
WHO CAN SPEAK ABOUT WHOM:

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES SOCIAL IDENTITY MAKE
TO EPISTEMIC CLAIMS ABOUT OTHERS IN THE
SOCIAL DOMAIN?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to understand the weight of claims which assert that only certain individuals can speak for others who have a shared social identity. Specifically, these claims will be considered in light of differences between individuals which result in unequal social relations, with particular attention given to claims that strive to understand how it is that we can improve social relations and live well interdependently. In the first part of the thesis, I will defend the notion that it is important to consider a collection of people with shared societal experiences as a social group in order to understand the lives of those individuals. I will then establish how social group membership and identification with that group provides certain possibilities for relating to one another and making epistemic claims about the social domain that are, at the same time, hidden or perhaps not available to others who have not lived the experiences of that group. Finally, I will consider the extent to which others are limited by their social identity. Ultimately, I will suggest that taking seriously the claims, both, that our own knowledge of the world is influenced in important ways by social identity and that lived experience of a social identity results in meaning for some that must be displayed for others, results in the necessity to engage directly and actively with the lived experience of others in order to come to improved understandings of the social domain.

INTRODUCTION

Relevance

“Women should be in control of that line, no question” (Gadsby in Harmon, 2018). These are the words of Australian writer, actor and comedian, Hannah Gadsby, at an event for Women in Entertainment in 2018. Gadsby’s speech was delivered in the wake of the #MeToo Movement, a viral media campaign which demonstrated the extent of sexual violence against women. The line that she was referring to is the line between what is acceptable behaviour towards women and what is not. She argued that the line, when drawn by men, is used to make the distinction between “good” and “bad” men. In fact, she continued, men cannot be categorised in this way. The formation of this binary has resulted from men who wish to condemn the actions of other men and extricate themselves from any association with sexually violent behaviour. This, Gadsby went on to say, inevitably results in an arbitrary line that reflects the interests of those men: “men will draw a different line for every different occasion — a line for the locker room; a line for when their wives, mothers, daughters and sisters are watching; another line for when they are drunk and fretting” (Gadsby in Harmon, 2018). This results in the world that we live in now where women are subject to immoral behaviour from “good” men. Gadsby concluded her speech with the claim “now take everything that I have said up unto this point and replace ‘men’ with ‘white person’ and know that if you are a white person you have no place drawing lines in the sand between good white people and bad white people” (Gadsby in Harmon, 2018). And the same logic, she claimed, should be applied to other social groups. Ultimately, she ended, we all want to believe we are good, this is part of the human condition, but we must be very careful not to let this blind us to our position in society, particularly when it is a position of power, when making claims about others in the social domain.

My interest in investigating how social identity bears on one’s ability to make judgements about others in the social domain was born out of personal experience. I am a white middle-class woman. Previously I worked in the charity sector, working with individuals who have social identities different from my own. Individuals who have experienced marginalisation that I have not. In my role, I represented these individuals, for example, working with employers to create recruitment processes that encouraged greater diversity in their workforce. When I moved to Amsterdam, I went to an event that made me question my role in this process. The event was on Black identity. During the panel discussion, held by four black women, a conversation ensued about the ineffectiveness of the diversity initiatives at a particular education institution. One of the concerns that was raised was that the diversity officer in this institution was a white woman with comments along the lines of: “let me get this straight, the *diversity* officer is a *white* woman”. In agreement with Gadsby, it was clear that they did not believe that someone who is white is best placed to make decisions that will address inequality, inequality that serves the interests of white people. I shifted in my seat uncomfortably during this discussion: I have ambitions to return to working on issues around social mobility and the lack of representation of marginalised social groups in the UK in areas such as employment and higher education. But, upon hearing this debate, I wondered what my social identity means for taking up such a position and whether it imposes limits on my role within the field. However, nor did I want to walk away from systems of social inequality that I benefit from and am implicated in and therefore, I believe, have a responsibility to address. Indeed, I still believed that

it is necessary for dominant social groups to engage in these issues in order for necessary change to occur because it is these groups that are complicit in the problem. Finally, and perhaps a little naively, I held onto hopes about the role of compassion and empathy in bridging social divides and finding ways to create joint projects which challenge unjust social institutions. With this motivation in mind, in this thesis I will embark on an exploration of the arguments behind the claim that social identity determines the role that individuals can take in their interactions with others in the social domain.

Justifications

There are two ways that the position of power that my social identity grants me can be conceived of as problematic when speaking for other social groups: for epistemic reasons and for reasons of justice. From the epistemic point of view, I may not be in a position to fully understand the oppression of others: my social identity necessarily incurs flawed, or at least incomplete, beliefs and judgements about the experience of people with different social identities, and in particular of marginalised groups. This claim rests upon the premise that knowledge is socially situated. A line of thinking most prominent in standpoint theory, this is contrary to traditional theories of knowledge which assume that access to knowledge is based upon exercising mental faculties in the correct way: who is doing the knowing does not matter (Grasswick, 2018). Standpoint theorists, on the other hand, argue that knowledge of the world, is shaped, and limited, by our social situation. This is particularly important to acknowledge in order to break out of dominant conceptual frameworks which have been developed largely, or even solely, from the perspective of dominant social groups. Interpreting the argument developed by Gadsby from the epistemic point of view, the argument is that, when judgements on gender relations are made solely by men, this leads to incorrect epistemic claims about the social domain. Gadsby argues that the beliefs that we have about the world are not impartial but shaped by our identity: an identity which is wedded to the belief that we, ourselves, are fundamentally good people. However, this can lead to skewed perceptions and beliefs about the social domain, such as an imaginary line between “good” and “bad” men. If the epistemic claim is correct, then, the fact that I am white is problematic for holding a position in which I represent groups who are not white because my social situation blinds me to certain social phenomena and ways of understanding the social world that are inherent to challenging injustice.

Turning to the second claim, the argument here poses that it is unjust for those in a position of power to make judgements for others *in and of itself* because doing so perpetuates the unequal power relations that are being challenged. This maintain hegemonic social structures, preventing the desired change from occurring. Instead, representation of the interests of different groups is necessary to achieve just social institutions. Again, this was reflected in the argument made by Gadsby who conveyed her anger at having to listen to *men* speak on an issue which has resulted from social structures which place men in a position of power over women: “the good men don’t have to wake up early for their opportunity to monologue their hot take on misogyny. They get prime-time TV and the late shows” (Gasdbsy in Wang, 2018). Although the two claims, the epistemic viewpoint and reasons of justice, are related to one another because they both result from unequal power dynamics in social relations, and are both concerned to address social situations in which the interests of some groups are disproportionately represented over the interest of others, they are distinct. On the question of my role in the charity sector, it is possible to conclude that I can speak

for others, granted epistemically, but I should not speak for others, to achieve justice. In other words, I can in the sense that I can access knowledge about the social world and the way in which social groups, to which I do not belong, are oppressed. However, I *should not* because, by taking up such a position, I am perpetuating the structures that I am proposing to challenge because I am asking employers to listen to *my* voice on diversity, my voice being a voice that is not representative of a marginalised voice.

In this thesis, my goal will be to analyse the first claim: the epistemic claim that knowledge is socially situated rendering some social groups in a better position than others to make epistemic claims in the social domain. I am particularly interested in claims about the social domain, as illustrated by the two examples above, about how society should be structured so that people live well interdependently, in a society in which individuals are treated fairly and equally. First, we need to understand the limits that social identity does or does not impose on our ability to understand the oppression of others and then it can be analysed whether it is justified to speak on behalf of others. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, I will bracket the second claim.

In the first chapter, I will argue that social identity is an important factor in shaping our perception of the social domain. This is to challenge the traditional conception of knowledge that it is possible to adopt an impartial point of view (Reiss & Sprenger, 2014) such that who is doing the knowing is interchangeable (Grasswick, 2018). Instead I will argue that knowers, and the possibilities that the world presents them are, at least to some extent, shaped because of social identity. In order to consider why this might be the case I will first establish which social identities are important and why. Second, I will argue that social identity shapes the way that we come to the world in such a way that it is possible to talk intelligibly about a uniform experience for individuals with that identity. I will consider the second argument in light of its site of controversy that we must be very careful to avoid the homogenisation of group experience. This is because, to do so is to make the same move that those social groups argue against, that is essentialist definitions and damaging stereotypes which neglect individual experience.

In the second chapter, I will ask how and when this uniform experience informs the beliefs and judgements that we have about the social domain. In particular, how is it that partiality can, at times, afford access to epistemic claims in the social domain and which epistemic claims are these? And why should women speak for other women given that there is still much room for disagreement amongst individuals who interpret their social identity in very different ways? I will focus on the key arguments in standpoint theory using the work of standpoint theorists: Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill and Aileen Moreton Robinson. I will use standpoint theory as a way to explain how the shared perspective that was argued for in the first chapter provides a privileged position, through an *achieved* group consciousness, from which to understand oppressive social structures and make epistemic claims. I will outline the types of epistemic claims that this enables some individuals to make, that are hidden to others.

In the final chapter, I will explore what possibilities there are to overcome the limits that social identity sets on ways of coming to the world. I will ask what is needed in order to engage with the social experience of others in a way that could lead to more informed judgements about the world. I will focus my analysis on a particular case study taken from Moreton-Robinson's book, *Talkin Up to White People*, of the article written by Diane Bell and Topsy Napurrula Nelson "Speaking About Rape is Everyone's Business". In this article, Bell, a white woman, makes epistemic claims about the experiences of Indigenous women. This was received with a large amount of controversy from Indigenous women. I would like to explore the way in which Bell is limited in her scope of

understanding others' experience because of social identities. And, in light of what has been said about the way that social identity can limit or shape knowledge, I would like to question what the role of people who are not oppressed is in understanding the social world and how it serves some but fails to serve others.

