allegations are serious. Scheurich and Young carefully explain that they do not believe that educational researchers are, themselves, racially biased. Instead, the claim is that the dominant “epistemologies” might be racist.

2. The work of Patricia Hill Collins, which is cited by Scheurich and Young, illustrates the main point they make. In her book *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), she argues that groups in society have distinctive standpoints and epistemologies, but

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<sup>2</sup> Fuller discussions of these and other important sources are contained in Chap. 2 of this volume.

that the perspectives of Black women and others are suppressed by the dominant epistemology “representing elite white male interests.” She goes on to state that

Black women scholars may know that something is true but be unwilling or unable to legitimate our claims using Eurocentric masculinist criteria for methodological adequacy... (p. 204)

3. From a very different part of the reef, consider the controversial claims of Molefi Kete Asante. In a brief section of his book *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (1990) that takes up the issue of epistemology, he discusses the “quest for truth in the Afrocentric enterprise.” He argues that “language, myth, ancestral memory, dance-music-art, and science provide the sources of knowledge, the canons of proof and the structures of truth” (p. 10). It may not be clear exactly how each of the listed phenomena is supposed to contribute to the quest for truth; what is clear, however, is that Asante believes that he is making a claim about the relationship between culture and knowledge, culture and truth. And in a later passage, he makes an interesting remark that is similar in tenor to the claims made by Scheurich and Young, and Collins, about the dominance of Eurocentric epistemology: “The Afrocentrist does not accept the European concept of objectivity because it is invalid operationally.... I have argued that what often passes for objectivity is a sort of collective European subjectivity” (p. 24).

In each of these examples, a connection is sketched between “epistemology,” knowledge, and social and cultural environments. Each, therefore, represents an instance of the trend that we wish to examine here. What is being postulated in these instances, and in other cases we shall explore in more depth later, is that there is a deep connection between some aspect of personal identity – culture, ethnicity, race, class or social status, sexual orientation, gender – and what counts as knowledge. One important consequence is that there must be *multiple* rival or alternative epistemologies, since there are *many* cultural and ethnic groups.

## Questions About Knowledge: A Preliminary Mapping

These introductory examples should be sufficient to indicate the overall dimensions of the reef of multicultural epistemology. In what follows, we provide a more careful mapping, in which we point out that the meaning of the term “epistemology” has been extended beyond the standard two usages that are to be found in philosophy. This is not, itself, problematic. After all, words take on new meaning all the time, and woe to the philosopher who claims to determine (much less enforce) the official meaning or meanings of a term! In practice, however, the broadening of the usages of a term can represent a source of confusion, especially when the term in its traditional meanings has played a significant role over a considerable historical period in the philosophical literature.

There are some interesting possibilities here. The extension or broadening of the usage of the term “epistemology” might have been done deliberately – perhaps on the grounds that the traditional usage was too narrow and had ridden roughshod

over important issues. (If this can be established, then obviously the case for the broadening is substantial). But it also is possible that some, at least, of the individuals who have used the term in this new, broader way are not aware that they have extended its meaning, and may think that they are using the term in its traditional philosophical sense or senses. To try and make sense of the situation, we will proceed descriptively, running through the various extended usages of “epistemology” that we have detected in the relevant literature of the past few decades. In each case – in each distinct usage we identify – we will blend in some analysis by considering what it might mean for there to be multiple or alternative or socioculturally based epistemologies in that particular usage.

### *(A) Epistemology as a Normative Field of Inquiry*

In the *first* sense, “epistemology” is the name for a field of inquiry, namely, the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge and inquiry. This is the sense that is most directly derived from the word’s etymological origin: the “logos” of “episteme” (traditionally translated as “the logic of knowledge”). Within this usage, the word is only applied in the singular (“the logic” rather than “the logics”). But it is certainly the case that the broader expression, “the study of knowledge,” includes a range of important questions. When is a belief so well warranted that it deserves to be called knowledge? What are the “good-making” logical features of successful warrants or justifications? What can be known by humans, and on what is this knowledge based? What is the nature of evidence, and what is its role in “the fixation of belief” (to borrow the phrase of Charles Sanders Peirce)?