CHAPTER 1: WHY DOES SOCIAL IDENTITY MATTER?

By talking about the social domain, I am referring to the social institutions, organisations, relationships and structures that are fundamental to our lives. The social domain is an important object for analysis given the way in which it determines our interaction with the world and in particular the way in which this grants some individuals greater life chances than others. The two examples provided in the introduction are about knowing how people can live well interdependently with others. Traditional conceptions of knowledge assume an atomistic model of knowers (Grasswick, 2018). According to the atomistic model of knowers who is doing the knowing, judging and evaluating is not relevant to knowledge; knowledge is achieved through correct reasoning. To return to the example from my personal experience, in order to make judgements on how employers can achieve greater diversity in their workforce, I need to understand what prevents some groups of people from accessing employment opportunities and how. According to the atomistic model of knowledge it is possible for anyone to achieve the necessary understanding provided they have the correct empirical and rational resources. In regard to the empirical resources, it seems there is an easy step to make to argue that those who have experienced marginalisation can access empirical evidence more readily than I can because they directly experience oppression. However, this is not a problem for the atomistic conception of knowledge which would maintain that, provided I can have access to the necessary experience and thereby gain that knowledge, knowers remain interchangeable.

The argument that I want to explore is whether there are certain knowledges that are only accessible to those with a particular social identity because people with other social identities cannot access the necessary experience. According to this argument knowers are not interchangeable: who is doing the knowing shapes and limits what is known about the social domain. And, social identity, at least in some circumstances, is essential to who is doing the knowing. In order to make the argument that social identity grants certain knowledges it must be possible to (a) specify which aspects of individuals social identity make an irreducible difference to the knower (b) characterise the uniform experience from which such knowledges are possible (in a way that does not lead to essentialist definitions of social groups) and (c) demonstrate that this experience is only accessible to those individuals. This is the aim of this chapter.

I will start with the question of which social groups are important to talk about and why, when considering the social domain, by using Iris Young's (Young, 2001) account of systemic injustice. I will then consider whether the relational difference between different social groups, that this account grants, provides a reason to talk about a shared perspective of those social groups. This will be considered in light of the concern that to talk about a single perspective according to shared social identity, that could be the basis for epistemic claims, results in the homogenisation of group experience at the expense of recognising the experiences, interests, behaviours and personalities of individuals. I will argue that it is possible to maintain acknowledgement of individual experience whilst also arguing that our experience is shaped, in ways that determine our perspective, by social identity. Here, I will use the work of Linda Martin Alcoff (Alcoff, 1999) and her theoretical account of social identity, to explain the role of social identity in shaping perspective. I will expand on her use of Merleau-Ponty to include another part of his account which I believe is important to understand just

how social identity informs and mediates our perceptual experience, and the possibilities for shared knowledge with some but not others.

Why is it important to talk about social identity in order to understand the social domain?

First, why do we talk about social groups when trying to understand the social domain? And which social groups are important to talk about? It is commonplace, in social commentary, to make comparisons between different social groups. For example, employers recognise that it is important to address the fact that certain *groups* of people, such as ethnic minorities, women and disabled people, are under-represented in employment figures. Employers have rightly noted that there is something wrong with the fact that people who belong to one social group appear to have better access to opportunities than others. However, there are philosophical challenges to conceptualising the social domain with reference to groups and not to individuals. For example, Dworkins, as outlined by Young (2001), argues that we should consider individuals person by person and not according to social group membership because, to do anything otherwise, will neglect individual tastes, choices and goals. These concerns have been reflected in social rhetoric also. For example, setting quotas on the number of hires from minority groups are controversial because it has been argued that quotas neglect the talent and skills of individual candidates, mistakenly asking employers to consider social group membership. Further, quotas have been viewed as demeaning to those who are part of the social groups in question because, it has been argued, they do not recognise them as an individual but judge them on categories such as race or gender (Groom, 2017).

Young (2001) responds to these criticisms that it is necessary to talk about social groups because it is only by doing so that certain inequalities can be identified, which are not evident when looking only at the lives of individuals. If employers only consider their hiring processes at the level of the individual the reason that one person, who “happened to be” black, did not get a job that another person, who “happened to be” white, could be attributed solely to luck or skill (or lack of). Whilst this might be the case in some instances, when employment figures recognise social groups it becomes apparent that there is a marked difference between some groups as compared to others. This provides reason to think that there is something other than individual skill or chance that is making the difference to individuals’ prospects. Young argues that the difference between social groups in these instances is a result of structural injustice. Structural inequality results from certain structures which condition the lives of some in a way that affords them different opportunities than those afforded to the lives of others.

“Structures refer to the relation of basic social positions that fundamentally condition the opportunities and life prospects of persons located in these positions. The unintended consequence of many actions often produce and reinforce such opportunities and constraints, and these often make their mark on the physical conditions of future actions, as well as on the habits and expectations of actors” (Young, 2001, p15).

This inequality is unjust when it is possible to tell a plausible structural story that creates the inequality in question. For example, processes that produce and reproduce racial inequality can provide a plausible structural story for why people from ethnic minority groups are underrepresented in employment figures (Bulman, 2017). This is to say that: different social processes and institutions make it more difficult for individuals from ethnic minorities to secure

employment than for those who are white. This includes social processes such as the existence of unconscious bias and the tendency for ingroup favouritism in a society in which the dominant group is people who are white. Or, social institutions such as the media and the portrayal of ethnic minority groups which can accentuate biases. It is the way that these social structures intersect with one another that condition the employment prospects of ethnic minorities. Only by considering individuals at the level of group membership are these patterns identifiable. Therefore, it is necessary to consider social groups in order to understand the social domain and assess social structures. Not all social groups are important to this endeavour but those that are persistent in everyday lives, embedded in various social structures and therefore a potential site for systematic injustice: social groups such as race, class and gender.

Social movements mobilising around systematic injustices are often characterised by their identity with that social group (Johnston, Laraiia, & Gusfield, 1994). But, is this necessarily the case and why should that be? It could be argued that it takes those individuals to reveal systematic injustices because they have a vested interest in resolving systematic injustice. If so, one could argue that what it takes for individuals from other social groups to engage with these social movements is to look outside of their self-interested perspective in order to understand the plight of others. This way it is possible for shared understanding of the social domain. Taking this argument further, it has been contested that confining particular identities to social movements that represent those identities is a barrier to increasing knowledge about the social domain because it is divisive and self-serving (Young, 1997). For example, in the view of communitarian, Jane Elshtein, social movements which define themselves according to shared identity prevent efforts to achieve social justice because "If you are black and I am white, by definition I do not and cannot in principle 'get it'" (Elshtein in Young, 1997, p384). For Elshtein, this is problematic because it fixes people in their identities and prevents society from getting past its' differences.

I am interested in the question of whether, beyond the interests of different individuals, there is truth to the claim that some groups cannot, in principle, "get it". If this is the case, counter to Elshtein, then it is necessary to consider the claims of different social groups as epistemically different. And, beyond getting past self-interested viewpoints of dominant social groups, there is an irreducible difference that means that members of that group cannot recognise important features of the social domain. Young (1997) argues that Elshtein's criticism, and others like it, mistakenly conceive of group-based social movements under the label of "identity politics". This is mistaken because it imagines that social group identity is understood according to shared, set characteristics such as language, customs or national origin. Understood as such, Young agrees, that this leads to essentialist group definitions which serve to include or exclude. However, the difference that social groups mobilise around should not be understood in this way. Rather, the difference that makes a difference are the structural processes that position people differently. Social group differentiation, therefore, should be understood in *relational* terms. Individuals of a particular group share a particular social position that is sustained by social structures, practices and institutions. This can, and should, be differentiated from the social position that others share.

Young argues that characterising social groups according to a relational difference avoids some important criticisms that are incurred when the difference between social groups is understood according to set characteristics. Understanding social groups according to set characteristics implies that individuals share interests and strategies for social change, which is not the case. And, even more concerning, this understanding neglects the differences that exist between members of a shared social group. Everyone relates to numerous social groups and will relate to

each of these differently from other members of a shared social group, depending on a number of different aspects of that individuals' lives. Defining a common identity neglects the role of individual voices in understanding their experience. Young concludes that, what is shared by members of social groups, differentiated relationally, is the experience of similar constraints and enablement's, social meanings and expectations. Young, to avoid any association with a set definition of common group identity, argues that the relationship that relational social group members share with one another is not one of identity. For example: "The gender position of being a woman does not itself imply sharing social attributes and identity with all those others called women. Instead, 'women' is the name of a series in which some individuals find themselves positioned by virtue of norms of enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labour" (Young, 1997, p392). Identity, Young is keen to emphasise, is what the individual makes for themselves. Only this can maintain the different interests and values of the individuals that are part of a shared group. I agree with Young's explanation of the difference between the social groups as one which should be thought of as relational. However, I disagree that this is unrelated to identity. Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership together with its emotional significance (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). The emotional significance, and identification with different groups, is important to understanding the social domain and the way in which members of different social groups relate to one another. Self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) proposes that social categorisation exists as a mechanism to enable pro-social behaviour. This is made possible through a process Turner et al. label de-personalisation: whereby an individual sees themselves less in terms of individual characteristics but in terms of interchangeable characteristics with their social group. This results in an exaggeration of the similarities between "ingroup" members and the differences in comparison to "outgroups". However, it also causes ingroup favouritism, discrimination against outgroup members and a likelihood to perceive outgroups as more homogeneous than ingroup members. Identification with particular groups is therefore inherent to the way that social processes shape and limit the lives of individuals.

In addition, identities are not simply constituted by the individual: identities are also imposed by others and societal expectations. An example can illustrate this process. The writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, in a conversation about race, describes how it was not until she moved to America that she *became* Black. She had grown up in Nigeria where race was not a defining feature of individual identity and social perception. She describes how there is a choicelessness to being Black in America and, in this sense, it is imposed. This matters "because it comes with baggage. It matters because my professor in College was surprised that I wrote the best essay and I know that his surprise was simply because I was Black" (Adiche, 2018, 10.35). This is important to recognise because the way in which social structures and institutions limit and enable individuals is often related to their being perceived as a member of a particular social group. As illustrated in the example of the way in which structural injustices cause higher unemployment rates amongst ethnic minorities, one of the social processes that can be attributed to this is discrimination by ingroup members. This does not lead to the conclusion that all women, as Young is keen to avoid, share attributes of a woman but they do share the social identity, "woman", and this is important to understanding how social processes and structures shape the lives of women.

Social identity and shared experience

So far, I have argued that, in agreement with Young, that in order to understand the social domain, and in particular how social processes affect the lives of people differently, it is important to look at social groups. The difference between these social groups, as defined by Young, is relational and constituted by the way that social structures determine the lives of some people as compared to others. Counter to Young, I have argued that identity is an important factor to understanding this difference because of the impact that identification with different social groups, by ourselves or by others, has on those social structures. Whilst it may seem clear that social identity shapes the way that we interact with the world, the question is whether this difference can be characterised according to a shared experience. Individuals have many different identities that affect them in a multitude of ways. In addition, experience of the same social identity can vary from one person to the next because of different interpretations of this identity or different ways that social structures appear in their lives. Social identity does not necessitate shared opinions and beliefs about their identity, and it is important to avoid claims that generalise group experience with claims such as “all women believe...”. Is it possible to characterise the shared perspective that social identity provides and, if so, how? In the next section of this chapter, I will use the work of Linda Martin Alcoff (1999) and expand upon her account of Merleau-Ponty’s our interaction with others (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002) in order to do this.

Alcoff (1999) characterises the perspective that people who share a social identity have as follows:

“Identity is not merely that which is given to an individual or group, but it is also a way of inhabiting, interpreting, and working through, both collectively and individually, how it is to be lived. There are many ways in which the identity “woman” can be lived, many interpretations of it as intersected with other types of identity. Yet every woman must construct for herself an identity that grapples with this culturally mediated concept.” (Alcoff, 2001, p80).

This explanation recognises that individuals who share a social identity will also have a number of other identities that will affect their experience as an individual. It also recognises that each individual will interpret their experience of a given social identity differently. However, what is common to individuals is that they must negotiate comparable features of their social experience because of their shared social identity. Alcoff explains identity as constituted by a horizon from which certain aspects of the world can be perceived or hidden. In order to elaborate on this, she uses Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied perception.

Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002) provides an account of our interaction with the world that differs from the atomistic conception of knowledge with which I began this chapter. That is, he rejects any conception by which our knowledge of the world is viewed separately from our bodily experience in the world. This is counter to a conception of knowledge that rests purely on the careful exercise of mental faculties. Merleau-Ponty argues that all experience is immediately situated *in* the world, inseparable from our perception of the world and the beliefs and judgements which we form as we relate to various possibilities the world presents to us. As Alcoff puts it, “for Merleau-Ponty, the meaning of an experience is produced within an embodied synthesis of consciousness in the world. Meaning exists in the interworld of history, and thus refers to a world which is always already there before me and yet a world whose meaning is always meaning for me”

(Alcoff, 2001, p84). Alcoff uses Merleau-Ponty as a way to explain how our experience is specific to our social identity: we are immediately situated in a social world and our understanding of the world is constituted by this experience. Adiche (Adiche, 2018), in the same interview referred to earlier, puts it like this: “To be a black person in the world, particularly in the West, is to constantly negotiate blackness. If you walk into a store and somebody is rude to you, you are thinking, ‘this person is having a bad day’, that is a possibility, ‘this person is an asshole’, that is possibility or, ‘this person is racist’. That is also a possibility. If you are a white person and someone is rude to you in the store you just have the two options: bad day or asshole” (Adiche, 18.41m, 2018). This was striking to me because, as a white person, when I heard this, I felt that she is right. And not only that, never would I have thought of this. I would never have thought of this because, as Adiche rightly comments, there are only two options there to me in the first place. The third option, that exists for others, is hidden from me because of my social identity: a social identity which shapes how I relate to, and find meaning, in the world.

There is another part of Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception, not present in Alcoff’s account, which is useful to understanding how social identity presents opportunities for relating to others with a shared social identity, which are different from those with whom social identity differs. For Merleau-Ponty, the embodied experience from which we perceive the world is one shared with other, similar embodied and perceiving beings. Meaning is found through this shared experience. Merleau-Ponty argues that nowhere is this more evident than our experience of language. We do not approach speech knowing first what we will say and then revealing thoughts that already existed prior for us, rather, as we converse, “our perspectives merge into each other” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p413) as what one person says provokes the others response and vice versa. This joint project is not isolated to language but is illustrative of the way in which we come to the world with others and experience ourselves as such. In a thought experiment, Merleau-Ponty imagines that he and his friend, Paul, are both looking at a landscape; as they do so they point out different features of what they see to one another. In this scenario, like language, Merleau-Ponty is not first aware of a private sensation that he can then convey to Paul. Rather their perspectives merge into each other’s as they each follow the finger of the other to see what the other sees. This is possible because they are immediately situated in a shared world. I believe it is important to highlight this part of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception because it helps to understand the way in which individuals who belong to a shared social group have certain possibilities to build shared understandings of the world that individuals from a different social group do not. Returning to Adiche’s illustration of the way in which being black constitutes people’s experience, whilst to me her anecdote was a surprise, she would likely not have to point it out to someone else who occupies this social position. Someone else who is black may not articulate it in exactly the same way or experience being black in the same way, however, were they to enter the store together and Adiche was with someone else who was black it may just take a knowing nod to convey what they both interpreted from the situation. If I were with Adiche, the same knowing nod would not convey the same meaning for we are perceiving the experience from different social horizons. Therefore, even though the perspective of people who are woman, black and so on will differ in a multitude of ways, as influenced by their other social identities and by different values, interests and personalities, there is a common unified experience which is constituted by a shared social identity. This presents certain possibilities for understanding the world that are available to some people but closed off to others.

To summarise, Merleau-Ponty’s account helps us to understand that our perception of the world cannot be explained by an account that places us as if we were observers. Rather, through our

embodied experience, we have a world in which intentionality and significance have their place as we relate to various possibilities the world presents to us. This world is a social world as well as a natural world and therefore the possibilities that are presented to us are, at least in part, constituted by our social identity. This is argued persuasively by Alcoff. Further, expanding on Alcoff's position, this world is shared with others and it is with others that we find significance in the possibilities that the world presents to us. This latter point is important to the next chapter in which I will explore the type of knowledge that is available to some groups but not to others.

In this chapter, my aim has been to provide an account of which social identities are important to the understanding of better and worse ways of organising social structures, and why. By using Young's account of structural injustice, it was demonstrated that there are some social groups which are important to how we understand the social domain. These are social groups which are conditioned by social structures in such a way that the lives of individuals are limited or enabled. The difference between these social groups, in agreement with Young, is best understood as one which is relationally constituted. This is connected to identity because social identity is not separable from the social processes which condition it. Secondly, I have considered what it means to talk about a shared experience which results from shared social identity. I have argued that social identity constitutes a background, or frame of interpretation, from which we perceive the world. This is shared with others who have the same social identity. This does not negate individual experience but that individual experience, where social identity is shared, emanates from a shared position that is inherent to our experience of the world. I have not yet demonstrated when the possibilities that are presented through shared social identities makes a difference to the epistemic claims that can be made and what these epistemic claims are. In addition, given that there are still a number of other factors that affect an individual's life and, as has been argued, women will not necessarily be aligned on their strategies for social change: why and when should women be able to speak for other women? This is what I will explore in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: WHEN AND HOW DOES SOCIAL IDENTITY MATTER?

I have argued that social groups are an important feature of the social domain and recognition of the way that social groups relate to one another is particularly important in order to understand how societal structures affect the lives of individuals. In addition, identification with social groups informs the way that we experience the world and, most importantly, there is uniformity to this experience. In order to understand the uniform experience, first it was argued that the meaning and significances that we find in the world are dependent on our experience of “being-in-the-world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). As such, members of a shared social identity share an experience that is different from that of others: social identity shapes the way that we interact with the world and the possibilities that the world presents to us. In this chapter, I will explore under what conditions this experience is important to the epistemic claims that we make. It is still possible to contest that social identity does not provide enough of a basis for shared judgements and beliefs because there are so many other aspects that influence the way that we perceive the world. Therefore, my experience may still be closer to someone with a different social identity than my own, for example a man, who is from the same class and had a similar upbringing, or who has similar personality traits and values, than a woman who might see the world very differently to me for these reasons. Why then, should it be argued that women are better placed to speak for other women than men? How is shared knowledge possible with some and not others? In addition, what sort of epistemic claims is it possible to make?

In this chapter, I will focus on the work of standpoint theorists, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill to answer these questions. Moreton-Robinson’s account of an Indigenous standpoint gives an example of when situated knowledge reveals epistemic truths about the social domain which are hidden or misrepresented by other social groups (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Harding’s account of an achieved standpoint helps to conceptualise how social groups reach these epistemic truths (Harding, 2004). Here, I will argue that there is a stronger connection between a standpoint and the perspective that is granted by our social identity than is evident in Harding’s account. In order to do this, I will refer to Miranda Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007). Finally, Hill’s explanation of the experience, “outsider-within”, is important to understanding why, in some instances, the social position of some is epistemically privileged (Collins, 2004).

Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theorists argue that (a) knowledge is socially situated and (b) some groups are better positioned than others to reveal certain epistemic truths. There have been a number of different versions of standpoint theory but generally the aim is to demonstrate that dominant conceptual frameworks are confined to a particular social viewpoint. And, other socially situated knowledges are best positioned to demonstrate the gaps, or flaws, in these conceptual frameworks. Standpoint theory has been received with a large amount of controversy because it is in opposition to traditional theories of knowledge, denying the possibility, and desirability, of objective knowledge claims that are free from social bias. A common concern with standpoint theory is that it results in a relativist account of knowledge. The argument being, if different group perspectives result in different epistemologies then we are left without a standard by which to judge which group is

correct or not. This results in only being able to say what is true or false relative to a group perspective (Hekman, 1997). Harding (Harding, 1997) responds to the charge of relativity that it misunderstands standpoint theorists primary claim. The claim is that knowledge is generated from a particular social situation, not determined by it. Harding draws an analogy between the school science experiment in which students are asked to look at a stick in water, this results in the belief that the stick is bent. However, when the students look at the stick from another angle, it becomes clear that the stick is not bent, but straight. Likewise, knowledge stems from a particular way of looking at the world: the social situation of the knower influences the type of knowledge that is produced, the questions that are asked, who's interests are represented and how social relations are understood. In this sense, all knowledge claims are socially situated, and knowledge cannot be considered separately from the social situation from which it was generated because it impacts on the distance that claims are from a true picture of reality. We need not concede to a picture in which one standpoint represents what is true for one group whilst another standpoint represents the truth for another group. This is because, Harding argues, some socially situated knowledges are in a better place than others to rupture dominant frameworks and structures in order to reveal the truth about the way in which the social order works. What standpoint theories reveal, by interrogating dominant social structures and refusing to work from the conceptual frameworks that already exist, is a better understanding of these frameworks, the interests that they represent and, importantly, what they have missed. Therefore, in contrast to traditional conceptions of knowledge, not only is objective knowledge not possible, nor is it desirable because it is epistemically advantageous to have a socially biased point of view, at least from certain social positions.

To provide an example of a standpoint, that gives credence to Harding's account, I will use Moreton-Robinson's (2000) illustration of an Indigenous standpoint on the feminist movement in Australia. In her book, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, Moreton-Robinson explains how white feminist movements in Australia have failed to recognise the true nature of the oppression, and in particular racial oppression, of Indigenous women. Not only has this resulted in a partial account of gender inequality but it has caused the perpetuation of white supremacy due to the implicit assumptions that are present in the ideology of Australian feminism. For Moreton-Robinson, white women and Indigenous women have irreducible differences due to different experiences, knowledges, herstories and social locations. However, white women, who have been at the forefront of feminist movements, have not acknowledged these differences. In fact, quite the opposite, they have assumed the position of speaking for all women in their fight for equality. This has resulted in the neglect of other women's interests. For example, in the first wave of feminism, when women won the vote in South Australia in 1894, this was received with a rallying cry from white feminists as if it were a victory for all. But not all women were affected equally by this victory. Class and race continued to act as exclusionary factors for some women being able to vote for reasons such as racialised bureaucratic intervention. In their failure to recognise race, white feminist movements failed to acknowledge their own privilege, emanating from the fact that they are white, which contributed to their ability to have their own struggles recognised. In doing so, the struggles of others were undermined and seen only in the shadow of certain women who presumed the position of speaking for all. Because middle-class white women spoke as if speaking for all women, not only did they neglect the interests of others, but they reduced the position of others to their own whereby "middle-class white woman" was perceived as the legitimate depiction of womanhood. Further, Moreton-Robinson illustrates, when feminist movements did consider the position of Indigenous women, for example recognising poverty or a lack of access to education, it

was done so from their situated perspective. As such, Indigenous women remained as the “other”, objectified under the gaze of white women. Moreton-Robinson gives the example of the actions of the 1920s Women’s Service Guilds who worked in alliance with the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia. Moreton-Robinson explains that their mission was misguided because it remained from a horizon of white imperialism whose intention was to “civilise” Indigenous people under the presumption that only by awakening them to “more advanced” Western customs would they be free from their own “tyrannical” and “backwards” traditions. As we saw in self-categorisation theory, group prejudice works in such a way that we are more likely to homogenise the experiences of out-group members, finding it more difficult to view them as individuals and consider their experience and behaviours with the same complexity we understand members of our own group. This is reflected in Moreton-Robinson’s depiction of the way in which this alliance approached Indigenous people. When representatives from the Women’s Services Guilds visited an Indigenous community, the community was observed as being a model village with people who were “perfectly content”, despite “primitive conditions” (Davidson as cited in Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Another account, of an Indigenous woman, Nannup, remembered this experience very differently. She recalls the preparation of cleaning and polishing in order to portray a certain image of their village, before such visits. The Women’s Service Guilds had presumed to observe everything that there was to the village and not tried to understand people as individuals. This also resulted in a belittling of their needs. Although education was considered necessary, this was only up to a point: Moreton-Robinson quotes an overheard conversation by Nannup in which one representative said, about the education of Indigenous communities, “Ohh, it’s alright, as long as they can write their name and count money – that’s all the education they need” (Nannup et al. as cited in Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p100).

In her account, Moreton-Robinson is concerned to highlight the way in which the first wave of feminism in Australia was representative of a particular standpoint: white middle-class women. In accordance with Harding, this is important because it reveals the context in which gender equality is understood: a context in which womanhood is conceived of in a certain way (reflective of white, middle-class woman), a context which ignores race, a context which fails to properly understand the effects of poverty and a context in which being white supports its success as a movement. All of this is not to say that feminist movements did not make important advancements in their bid for gender equality rather it is to recognise that this success was partial. This is important to recognise because, when the context from which feminist movements emanated are interrogated, this reveals that not all women’s interests are represented within this context. This is despite the epistemic claims made by white feminist movements that these movements were representative of all women’s interests. In addition, interrogating the context reveals who is speaking about whom and ways in which they have been misrepresented. The pursuit of standpoint theories, therefore, is to maintain critical awareness of the social context underpinning such movements. For Moreton-Robinson, it is Indigenous women who are best positioned to critically appraise the context of white feminist claims and offer insights into gaps and misrepresentations: it is the “specifics of Indigenous women’s accounts of white privilege and domination which can offer insights into incommensurabilities and limits to knowing “Other”” (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p110).

But how is it that groups come to occupy this revelatory position? And what exactly is the role of social identity in enabling this position? As we saw above, having a social identity, in this case “woman”, was not enough to provide the type of perspective needed to understand the true nature of Indigenous women’s oppression. Could not the standpoint of Indigenous women fall into the

same trap; whereby some Indigenous women assume a position of understanding the plight of other Indigenous women but, by speaking on behalf of all, fail to recognise an essential difference to their experience (for example, along an age divide)? As such, do we not enter an infinite regress until we are back to only being able to speak about individual experience and back to the argument that was argued against in chapter 1? I believe not. I will argue that this becomes clear when the revelatory position is understood as an *achieved* consciousness as argued by Harding. I will argue that the achieved consciousness is connected to the possibilities for joint meaning because of the intersubjective shared experience that was argued for in chapter 1. This is the aim of the second part of this chapter.

Epistemic possibilities

Harding (2004) also recognises that being a member of an oppressed group does not incur automatic epistemic privilege. She points out that individuals can be, and often are, despite being members of the oppressed group in question, blinded by dominant conceptual frameworks leading them to believe distorted social representations of their social position. What is necessary to achieving an epistemic privileged position, Harding asserts, is the creation of *group consciousness*. By group consciousness, Harding explains, she is referring to collective consciousness which occurs through the liberatory struggles by members of that group as they come to understand the way in which dominant conceptual frameworks fail to serve them. This is a standpoint and, as such, is not simply given but is an *achieved* position which is very much connected to a particular political project. Portraying the standpoint position in this way can explain why white women were able to represent their own group struggles, as they found shared meaning in a joint political project of mapping out the way in which gender norms limited their opportunities, but not the group struggles of Indigenous women, who were not part of this project.

I would like to suggest that the achieved position is made possible because of the shared intersubjective experience, residing in a common social identity, that was illustrated in the first chapter. Harding herself is unclear on the exact role that a particular social perspective has in achieving the required standpoint. She argues that some social groups, the oppressed, are more likely to achieve the necessary group consciousness than others. This is because members of that group have a greater interest in understanding and articulating the social context which has led to gaps in understanding about their experience. Thus, for example, Harding argues that it is no coincidence that it is women of colour who have developed notions of intersectionality: accounts which recognise the way that discrimination overlaps and combines to impact people's lives. However, she also distances standpoint theory from perspectivism, presumably to avoid critiques of essentialism as well as to overcome the fact, as already highlighted, that being a member of an oppressed group does not incur automatic epistemic privilege. Thus, she argues that standpoint theory's:

“concern is not to articulate women's or some other marginalized group's perspective about the group's lives, though this frequently is an important step in its process. Rather, it ambitiously intends to map the practices of power, the ways the dominant institutions and their conceptual frameworks create and maintain oppressive social relations.” (Harding, 2014, p32)

As such, it is the critical awareness of dominant frameworks that is the identifying feature for standpoint theory and not the necessity of a particular perspective in coming to this standpoint: “standpoint approaches can be insightful even when one cannot access first-person reports by those from whose lives research starts off.” (Harding, 2014, p32). Therefore, members of non-marginalized groups can also be part of the process of achieving a critical consciousness. This follows from the Marxist tradition from which standpoint theory originates: Marx claims a particular standpoint *on behalf of* the standpoint of the proletariat (Anderson, 2015). I believe there is a stronger connection than Harding asserts between the perspective of the social group in question and the political project inherent to establishing a standpoint. I agree that this is an achieved position but will argue that it is achieved in light of a particular social perspective. To make this argument, I will use an illustration provided by Fricker in her account of *hermeneutical injustice* (Fricker, 2007).