Thus, an introductory textbook by the epistemologist Robert Audi (1998) points out that the field of epistemology includes not only questions about knowledge but also questions about *justification* of knowledge: “Historically, justification—sometimes under such names as ‘reason to believe’, ‘evidence’, and ‘warrant’—has been as important in epistemology as knowledge itself” (p. viii). It is noteworthy that the same author includes no references to anything called “multicultural epistemology,” and makes only two brief references (in 340 pages) to “feminist epistemology.” What this suggests is that, rightly or wrongly, there is little intermingling of the balmy waters of mainstream epistemology with the currents around the reef we are attempting to chart in the educational literature.

Traditional epistemology has seen itself as a “meta-discipline” that is concerned with elucidating and evaluating the principles that apply to judging *all* knowledge claims, regardless of the power and influence of the claimant – or, for that matter, his or her marginality. Another way to put this crucial point is that traditional epistemology is a *normative field*, in the sense that we have already articulated. It requires that we distinguish between two sorts of beliefs: “mere” beliefs, those beliefs that we (or any individual or group) actually have come to hold; and those beliefs that we are justified in claiming as *knowledge* because they meet some set of epistemological standards or are arrived at in some particularly legitimate way.

(Of course, there are other questions – political or psychological questions – about why a person believes a certain thing, but those are not the focus of our attention here.) Epistemology is a vibrant field, which means there is lively debate about the precise nature of such standards and even about whether precision is *possible* when it comes to articulating such standards. But the point of the quote from Audi, above, is that there is little debate about the necessity of preserving the theoretical distinction between those beliefs that are justified and those that are not.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, epistemologists are prone to point out that each of us believes countless things to be true, although the sad fact of the matter is that many of these beliefs are not well warranted and indeed many of them are not true at all. Even some of the beliefs for which we *do* have strong warrants – such as our beliefs in the current findings and assertions of science – will eventually turn out to be false. It is standard in philosophy to insist that therefore we cannot have had knowledge of these things. For example, while scholars in the past might have believed that the Earth was flat (and had some evidence that they could offer in support of this judgment), nevertheless we are extremely reluctant to say that they *knew* this, for the simple reason that the Earth is not in fact flat and therefore cannot be known to be flat! This reluctance is strengthened by the fact that there is a perfectly reasonable, respectful, and unproblematic way to describe the view of these scholars in the past: They *believed* something and even had some good *reasons* for holding that belief about the shape of the Earth, but that belief turned out to be incorrect. This means that, because they believed and had some evidence (that turned out to be wanting), they wrongly identified their erroneous opinion as being something they *knew*. From the perspective of the epistemologist, there is nothing derogatory about all this. After all, it will certainly turn out that we are in the same position.

That note of humility should be emphasized and expanded. There is no good reason to believe that a simple answer to the questions of epistemology – an answer that would provide a fail-safe test at a given moment in time of the correctness of a particular knowledge claim or a particular inquiry – is lurking just around the philosophical corner. This is just to say, with most contemporary philosophers, that there is no reasonable hope of finding a method of achieving *certainty* regarding our knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the job of this kind of epistemology is to gain insight into the (better and worse) ways that we attempt to justify or provide warrant for our beliefs and thus bestow upon them the status of knowledge. Since we have already mentioned Peirce in passing, it is worth remembering that his paper on the “Fixation of Belief,” published in 1877, was among the earliest formulations of this view. And

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<sup>3</sup>In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and later work, Richard Rorty may be taken to be debating exactly this point; he certainly had little patience for the efforts of traditional epistemologists to generate significant insight in these matters. We will return to Rorty below.

<sup>4</sup>To simplify matters, we exclude from our discussion here knowledge of mathematical and logical propositions.



one of his intellectual successors, John Dewey, put the matter well, in terms of the norms or standards of inquiry:

We know that some methods of inquiry are better than others in just the same way in which we know that some methods of surgery, farming, road-making, navigating, or what-not are better than others. It does not follow in any of these cases that the "better" methods are ideally perfect .... We ascertain *how and why* certain means and agencies have provided warrantably assertible conclusions, while others have not and *cannot* do so. (Dewey 1966, p. 104)

For philosophical epistemology, then, the distinction between beliefs and knowledge (warranted or justified belief) is fundamental.