Fricker coined the term hermeneutical injustice to describe the injustice that occurs when individuals lack the hermeneutical resources to understand their social experience. This is one way in which, as highlighted by Harding, social self-understanding can be hidden even from members of an oppressed group because there is no way for them to put their experience into words. These groups are hermeneutically marginalised by a lack of hermeneutic resources; they are unable to make important aspects of their life intelligible, and thus disadvantaged, in contrast to groups whose interests are represented by dominant frameworks and its conceptual resources. Fricker illustrates hermeneutical injustice with reference to Susan Brownmiller’s memoir (as cited in Fricker, 2007) and her description of the injustice that was experienced by Carmita Woods.

Carmita Woods worked in the nuclear physics department of a university and, one day, was asked by one of the professors to help handle domestic chores. Upon doing so, the professor proceeded to inappropriately touch Carmita, for example finding ways to brush against her breasts or even kiss her, despite Carmita’s attempts to avoid his advancements. This culminated in levels of stress to the extent that Carmita was forced to quit her job. Carmita went on to apply for unemployment insurance but, when filling out the required form, she was unsure what to put in the box which asked her reason for quitting. She was ashamed about her experience and, lacking in hermeneutic resources, cited “personal reasons”. This led to her insurance claim being denied. Carmita, as Fricker explains, experienced hermeneutical injustice. A gap existed where the name of a social experience should be, and this affected Carmita in a way that caused her significant disadvantage. Fricker also includes, but does not dwell on, Brownmiller’s account of the way in which this was corrected which is illuminating to the understanding of group consciousness and its connection to a social perspective. Brownmiller, after talking about Carmita’s experience, explains how, it was only upon attending a university workshop on medical and sexual issues that this hermeneutical gap was addressed. At this workshop, Brownmiller, Carmita and other women spoke about their shared experience of similar incidents: “And then Carmita Wood comes in and tells Lin her story. We realized that to a person, every one of us—the women on staff, Carmita, the students—had had an experience like this at some point, you know? And none of us had ever told anyone before. It was one of those click, aha! moments, a profound revelation” (Sauvigne as cited in Fricker, 2007, p150). This enabled them to understand the experience for what it was and conceptualise it, coining the term “sexual harassment”.

Not only does this example help to understand the harm that can be caused by hermeneutical injustice, but it also provides a good illustration of the creation of group consciousness: one that is both an achieved standpoint and stems from a shared social experience. It is illustrative of the kind of collective consciousness, in Harding’s account of standpoint theory, that

is achieved through the group's struggle to gain understanding of the social phenomena that create and sustain social injustice. It also builds on from the proposal made in chapter 1. The proposal was that social identity can be understood as constituting a shared experience of being-in-the-world and from this experience, various possibilities present themselves. This is especially evident in the way that we converse with one another. Language, as illustrated by Merleau-Ponty, makes evident the shared world, in which we are immediately situated, that we navigate with others. Following from this, hermeneutical injustice can be understood as arising because the dominant group create meaning from one frame of interpretation which is blind to another frame of interpretation. When individuals whose experiences do not emanate from the dominant frame come together to understand their experience it is thus that group consciousness of their shared predicament can develop. To return to Merleau-Ponty's example of he and his friend Paul, similarly, the women in Brownmiller's memoir are able to follow each other's "finger" as they "point" to a shared experience. This account explains why, as Moreton-Robinson argues, the insights of Indigenous women are best placed to understand and make evident the context for the feminist movement in Australia. Their shared perspective presents certain possibilities from which this achieved position is possible. The standpoint that was represented in the feminist movement in Australia, as it embarked on an understanding of the social institutions and practices of power that were conducive to their oppression, was one which was also developed from a shared social space: white middle-class women. This did enable a group consciousness that was critically aware of certain power dynamics however it did not speak for all women. Acknowledging this does not concede to an infinite regress in which we can only accept an individual experience as truly speaking for that experience, rather it acknowledges the limits in its scope.

The example of Carmita Woods is illustrative of how an achieved standpoint, resulting from a shared social perspective, can result in shared understanding about group experience that have been neglected by dominant frameworks. However, reflecting back on the initial example provided by Moreton-Robinson, as well as gaps in knowledge the claim is also that white feminists misrepresented the relationship between white women and Indigenous women. And so, in some sense, Indigenous women are speaking for white women. Why should Indigenous women be epistemically advantaged in their ability to understand their relationship with white women, as compared to white women? A common argument made by standpoint theorists is that epistemic advantage, in these instances, is due to the experience of marginalised groups of "bifurcated" consciousness (Grasswick, 2018): having to navigate a social world which is constituted by dominant conceptual frameworks, as well as their own social experience. This is characterised by Patricia Hill, in her account of Black women's standpoint, as the position of the "outsiders-within" (Collins, 2004). Hill demonstrates how the outsider-within status that black women must navigate in academic settings results in a valuable source of knowledge to sociology. Black women working with sociological paradigms must assimilate to worldviews that are quite different from their lived experience. They are therefore both near and far from these frameworks: having to build an understanding of the dominant frameworks which they are in direct contact with but from a different social perspective. Having this particular vantage point is, therefore, like the previous example, connected to the perspective that is granted through social identity. The shared perspective of black women is apparent in the dominant themes in Black feminist theory. Here, Hill highlights three key themes. These are, firstly, the efforts of Black women to overcome stereotypes about black women. This is not by replacing one definition with another but by re-asserting the human subjectivity of black women in order to make clear the context behind existing stereotypes

and the way in which they have functioned to dehumanize and control black women. Secondly, black women have highlighted the interlocking nature of oppression that affects black women. And, thirdly, black women have drawn on culture and creativity to reveal the ways in which black women have understood, coped with and rebelled against their oppression. The result of having this shared perspective is that black women are best placed to highlight certain anomalies that exist in sociological paradigms. This project is inseparable from the lived experience of black women because it is the conditions of their lived experience that produce the content and insights of Black women's standpoint. Black women are in a position to provide a better picture of the social world than white people, in this instance, because of the way in which they have been marginalised in society. It is this marginalisation that results in a unique perspective because it is necessary for black women to view themselves from the gaze of the other, living through shared oppression, as unique individuals.

In conclusion, my aim in this chapter has been to demonstrate that social identity can provide an advantageous epistemic position from which to interrogate the context which supports dominant ways of understanding the social domain. This is possible because of a shared perspective, afforded by social identity. On its own this perspective does not guarantee better understanding of the social domain. However, it presents certain possibilities for knowledge through achieved group activities which provide understanding of a shared social position. This position avoids objectifying individuals because it is the individuals themselves who take control of understanding their subjective experience. Thus, the interests and values of that group are properly reflected. And joint language projects result in distinctive social experiences, which were previously hidden, being revealed. In addition, the outsider-within status that marginalised groups locate means that the interests of dominant groups are not hidden in the same way that their interests are often hidden from dominant groups. They are therefore in a better position to understand both points of view. In the final chapter, I will ask what the implications are for who can say what about whom in the social domain? Are there ways that dominant social groups can still talk about and understand the experience of others? Finally, what responsibilities are there for understanding the experience of others and what are the limits?

CHAPTER 3: IMPLICATIONS FOR EPISTEMIC CLAIMS ABOUT OTHERS

I would like to start by considering what has been said so far by returning to the personal example I outlined earlier: does my social identity, as someone who is white, impede my epistemic capability when speaking for others on the topic of employment diversity programmes? The social situation which needs to be understood is the way in which social processes interact in a certain way to limit the employment opportunities of some groups of people compared to others and how this should be addressed. To explore this, let us imagine a scenario in which the social perspective of marginalised groups can provide epistemic insights: an employer is looking to increase the ethnic diversity of their workforce but argues that it is disproportionately white candidates who apply and therefore there is nothing that they can do. The employer believes something along the lines of “our workforce is not diverse because this is representative of the candidates that apply”. I am working with the employer to try to address this. It is only by bringing people together, from the groups that the employer is failing to attract, that it becomes clear that everyone on the employer’s website is representative of dominant social groups (that being groups who are predominantly white). In addition, the way that their job adverts are worded asks for character traits that are stereotypical of those groups. Therefore, individuals from some social groups feel that they are not the right fit for the company or job (PearnKandola, 2018). This knowledge is not readily available to me or the employer because it is hidden by our social perspective. In order to make possible a fuller account of the reasons that the employer’s workforce is not diverse, it is necessary to turn to the social groups in question to make evident the gaps in understanding.

However, it is also the case that I was able to think of this example because of my experience of working in this area. Therefore, there are ways that I can acquire knowledge in order to improve my understanding of the social domain, and, in this case, about diversity in the workplace. In addition, as we have seen, it is not guaranteed that another individual with the relevant social identity is epistemically advantaged because it takes an achieved group consciousness to reveal social truths (I have still bracketed reasons of justice: on an individual basis there could be reasons that someone with the relevant social identity should act as a diversity adviser over me because of the power dynamics). Does this lead to the conclusion that I can speak with epistemic capability, even though I do not have first-person experience of a social perspective, provided I educate myself in the right way about the experience of others?

There are two ways that this can still be argued against. Firstly, it can be argued that my social identity limits my perception in a fundamental way that distorts certain realities about social relations. Secondly, it could be argued that understanding that is gained through the testimony of others is different from first-hand experience in a such a way that knowledge will always remain partial. These two claims are related because it could be argued that the reason for the first claim lies in the second i.e. that I lack experiential knowledge. This depends upon whether it is argued that the way in which reality is distorted by my social identity is due to flawed ways of relating to others (which, it can then be argued, be overcome) or due to a perceptual orientation which is not interchangeable with others. In this chapter, I will explore these two claims to establish how social identity has epistemic relevance.

This chapter will proceed as follows: I will begin with another example from Moreton-Robinson on the controversial article written by Diane Bell and Topsy Napurrula Nelson: *Speaking About Rape is Everyone’s Business* (Bell & Nelson, 1989). This debate provides a case in which a white

woman and an Indigenous woman conduct research into intra-racial rape in Indigenous communities. I will argue that the area of tension is Bell's claim that she locates the issue within the wider social context. Here there are reasons to argue that her account is partial and misrepresentative of Indigenous women. In particular her account does not acknowledge the impact of race in the way that she represents the perspectives of Indigenous women on the issue of intra-racial rape in Indigenous communities. I will argue that Ortega's account of "loving, knowing ignorance" (Ortega, 2006) helps to understand this misrepresentation. The question then is the extent to which this error is insurmountable. Are individuals doomed to misrepresentation about the experience of others because of a lack of lived experience or are there better and worse ways to represent the experience of others? Here, I will take two accounts of Charles Mills concept of white ignorance: the first being Alcoff's positioning of white ignorance as demonstrative that knowers are not interchangeable (Alcoff, 1999) and, second, Jose Medina's portrayal of white ignorance as a vice that should be overcome (Medina, 2012). Making this distinction will allow us to disentangle the differences that social identity makes that are irreducible and the ones that can, and should, be overcome: the differences that are limits and the ones that are barriers to understanding. Finally, I will consider, in light of these limits, what can be said about the responsibility for social groups in their understanding of the other. I will conclude, using Maria Lugones account of world travel (Lugones, 1987), by arguing that dominant groups should not be trying to understand the "other" as such but their *relationship* with other social groups: taking up a similar position that marginalised groups do not have a choice but to operate from in their understanding of the social domain.

A thought-provoking case

In 1989, Bell, an Australian white woman, and Nelson, an Australian Aboriginal woman wrote an article about intra-racial rape committed against Indigenous women by Indigenous men (Bell & Nelson, 1989). Bell and Nelson, close friends, had met 13 years earlier when Bell was conducting fieldwork in Nelson's community. By both accounts, Nelson, who is illiterate, asked Bell to write about intra-racial rape in Indigenous communities with the intention to shed light on the violence, on the rise, that was being committed against Indigenous women without the right means for women to seek justice or support. The article is written largely in first-person by Bell, who provides the structure, framing and theoretical analysis for the article, with italicised sections included of interviews with Nelson on her first-person reflections about Indigenous communities. The article focuses on two cases of rape that have occurred in Indigenous communities. In addition to the two cases, the article aims to put the issue into context in order to explain why it is that Indigenous women are in a position of powerlessness. For example, the article addresses the reluctance of Australian police to intervene in "domestic" affairs and the male-dominant nature of Aboriginal institutions. When cases do go to the Australian Crown Court, Bell question's whether the prosecutors are acting out of compassion or from an Imperialist perspective that intends only to enforce Anglo law over "primitivism" and does not truly take women's interests into account. In addition, Bell explains the lack of Indigenous women's refuge in their own communities as a result of colonisation, which incurred the loss of traditional land and change in economic systems, therefore diminishing traditional power bases of Indigenous women. By providing a context for the issue, Bell argues that she does "not speak for, nor did I merely report, but rather my task was to locate issues of gender and race within a wider perspective, one outside the experience of any individual; to provide an analysis of social change; to formulate a critique for the wider society" (Bell, 1989, p405).

The article ends with a call to action to recognise the increase in intra-racial rape in Indigenous communities, the potential of women's refuges – that had been successful in providing a safe space for white women - as a space for support and increased understanding about the ways that social structures intersect to make Indigenous women vulnerable.

I have included this article because it is an example of how someone, an anthropologist who researched Aboriginal communities in Australia and held close friendships with some members of those communities, can still come under justified criticism when talking about others because of her identity, however well-meaning her intentions might be. The article was received with a large amount of controversy from Indigenous communities. That the article was co-authored was brought under question and, naming Nelson as co-author was seen as a move made by Bell to justify her ability to talk from a shared perspective with Indigenous women (Huggins as cited in Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Moreton-Robinson disputes Bell's assertion that she formulates a critique that is outside the experience of any individual, arguing that the article is very much reflective of Bell's experience, her experience as a white woman. Therefore, Bell, Moreton-Robinson argues, operates from the "subject position of middle-class white women [and] speaks for us as the authoritative voice of all-knowing subject" (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p113). In doing so, Moreton-Robinson argues, Indigenous women remain the object of perception. For example, Bell frames the perspectives of Aboriginal women in the context of the white feminist movement describing how, what was realised in early feminist movements, is only now (at the time Bell was writing) entering the writing of Aboriginal women. Before this, according to Bell's article, Indigenous women did not enter the theoretical debate about rape and "it has taken time for Aboriginal women to recognise that there are many feminisms" (Bell, 1989, p410). Therefore, Moreton-Robinson argues, Aboriginal women are positioned as unknowing girls until they recognise the same themes as white feminists and only at this point are they positioned as women. This is representative of white hegemonic ideology and maintains a binary that operates as white authoritative subject and Indigenous unknowing object. Moreton-Robinson argues that the reaction to Indigenous women's critique of the article is demonstrative of this positioning. Reaction in academic circles led to a letter of response to the article, written by Indigenous women, going unpublished as well as a failure to recognise Indigenous women in public debate; their interests and values were not received in the way that those of white women were. Rape is not everybody's business, Indigenous women have argued, it is the business of Indigenous communities. It is argued that Bell does not recognise that the damage that occurred to Indigenous communities due to white imperialism, which incurred the loss of power to Aboriginal women, and which Bell herself draws upon in her article, is damage that is inscribed by articles like hers which bolster a framework of unequal race relations.

The opposing viewpoints on the interaction of a white woman with people with a different social identity are representative of two ways of viewing Bell: as an individual or as representative of a social group. Bell sees herself as an individual, an individual who, upon the request of her friend, wrote on an important issue, the incurring violence against women which was not being brought to justice. However, when viewed from her position as a white woman the article takes on different meaning. Bell's position is not isolated to her individual experience but, as has been discussed in the previous chapters, is informed by a particular social, privileged perspective that leads to certain ways of seeing and understanding the world and others. Bell, and her affront against the criticism that she has faced, is based upon her self-perception as an individual. But her critics perceive her primarily from her position as a white woman. The truth is, Bell is both. She is an individual but, she is also a

white woman, and this does have implications, which go unacknowledged by Bell, for how social phenomena are mapped and interpreted.

I agree with Moreton-Robinson that Bell's own social perspective is evident in the way that she approaches the issue of intra-racial rape in Indigenous communities. Bell writes in first-person and when she does write about "we" it is implied that this refers to others like her. For example, she introduces the article with the statement: "what do we know about Aboriginal women before colonisation? Very little" (Bell, 1989, p1). As argued by Moreton-Robinson, Bell perceives the issues faced by Indigenous women and their self-understanding within the context of white feminist consciousness instead of an understanding which considers Indigenous women in their own right. In addition, Bell claims knowledge for others who, as demonstrated by the response to the article, did not feel represented by the claims that were made. However, Bell herself does not acknowledge that she is operating from a particular social frame of interpretation. Bell (Bell, 1996) has responded to the arguments made against her article with a dismissive air: "Our unspeakable article was the basis of many a talk but, I quickly learned, it was rarely read. Jumping on the bandwagon of 'beat up a white anthropologist who is now out of the country' ... was a popular pastime in 1990" (Bell, 1996, p199). Bell argues that she was speaking *out* and not *for* other women. She argues that it was necessary to speak out in order to ensure that this human rights issue, that of rape of Indigenous women, was no longer ignored. This issue, she argues, and the voices of women who are subject to violence, has been lost in the debate about who can/should/does speak for whom. Bell suggests we must "begin with the issue (rape) and not the construct (race)" (Bell, 1996, p200). However, although she is keen to isolate the topic of rape from her article, as mentioned, central to her original article was the intention to locate the issue within a wider context in order to understand the complex forces of gender, race and class and how these obstruct justice. Although her defence (1996) asks her readers not to "cringe" before socially constructed categories, seemingly dismissing their realness in people's lives, her original article (1989) is fervent in its emphasis on the role which gender, a socially constructed category, has on the issue of rape. She comments that it is feminist consciousness that exposed the way in which victims were damagingly portrayed and blamed (p407), that the male orientation of legal services should be addressed (p414) and the need to recognise that men are in a better position to take advantage of organisations that represent Aborigines than woman (p415). According to Bell, we cannot recognise the issue (rape), putting aside the construct (gender). And yet this seems at odds with her later contention that first and foremost we must recognise the issue of rape and not get caught up in a debate about social constructs.