However, some writers on multiculturalism and education do not draw this normative, epistemological distinction and often use the term "knowledge" where the philosopher would insist that "belief" ought to be used. A passage written by James Banks in 1993 is quite explicit about this:

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. (p. 5)

Everything he says here is true of a person's beliefs – what a person claims to know. And to the sociologist, observing and describing the function of those beliefs in the lives of people and groups, it may well seem reasonable to call those beliefs "knowledge." To the epistemologist, however, what would turn these beliefs into knowledge are not the facts about the cultural or political or economic "position" of the individual whose beliefs they were, but whether or not those beliefs had been justified or warranted in an epistemically compelling manner.

Why does this distinction between belief and knowledge matter? It must be admitted that for some purposes it doesn't. In those situations where researchers want to describe what individuals, or social or cultural groups, actually believe – i.e., when the issue is what they *take* to be true, as in Banks, above – the distinction is irrelevant. When, however, the discussion turns to *normative* matters – what beliefs are trustworthy enough to be successfully acted upon, for example, or how researchers are to validate their findings – the distinction is inescapable. For in these latter cases, one vital consideration that needs to be taken into consideration is whether or not the belief or finding is well warranted.

The same issue arises when the school curriculum is being planned. In the elementary schools of today, we would not want to teach, as *knowledge*, that the Earth actually is flat, regardless of whether some people (whether historically or contemporaneously) believe it to be flat. Likewise, we would not want to teach that the Earth is anything other than five billion years old, regardless of whether some cultural groups believe that to be true. It is not helpful to say things like, "The world was flat for them but spherical for us," or, "There is a scientific theory that the world is five billion years old but it is true for some religious individuals that it is five thousand years old." These formulations are well meaning but ultimately misguided.

It is often important, of course, to describe – and treat sympathetically – the beliefs of different cultural groups, but on those occasions it is intellectually honest for these to be reported as beliefs, not as knowledge.

It might appear to some that this distinction lying at the heart of the traditional field of epistemology – the distinction between knowledge and belief – merely serves as an excuse for the more traditional branches of epistemology to ignore the more radical branches. But this is not the case, for some philosophers sharply critical of those traditional branches uphold precisely this distinction. For example, Charles Mills (1988), in his Marxist analysis of alternative epistemologies, argues that “those who are expressly challenging traditional belief-systems would seem to have a good reason for wanting to retain [the distinction between belief and knowledge]” (p. 240). Without it, he holds, the possibility of critique – in which one argues against a set of standard claims, or questions the justifications of those claims – is lost. And similarly, the feminist epistemologist Sally Haslanger (1999) explains that “a purely ‘descriptive’ approach to the analysis of knowledge ... either ignores the normative question of what epistemic concepts we ought to employ, or assumes implausibly that the epistemic concepts we do employ are the ones we ought to” (p. 467). Feminist philosopher of science Helen Longino (1993), for her part, writes as follows:

[Even] if we abandon the idea that knowledge is one, and ... absolute, [even] if we assume the location of knowledge in sociohistorical contexts and become pluralists, *we are still faced with the ancient problem of distinguishing knowledge from opinion* and what the distinction amounts to. (p. 212, emphasis added)

### ***(B) An Epistemology as a Normative Theory of Knowledge***

There is a *second* and closely related philosophical sense of the term “epistemology” that applies to the theories that epistemologists produce – those particular sets of ideas about knowledge and inquiry whose labels make up the professional jargon of philosophy. For example, epistemology in the West was dominated for several hundred years by the contending *empiricist* and *rationalist* epistemologies, and for part of the twentieth century by *positivism* (all of which are sometimes grouped together as “foundationalist epistemologies”). Similarly, those theories about knowledge inspired by Peirce, James, and Dewey are *pragmatist epistemologies*, and those inspired by Popper and others are *non-foundationalist epistemologies*. Epistemology, in this sense, is not the name of the field but the name of the theory that the inquirers in the field produce.

The term “*multicultural epistemologies*” is often used in this way; it is a theory or more accurately a set of linked theories that have been produced by a group of inquirers in the field of epistemology. Note, however, that the plural form of the term does not merely signal the existence of competing theories within the general camp of multicultural epistemology, the existence of intra-family disputes. Rather, it signals that a multicultural epistemological stance will recognize the validity of multiple epistemologies among the multiple cultural or ethnic groups in society or

in the world – not just their existence, as an empirical fact, but their validity. It seems fair to say that, for multicultural epistemologies, all of these rivals need to be respected, for each group’s epistemology is right, in some sense, for that group. The situation is different with the various rival classical epistemological theories we listed above. Empiricism, rationalism, and the rest coexist because philosophers still disagree about them, but all the disputants agree that only one position can be right (and each disputant claims that his own position is that one correct position). That is, each of these traditional epistemological theories is actually (and explicitly) making a mutually exclusive claim about the nature of human knowledge and justification, namely, that it is the only correct position. Multicultural epistemologies tend not to make such claims.

### The Special Case of “Standpoint Epistemologies”

To probe this idea, it will be helpful at this point to introduce an alternative epistemology known as “standpoint epistemology.” Derived from insights in Hegel (regarding the master–slave dialectic) and Marx (regarding the standpoint of the proletariat; see Mills 1988), borrowing Lyotard’s skepticism about justificatory meta-narratives (Lyotard 1984), and building on commonly held critiques of foundationalist epistemologies (see Phillips and Burbules 2000), standpoint epistemology holds – in its simplest form – that one’s social positioning or standpoint (including especially one’s race and gender) determines what is accepted as knowledge, what beliefs can be justified, and – crucially – *how* they can be justified. We shall return to a more detailed discussion of standpoint epistemology below, but for now, we intend to focus on the claim that multiple cultural/social epistemologies can coexist at the normative level. That is, this theory holds that a variety of different and competing sets of normative epistemological views about what makes for better beliefs, and how beliefs should be warranted, can all be correct at the same time.

It should be clear that the work of the standpoint epistemologists differs from the descriptive standpointism espoused by James Banks in the passage quoted earlier, for it was explicit that it was *not* part of his agenda to discuss or assess the warrants or justifications for beliefs. He made it clear that he was not engaged in a normative endeavor but rather sought to explore the sociopolitical forces and processes that shape how groups construct the things they consider to be knowledge. But the standpoint epistemologist insists that, in contrast to an abstract knower of some hypothetical proposition (as in the endlessly repeated formula, “S knows that P if and only if...”), *real* knowers and *real* inquirers are always located in a sociocultural and historical setting and have their own specific identities,<sup>5</sup> and it is from such sources that their epistemological tools are acquired. Therefore, for example, it is suggested that what counts as knowledge and justification for Black

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<sup>5</sup> This position is developed by Lorraine Code in her classic essay, part of which is reprinted as Chap. 5 in this volume.

females is not necessarily the same as what counts as knowledge for Asian males, and vice versa.

We believe that there are a number of weaknesses in this view, but at present we merely want to point out that, as an epistemological theory, standpointism too makes a *normative* claim about the nature of knowledge and inquiry, just as the other traditional epistemological theories do. In other words, the standpoint epistemologist believes that this theory is *correct* and is not merely one alternative among many; and furthermore it tells us something about the difference between knowledge and beliefs. At the same time, standpointism does allow for the possibility that the knowledge produced and accepted by one culture (or race, ethnicity, gender, etc.) is fundamentally different from the knowledge produced and accepted by other cultures – a strong sense of the term “multicultural epistemologies” that leads in the direction of relativism.