Bell's article operates from her frame of interpretation, which is mediated by her social identity, and as such, this leads to an account of the social domain which misrepresents the experience of Indigenous women. Ortega's (Ortega, 2006) account of "loving, knowing ignorance" between white feminists and women of colour is a useful way to understand what the problem is with Bells account. Ortega takes inspiration from Marilyn Frye's account of arrogant perception, an account which explored the mechanisms by which men exploit women. Perceiving one with arrogant eyes is to organise perception and everything in it with reference to one's own desires and interests, without any care for those who lie outside of these interests. In contrast, the loving perceiver is not driven by their desires and interests and knows what it is to exist outside of these interests. This is made possible by looking to others, listening, checking and questioning (Frye as cited in Ortega, 2006). Ortega adds to Frye's account on ways of perceiving others, cases of *loving, knowing ignorance* which, she argues, is often characteristic of the relationships between white feminists and

women of colour. Here, loving is used in an ironic way, for it is not truly loving. Rather, it refers to the fact that, unlike the arrogant perceiver, white feminists *do* engage with those the interests of others. They look and listen. However, Ortega argues, they do not *check and question*. As such, it is not truly loving and women of colour remain misrepresented, objectified or misunderstood. Their resulting accounts of the social remain in accordance with the interests and expectations of white women, instead of accounts which represents the actual state of affairs. This is an accurate representation of Bells account which is not disinterested in the experience of others however remains positioned from her own perspective. Bell herself does not recognise the impact of her racial identity in framing her perspective.

White ignorance: insurmountable or culpable?

A crucial question is whether Bell's flawed account, afforded by her social identity, is insurmountable or whether, if approached in the right way, she can accurately speak for others. In order to answer this question, I will look at two accounts of Charles Mills concept of white ignorance: the inability of privileged white subjects to understand their own racial identity in light of a particular racial history which that identity is connected to and informed by (Mills as cited in Medina, 2002). Alcoff uses white ignorance to demonstrate the cognitive significance of identity, where identity denotes a particular experience. This experience does confine us in a particular way that leads Alcoff to argue that social identity (at least on some occasions) contributes to the credibility of what someone is saying. Medina uses white ignorance to extend Fricker's analysis of hermeneutical injustice. By positioning it in this way, as an injustice, he argues that white subjects do have a certain responsibility to address their ignorance. Where individuals do not address this responsibility then, Medina argues, this is demonstrative of the vice of hermeneutical injustice. If white subjects have a responsibility to address their ignorance then it must be the case that their identity does not limit them in a way that cannot be overcome, for else they could not be held accountable. By using these two accounts, where the first focuses on the insurmountability of white ignorance and the second on culpability, I hope to disentangle the epistemic limits of social identity and the epistemic barriers.

I will begin with the argument presented by Alcoff. Alcoff (Alcoff, 1999) explains that experiences are characterised both by the event and the meaning that is attributed to that event. This interpretative process is instantaneous and thus part of the experience. Social identities, as explained in chapter 1, are variables which effect this interpretative process. Therefore, there is a correlation between identity and how social phenomena are experienced. Social identity, therefore, can impact the way that we acquire knowledge. Alcoff provides an example with reference to Charles Mills essay "Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American experience". In this essay, Mills discusses his experience of putting together a course in African-American Philosophy (Mills, 1994). He argues that, inherent to Philosophy, is a conceptual and theoretical *whiteness* which is "hard to convey to those who do not, in this case because of their colour, spontaneously feel it in the first place" (Mills, 1994, p224). He discusses how there is a silence on the topic of race which renders groups of people invisible. When approaching the topic of ethics, he argues, this silence appeared particularly absurd to the students in his class who were black, for whom moral philosophy feels little more than a pretence given that, in all cases, ethical principles have been violated for people who are black. In these instances, he argues, he sensed a certain impatience, or indifference, from these students. He characterises the black lived experience using the concept

'sub-personhood': the experience of being categorised as inferior, seen as not fully human or rendered invisible. This experience, Mills continues, results in radically different perspectives and thereby radically different philosophies. Mills also had a number of students in his class who were white and here, he felt "that they would not really be able to understand the work of black philosophers without a sense of the existential condition to which blacks were responding" (Mills, 1994, p231). Alcoff continues this line of argument with reference to another of Mills' work: "The Racial Contract" in which he discusses white ignorance. White ignorance is the inability for "whites to understand the world they themselves have made... white misunderstanding, misinterpretation, evasion and self-deception" (Mills as cited in Alcoff, 1999, p17). This is not to say, Alcoff explains, that ignorance of certain phenomena is natural or universal amongst people who are white. However, that whiteness, results in a (socially constructed) lived experience that is correlated to epistemic ability. Alcoff argues that these two examples, of the black lived experience and the white lived experience, point to the conclusion that knowers are not interchangeable. The social identity of who is doing the knowing, at least in some circumstances, is correlated to the description of events, how they are evaluated and how they are assessed. Returning to the initial example, whilst it is true that I can gain knowledge of the social domain by speaking to others, there are reasons to consider my social identity as epistemically limiting because of a lack of first-person experience and the way that social identity effects the way that I interact with world around me. The difference that this makes lies in how I come to the discussion group (used in the initial example): my understanding of this experience is displayed rather than lived through and this impacts on its meaning and how it is interpreted.

Elsewhere, Medina has used white ignorance to illustrate how white people can *fail* in their epistemic responsibilities. This failure is characterised by Medina as an example of hermeneutical injustice. He argues that Fricker's account of hermeneutic injustice does not give enough attention to the way in which social relations and interpretative practise can emphasise or diminish hermeneutical injustice. The partiality of her account is in her assertion that hermeneutic injustice stems from a *collective* lack of hermeneutical resources. This, for Fricker, is what results in hermeneutical injustice because agents do not have the resources to understand important elements of their social experience. Medina argues that Frickers analysis does not recognise the multiple struggles that occur in order to make sense of one's experience because of the various ways of inhabiting and relating to others in a social context. Thus, "it is not the same to try to make sense of one's experience to oneself, to others within one's group or in the same predicament, or to others who do not share the experience in question" (Medina, 2012, p208). Where Frickers account implies that all subjects in a shared social context are presented with the same hermeneutical resources, Medina's account recognises that there can also be instances in which, in the same context, some social groups do have the necessary hermeneutical resources that others do not. This results from the fact that lived experience of a shared group experience can present more immediate opportunities for knowledge of the social domain, as illustrated by Alcoffs account. White people, on the other hand, are hermeneutically marginalised because, as above, social structures and systems prevent them understanding an important aspect of their experience. However other groups, i.e. people who are not white, do have the resources to understand others whiteness and how it impacts on their privilege and social relations. This presents an interesting case of hermeneutic injustice where those who are hermeneutically marginalised are not the ones that are harmed, they can even benefit from this marginalisation, whereas those who have the resources are the ones who are impaired. Hermeneutical injustice, Medina agrees with Fricker, is largely a result of social

structures which cause certain patterns and power dynamics which exist beyond the individual agent. However, Medina argues, it is important to recognise the role of individual agents within these structures. Whilst it might be more difficult for some individuals to recognise the nature of social relations because of their positioning within these social structures, they have an important epistemic responsibility in regard to these relations. This is because, it is *their* lack of hermeneutical resources which causes *others* to be harmed. The responsibility here lies in the communicative exchange which can accentuate or alleviate gaps in understanding that have resulted from a particular social context. An example of the communicative exchange can be found in Moreton-Robinson's account of her experience at a conference in which she debated the issues raised by Bell's article. This is helpful to expand upon the failure of white subjects; which Medina labels the vice of hermeneutical injustice. The vice is a defensiveness, failure, or non-responsiveness to aid speakers in their attempts to render their experiences intelligible or, by Moreton-Robinson's illustration:

"The white audience members adopted the line that Indigenous women did not seem to understand that Bell was in fact doing us a favour by exposing intra-racial rape. By positioning Huggins, Wilmot and me in this way, white women in the audience used their race privilege to dismiss the issues and questions being raise by us. Such a position allowed them to feel good about themselves although simultaneously reinscribing white superiority." (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p116).

In contrast, the virtue of hermeneutical injustice, as explained by Medina, is to adopt a certain openness to the experience of others, aware of the gaps that might exist in ones own understanding. It can be contested whether Medina's use of white ignorance is an example of hermeneutical injustice or not. However, my interest in his account is the fact that he positions it as an *injustice* and the failure on behalf of white subjects to acknowledge the implications of their whiteness as a *vice*. Where Alcoff's account emphasises the insurmountable nature of white ignorance, Medina emphasis the culpability.

There are, therefore, two sides of white ignorance that should be recognised. The first is that which is incurred from a lack of lived experience which means white people lack certain possibilities that are present for others in how they interact with the world. The second, is the perpetuation of this gap because of a failure to open up to the experience of others. Both are related to social identity but have different epistemic results. A recent blog post written by British journalist, Reni Eddo-Lodge titled "Why I am No Longer Talking to White People About Race" (Eddo-Lodge, 2017) is demonstrative of these two sides of white ignorance. In the blog post, Eddo-Lodge expresses her anger and frustration at white people who do not acknowledge the existence of structural racism. She explains her experience of talking to white people about race and receiving a common response. This response is one of emotional disconnect due to the fact that people who are white have not had to live with race as part of their consciousness. She describes responses of indignation, denial and defensiveness; a failure to open up to an experience different from one's own, particularly in the face of damaging implications to one's own self-perception. This experience culminated in the blog post written by Eddo-Lodge and resignation to the following statement: "I can no longer have this conversation, because we're often coming at it from completely different places" (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p7). I have argued that there is a sense in which social groups are coming to the social domain from different places. I have also argued that this enables a shared perspective from which social groups can relate to the world in order to develop joint understanding which reveal features of the

social domain. The epistemic limit here is that white people have not lived with race as part of their consciousness and this results in the absence of important possibilities for understanding the social domain, in contrast to others for whom they are immediately presented. However, there is also a failure to open up to experiences that are different to one's own. Again, this is related to social identity: because, for example, the emotional significance of identity results in feelings of being personally attacked when whiteness is viewed critically. Here, there is a failure on behalf of those individuals, as Eddo-Lodge argues, when their response is one of indignation and denial. It is important to take these two ways that social identity affects our interaction and understanding of the social domain, and of others, separately because they call for different courses of action. This is that the first asks us to recognise certain limits in understanding that cannot be overcome because it affects the availability of knowledge itself. The second results in social biases which are barriers to knowledge but which we should strive to overcome.