It appears, then, that feminist or Black or Chicano epistemologies (for example) might be classified as sub-theories under the standpoint epistemology metatheory, for they describe the knowledge practices of these particular communities; but it should be remembered that they face a significant philosophical hurdle in achieving normative status *beyond* their specific group of origin. For as we pointed out earlier, there are multiple cultural groups, and to be consistent, they cannot claim that only their own culturally based epistemology is valid – they have to extend this privilege to all cultural groups. This charitable (relativistic) position is reinforced by standpoint epistemology. For example, if the version of standpointism described above is accepted, then Chicana epistemology, say, has no greater external or universal validity than Native American epistemology. Or more controversially, feminist epistemologies – understood now as that knowledge produced by women, or as the knowledge-justifying practices of women – have no greater universal validity than masculinist epistemologies. In other words, if standpointism is correct, the epistemology of a group (and the products of its epistemological activities) will have normative status *for that group* but will not have such status for those with another group affiliation – a position that would seem to be something of a pyrrhic victory for the supporters of “multicultural epistemology.” (In our discussion, we are putting aside the vexed question of what actually constitutes a group, but see Kwame Anthony Appiah’s thoughtful inquiry into the sources of group identity in Appiah 1990.)

### ***(C) An Epistemology as a Descriptive Account of How People Acquire Beliefs***

The preceding discussion has already introduced a *third* distinct usage of the term “epistemology,” as an empirical or descriptive term rather than as a philosophical and normative one. As discussed several times already, this distinction between normative and descriptive usages is crucial. Simply put, a descriptive epistemology is one that merely describes (and perhaps analyzes or studies) a set of beliefs or belief strategies without evaluating them, without regard for the normative distinction

between belief and knowledge. In contrast, a normative epistemology is one that upholds that distinction and attempts to gain insight into it.

We need to make clear that in calling attention to the difference between descriptive and normative usages, we are not denying the potential *relevance* of descriptive studies to normative inquiry. Many serious philosophers today, perhaps even all, believe that normative epistemology must seek to analyze actual knowledge practices. To take just one example, the recognition that knowledge is often generated by communities (for example, research groups or peer groups of researchers working in the same general field) rather than by isolated individuals has had far-reaching implications for normative theories of knowledge. (See Haslanger 1999, for a contemporary development of this general point, in the service of the argument that “feminist inquiry into social and cognitive lives is essential to normative epistemology.” And, see our discussion below, in the section entitled “Cultures and Knowledge: A Closer Look.”) As a second example, we might note that the paradigm-shifting work of Thomas Kuhn (1962/1970) in philosophy of science – universally cited and sometimes understood – is grounded in the empirical study of actual scientific revolutions.

### **An Example: An Argument from Scheurich and Young**

To offer an illustration of how many of the issues we have touched upon in our discussion thus far can become entangled, consider the following passage from Scheurich and Young (1997) in which they argue that what they call the “critical tradition” (by which evidently they mean the traditional philosophical tradition) is in some way defective or limited. (We have added numbering to the sentences for ease of reference in our subsequent discussion.)

(1) The critical tradition’s ontology, epistemology, and axiology are predominantly the creation of White scholars and their social context.... (2) Consequently ... it is not necessarily the appropriate epistemological frame for all race-oriented emancipatory work. (3) Advocates for the critical tradition, therefore, need to support the emergence and acceptance of other epistemologies. (pp. 9–10)

A close reading of these three sentences yields the following. The first sentence offers a correct descriptive historical statement, for indeed, traditional philosophical epistemology was developed mainly by a succession of White males. But note that it remains at the descriptive level; there is no normative analysis of the validity of the epistemology that was produced by these men. Indeed, the sentence tells us nothing about the content of the theories at all. The second sentence, however, beginning as it does with “Consequently,” contains an unarticulated argument. That argument is something like this: Because the tradition was created by a particular ethnic group (White males), its epistemology is only suited for or only meets the needs of that group (White males). The authors temper this argument by their circumlocution, claiming that the White-male-created epistemology is “not necessarily ... appropriate.” But the basic argument is unavoidable. And the third sentence then follows: If a traditional epistemology is inappropriate for

“emancipatory work,” and if (we might add) people of good will are in favor of such work, then those within the tradition ought to support alternative epistemologies. They ought to acknowledge and accept the fact that what worked for them (as it were) does not work for others. (Interestingly, the authors deny that the alternative epistemologies are to be preferred over traditional ones: “It is not our intention ... to privilege some of the race-based epistemologies over others” (Scheurich and Young 1997, p. 11).)

What are we to make of this claim? If we consider fields other than epistemology, we quickly run into trouble. The current physical science “theory of matter” – matter is composed of atoms, which have nuclei and electron shells, and at the subatomic level there are quarks of various types, etc. – was built up overwhelmingly by White males, but does this mean it only “meets the needs of” this group? Are Hispanic males, or Black females, or White females, also not obliged to accept this as the best theory that is currently available? We might ask similar questions about any other field, in the social sciences and the humanities no less than the physical sciences. This second sentence makes the assumption that what is required for successful “emancipatory work” is an appropriate epistemology, whereas one might have supposed that what was required was substantive knowledge produced by rigorous and disciplined inquiry into political and economic systems and how one might influence those systems in forwarding the emancipatory agenda.

It seems clear that here the authors are using the term “epistemology” not in either of the two philosophical senses we discussed earlier. The need for other epistemologies is not supported here by any normative analysis of the defects of the principles of traditional epistemology. Instead, the argument is entirely nonnormative; a descriptive account of the particular ethnic or cultural origin of the theory is sufficient to show that it is inappropriate in the new setting.

In their rejoinder to two responses to their original article, Scheurich and Young ask that their critics consider more sensitively “the issues of racism in research, including the recognition that research has an atrocious history of reproducing White racism” (Scheurich and Young 1998, p. 29). It surely is true that the history of social inquiry is littered with examples of racial bias, and it surely is true that the products of those inquiries have preserved and even promoted racist social arrangements. But those examples all serve to confirm the descriptive thesis that research has been biased with sometimes disastrous consequences. In order to construct the normative category of epistemological racism, as Scheurich and Young hope to do, it is necessary to offer an account of the relationship between the “race” or culture of inquirers and the validity or satisfactoriness of the criteria or normative standards that these inquirers operate with in producing their knowledge claims, and to show that the normative standards of traditional epistemology actually endorse the biased work that has been produced. People do bad things to other people, and sometimes they do bad things using bad research, unconsciously or even intentionally. But it is hard to understand how the bad things that people do can undermine the norms of inquiry. If inquirers falsify their research, we can blame the inquirers and perhaps the system that produced them, but we can hardly blame the norms of inquiry that they have failed to honor.

## Sociology of Knowledge: The Descriptive Orientation Reigns Supreme

The idea of an epistemology as a descriptive account of how people acquire beliefs suggests a branch of sociology known as “sociology of knowledge,” and in particular, that subbranch known as “sociology of science,” which inquires into the knowledge practices of particular communities – in this case, communities of scientists.

Sociologists of science ask fascinating descriptive questions. For example, in the course of their knowledge-making activities in their laboratories, what are the chief practices in which scientists engage? Do all members of the lab – from the humblest to the most famous – have freedom of input, or are some relatively disenfranchised? Do women and members of minority groups in the lab participate as frequently in discussions and in decision-making as men? In pursuing such questions – in constructing a descriptive account of knowledge production – sociologists may also be considered by some to be providing an “epistemology” of science in this empirical, descriptive, nonphilosophical, and nonnormative sense of the term. (Latour and Woolgar 1986, is a controversial classic in this general genre.)

It should be clear that insightful sociology of science has raised important issues, in particular, regarding the relationships between power structures in communities of inquiry and the knowledge claims that are put forward by those communities. For example, writing in the “Introduction” to their edited volume on *Feminist Epistemologies*, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (1993) write as follows:

Growing awareness of the many ways in which political relationships (that is, disparate power relations) are implicated in theories of knowledge has led to the conclusion that gender hierarchies are not the only ones that influence the production of knowledge. Cognitive authority is usually associated with a cluster of markings that involve not only gender but also race, class, sexuality, culture, and age.... Research has revealed a plethora of oppressions at work in productions of knowledge.... (p. 3)

Alcoff and Potter here point to the fact that, while gender is the primary issue of concern to them, the question of the relationship between political power and the production of knowledge is similar for all marginalized groups.