Learning from the outsider-within

The question that follows is how much weight these different limitations afforded by social identity should be given? How much does the insurmountable difference - the lack of lived experience - matter and how much does the difference - resulting from social bias - matter to our ability to make epistemic claims about others?

I believe that the only way that this can be answered is by taking seriously the limits for which we do have responsibility: that is to say, in my own case, only by recognising my own socially situated perspective and adopting a willingness and openness to engage with the experience of others can I understand what the limits are that are imposed by the fact that I do not have a particular lived experience. Such an approach, in its attempt to address social bias, should also give weight to the need to engage directly with the lived experience of others.

An example can be found in Maria Lugones account of "world travel" (Lugones, 1987). Lugones is interested in the failure of White/Anglo women in the US to identify with women of colour. This is when, "White/Anglo women do one or more of the following to women of color: they ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely alone, interpret us as crazy. All of this while we are in their midst" (Lugones, 2003, p83). For Lugones, what is necessary, for those who are members of dominant social groups, upon engaging with the experience of others, is an openness to the experience of others, or, what she calls "world travelling". Lugones interest in different "worlds" stemmed from her own ontological confusion about whether or not she had the attribute "playfulness". She was concerned about the fact that in some contexts she did not feel able to exhibit this attribute despite her feeling that she is playful. She argues that, whether or not she has the attribute of playfulness depends upon the "world" that she inhabits. "Worlds" are different ways in which individuals experience themselves amongst others and the different ways that they are constructed by others. And so, by travelling to the worlds of others, Lugones means engaging in the different experiences of others, their different worlds and therefore the nuanced nature of their experience. Reminiscent of Hill's account of the outsider-within, Lugones explains how outsiders are more accustomed to world travel because they have to accommodate dominant conceptual frameworks as well as their own personal, social experience. For example, black women who are academics, when entering academic circles, are confronted with a different world, to which they have to adjust, from their personal worlds. Memories of the self in other worlds remain and this is what gives black women a unique perspective on the academic world, because it is a perspective

which also has knowledge from another world. For Lugones, those who are insiders can learn from this experience of world travelling that is necessary for outsiders. This is what will enable insiders to truly identify with others: travelling into their world. World travelling of this kind cannot be done with the idea to assimilate, as arguably is Bells approach, but must be with an attitude which Lugones characterises as loving playfulness:

“the playful attitude involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction or reconstruction of the “worlds” we inhabit playfully. Negatively, playfulness is characterized by uncertainty, lack of self-importance, absence of rules or a not taking rules as sacred, a not worrying about competence and a lack of abandonment to a particular construction of oneself, others and one’s relation to them.” (Lugones, 1987, p17).

The experiences described by Eddo-Lodge and Moreton-Robinson, can both be understood as lacking in the necessary playful attitude. Lugones encourages individuals to step outside of their insular, fixed perceptions of themselves and be open to seeing how others see them by entering the worlds of others. Whilst outsiders-within do not have a choice but to negotiate this position, groups who exist in the mainstream can complacently, or even purposefully, fail to inhabit the worlds of others. But, Lugones maintains, White/Anglo women can take up this position, if done so with the right attitude, and world travel in order to understand what it is to be them and *what it is to be themselves in the eyes of others*.

I believe that this is where knowledge is possible of the social domain and where dominant groups can learn from the experience of marginalised. This is to say that, whilst there is reason to view certain knowledges as insurmountable, there are also ways in which dominant groups can learn from the outsider-within experience: here the aim should be, as characterised by Lugones, to understand how we might be different in the worlds of others. In more practical terms, Ortega provides examples of what this could mean in real-life for white feminists interested in understanding the experiences of women of colour: “Various ways in which one could “travel” someone’s “world” include learning about the person’s culture in a less superficial manner than simply eating her food. They include learning her language, living in her environment, trying to understand issues from her perspective (as hard as this may be), and imagining what it means to be her in her world... Perhaps then white feminists could make knowledge claims about women of color that do in fact relate to these women’s experiences” (Ortega, 2006, p70). Similarly, Mills describes his approach to teaching white students who took his class on African-American Philosophy: “I would also draw on less academic materials: popular writings, fiction, and even excerpts from movies, videos, and daytime talk shows that I had previously recorded when preparing for the course” (Mills, 1994, p232). Mills encouraged his students to “world-travel” by asking them to engage with the lived experience of black people through tools such as fiction and film. Recognising the role of lived experience in shaping our perception leads to a commitment to interacting with the lived experience of others in order to come to a fuller understanding of others and importantly, in order to understand just what the limits are to understanding that result from a lack of lived experience.

In this chapter, my aim has to been to analyse an example of when social identity impacts on the epistemic credibility of the knower in her analysis of the social domain. By looking at the example of Bell’s account of intra-racial rape in Indigenous communities, I have tried to distil the types of epistemic claims that are impacted by social identity and how. I have argued that the reason

that social identity is important to her analysis is because she intends to provide an account of an issue within a social wider context. However, Bell does not recognise the limits, in this effort, that her social identity makes to how she interprets the social context. There are reasons to argue that she understands the experience of others through her eyes: a gaze which is impacted by social identity. She does not relate to the experience of Indigenous women in their own right but frames their experience relative to the viewpoint of white feminist consciousness. There is a sense in which the limits imposed by social identity are insurmountable in this endeavour because Bell cannot access the experience of Indigenous experience "in their own right". This is because she does not have a certain lived experience. This is not to say that all Indigenous women have the same lived experience but that there is a uniformity to their experience in so far as they must come to grips with the same socially constructed identity. This presents certain possibilities for knowledge and meanings which are not presented to Bell. However, what Bell can understand is her experience from the viewpoint of Indigenous women. This is to flip Bells position on its head and instead of viewing Indigenous woman from her standpoint operating from a position which attempts to view herself through the eyes of others. This is possible by engaging with the experience of others in a certain way. Here, there is another way in which social identity can inhibit these endeavours. Social identity can make it difficult to relate to the experiences of others given features of the social domain such as ingroup/outgroup tendencies and the emotional significance of social identity. This can result in failings in the communicative exchange where the experience of others is dismissed, denied or greeted with indignation. These factors, related to social identity, present barriers to understanding but, as barriers, they can, and should, be overcome. A possibility of an approach which could be taken is presented by Lugones account world travel which promotes engaging with the lived experience of others with an openness to the way in which individuals relate to worlds which are quite different from their own. What individuals who operate within dominant frameworks should be aiming for is something like the experience characterised by Hill of the outsider-within. Unlike Bell, who can remain unaffected by her critics, the outsider-within has no choice but to understand the gaze of the other, and their experiences in relationship to this gaze.

CONCLUSION

“Women should be in control of that line, no question”: I would like to conclude by reflecting back on the opening quote of this thesis. The question is whether, and to what extent, women are better positioned to speak for other women, epistemically, than men. The starting point of this thesis was to consider what it is that women share, given their different interests, personalities, values and experiences, all of which will result in very different opinions on what is important to consider when making judgements about gender relations. Women might even converge more in this area, in their opinions, with people with other genders and so, why should we assume that they are better positioned, in light of their social identity, to speak for other women (whose opinions could be very different)? The possibility lies, not in what one can necessarily say about the experience of another but how one stands in relationship to the experience of the other and therefore relates to it. This relationship was characterised using Iris Youngs account of relational difference: a difference afforded by different social positions. There is a similarity between my experience and the experience of another woman, in a particular social context, because of the social norms, structures and institutions which we are among and are concurrent to our experience of the world. This does not mean that we have a shared opinion or even that our experience of these structures will be the same. Importantly, it also does not grant me, simply in light of being a woman, epistemic credibility. However, what it does mean, is that, because we are both relating to the same social world, the way that we relate to one another’s experience is different to how a man will relate to my experience and how I relate to a man’s. This presents the opportunity for shared knowledge between women as we relate to and come to understand one another’s experience. Often times, this understanding will be supported by the interaction with others who have similar experience, and this is what results in the possibility for epistemic claims about the social domain from individuals with shared social identity. Therefore, in order to draw an accurate line, the voices of women are necessary to make clear certain truths about their experience, their relationship with others as well as provide a critical analysis on the way in which dominant conceptual frameworks are at fault.

What then are the opportunities for people with different social identities to understand the experience of others? Having characterised the difference that is important as a difference which is caused by social positioning, in order to answer this question, it is important first to look at the gap that social relations enables. This will vary depending both on the social context, from person to person and for different social identities. For example, although men and women are positioned differently, their lives usually remain very much intertwined. This is different from social contexts in which some social groups have little, if no, interaction with one another because, for example, of racial segregation. In these instances, it is reasonable to suggest that more will need to be done in order to relate to and understand the experience of others. In all cases, what needs to be avoided is a lack of consideration for how social identity frames our perspective. The question here is what is insurmountable and what can be overcome. I have argued that social identity incurs social biases and ways of seeing: the extent to which these are insurmountable will again depend upon the extent to which certain social structures are entrenched in different areas of our lives. However, the only way to know what the limits are which result from a lack of lived experience and what this means for what we can or can’t say about others is by engaging, in the right way, with the lived experiences of others.

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