At the same time, however, one radical trend within sociology of knowledge – the so-called strong program – would not be satisfied with the analysis offered to this point. (For further discussion of sociology of science, see the chapters by Phillips, Matthews, and Slezak, in Phillips 2000a; also see Phillips 2000b.) Adherents of this approach would *acknowledge* that their work is descriptive, rather than normative (that is, it follows the third usage of “epistemology” rather than the first or second). But they would argue further that decisions about what to count as knowledge are *never* made using epistemic criteria (the sorts of criteria Audi discusses under the rubric of “justification”). Instead, what gets called “knowledge” is *entirely* determined by sociopolitical processes, of the sort that sociology and anthropology of science can elucidate. This is strikingly illustrated in the following passage, written by the prominent “strong programmer” Steve Woolgar (1993):

It should be clear from these tenets [of the strong program] that mathematical statements such as “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” are as much a legitimate target of sociological questioning as any other item of knowledge .... What kinds of historical conditions give this expression its currency

and, in particular, what established (and now sustains) it as a belief? This kind of question is posed without regard for the (actual) truth status of the statement. (p. 43)

But surely it is bizarre to exclude the “truth status” of this mathematical statement from being among the factors giving it the wide currency it holds among educated people. (That is, surely most of us accept the statement because we have strong reason to believe that it is true!)

To followers of the strong program, then, issues of warrant or justification in the philosophical sense are mere window dressing, and traditional normative epistemology is an utterly futile endeavor. On this view, then, the distinction between the normative and descriptive senses is crystal clear. The “strong programmers” are not *denying* the theoretical distinction; rather, the claim is that we should just stop doing this vacuous normative epistemology altogether – as a field, it is now defunct. It is worth noting here that perhaps the most prominent proponent of the end-of-epistemology view – though he was postmodern rather than an adherent of the strong program – was Richard Rorty (e.g., Rorty 1979), who argued that there is simply nothing (or, nothing “interesting”) to be said about what makes some kinds of inquiry or some kinds of belief better than others.

### The Idea of “Ways of Knowing”

A further example of this third usage of “epistemology” in the literature we are surveying emerges when the question of “how do we know?” is interpreted in a rather natural manner, especially for educators and educational researchers. Everything that we actually do know can be construed as a product of *learning*, either on the collective or individual level, and scholars have done important work on such matters as the mechanisms of learning and diverse learning styles. One example here is Lyttle and Cochran-Smith’s (1992) article, “Teacher research as a way of knowing,” but the more prominent example is Belenky et al. (1986), *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. Clearly, this usage of “epistemology” also is descriptive rather than normative; research in this category is not concerned with the normative justification of particular propositions or ideas, but rather with describing *the psychology or social psychology of knowledge*. How do individuals come to know (learn) something? How do members of a culture come to do so? Do different ethnic groups or genders learn or acquire knowledge (or insight, or wisdom) in different ways? Are there different ways of learning or of “coming to know”? Particularly when these empirical issues are addressed on a fundamental level, writers sometimes consider them to be “epistemological.” Those who are familiar with traditional *normative* epistemology, on the other hand, believe that such a label is confusing for precisely the reasons that we have been discussing. Indeed, this is why Helen Longino (1994) concludes her (generally positive) review of Belenky et al. as follows: “But it is not yet epistemology” (p. 474).

Some of Asante’s remarks are best understood within this framework as well, for example, when he asks about the role of myth and ancestral memory. One assumes that he is not debating the degree of warrant for traditional cultural myths, or for



ancestral memory. Rather, he is suggesting that they are the psychological or social sources of the beliefs that some cultural groups value and teach to their younger members (teach, that is, as “knowledge”). And this same sense of “epistemology” seems to be relevant to Collins (1990), when, in her discussion of “an Afrocentric feminist epistemology,” she discusses the importance of such things as dialogue and a “call-and-response discourse mode,” the use of empathy, and the use of metaphors (Chap. 10). A metaphor surely does not make a knowledge claim valid; a metaphor does not provide warrant. But a metaphor certainly may help individuals learn or understand that claim.

In some of these cases, there seems to be an unnecessary source of confusion. Nothing much is gained from the rhetorical inflation of using the term “epistemology.” Conversely, nothing is lost if the use of “epistemology” is avoided, and instead these phenomena are referred to in terms of diverse learning styles, different modes of learning and engagement, different patterns of discourse and rhetorical and cultural production, and so on, across various cultural groups.

#### ***(D) An Epistemology as a Description of a Set of Beliefs***

To this point, we have noted two normative senses of “epistemology,” one in which it refers to the specific field of normative inquiry as a whole and a second in which it refers to particular normative theories within that field. We have also argued that there is a third sense of the term, which has become prevalent in the educational research literature, which is descriptive rather than normative. And in adapting the term to a descriptive usage, the notion of “multiple epistemologies” becomes unproblematic. But in addition to the description of knowledge *practices* of particular communities, the term “epistemology” is sometimes extended even further to encompass description of the specific *content* of beliefs that are held, or are accorded the status of being knowledge, by ethnic or cultural groups. In this *fourth* usage, then, multicultural epistemologies are simply *those differing sets of beliefs held by different communities*. This need not take the form of an individuated list of propositions, of course; we might think instead of a worldview or even a horizon of meaning. Here it is worth pausing to note that multicultural epistemology, in this sense, indeed can be an extremely important area for educational research to explore. One only has to consider the potentially miseducational consequences of assuming that all students share the beliefs of the dominant culture to see why this is so.

Thus, it is sometimes claimed in the literature that Chicanas or Blacks have different, rival epistemologies (typically, in opposition to a dominant White epistemology, rather than in opposition to each other). But the substance of the argument involves pointing to, at least in part, the different beliefs that the groups in question actually hold, and which they respectively believe to be important to their experience of the world. This is part of the argument of Bernal (1998), who claims that “a unique characteristic of a Chicana feminist epistemology is that it also validates ... experiences that are intertwined with issues of immigration, migration, generational

status, bilingualism, [etc.]” (p. 561). These issues are certainly important and worthy of the attention of educators and educational researchers, but they are “epistemological” only in this fourth sense; they are aspects of the experiences of a certain community and may certainly shape the way members of the community act or behave (for everyone acts at least in part on the basis of their past experiences, and what is believed to be the case). But again we stress that epistemology in this fourth sense makes no appeal at all to any evaluation of the things that are claimed to be items of knowledge.

Consider the following example. In her chapter entitled “Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology,” prominent Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) blends standpointist assumptions with a call for the expansion of scholarship to encompass broader areas of experience:

Black feminist thought, like all specialized thought, reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators.... Because elite white men and their representatives control structures of knowledge and 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 been routinely distorted in or excluded from traditional academic discourse. (p. 201)

Collins does not present a philosophical argument, here, for standpointism as an epistemological theory. Rather, she is rejecting the disciplinary limitations on scholarship and offering a sketch of a sociopolitical argument that those limitations inevitably bring about a scholarly distortion and undervaluing of the real lives, and real concerns, of Black women. Clearly, if this argument were to be developed, it should be a matter of great concern that the body of knowledge accorded a canonical status within a society does not include the “thematic content” that is of importance to subgroups within that society. Just as clearly, however, Collins’ usage of the term “epistemology” in this chapter avoids the kind of normative considerations that characterize the philosophical usages of the term. She is not saying that there is something about the experience with work or family that generates knowledge of a particularly logically well-warranted kind. Rather, she is saying that the topics or issues that are of central concern to Black women are not sufficiently addressed by current scholarly inquiry.

### **Using the Map: An Example**

Our map of the broad field of multicultural epistemology should have made clear that there are – in addition to the two standard philosophical usages of the term – two other different and counterposed senses in which a scholar might be using the term “epistemology.” The four were as follows: (a) epistemology as a normative field of study, (b) an epistemology as a particular normative theory of knowledge and justification, (c) an epistemology as a descriptive account of the belief-acquiring practices of individuals or communities, and (d) an epistemology as a descriptive account of the actual contents of a set of beliefs or a worldview. In the latter two