Researching to Transgress: The Epistemic Virtue of Research With

A. Wendy Nastasi
Syracuse University

What are the words you do not have yet? What do you need to say?

—Audre Lorde

In her book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker describes hermeneutical injustice as "*the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.*"[1] Hermeneutical injustices are part of the systemic patterns of structural injustices that members of particular social groups (for example, women, GLBTQ, people of color, and dis/abled individuals) are susceptible to; they are, therefore, aspects of oppression. A hermeneutical injustice occurs when "a collective hermeneutical gap impinges so as to significantly disadvantage some group(s) and not others."[2] Those wronged in this way are excluded from participating in the spread of knowledge; a significant area of their social experience is not intelligible through collective understanding or dominant narratives because a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource renders them marginalized. Fricker offers the condition of women before the legal and social term "sexual harassment" existed to describe their inappropriate treatment by men in the workplace as an example of hermeneutical injustice. Owing to a lacuna in the collective hermeneutical resource, women were unable to fully express workplace experiences without the concept of sexual harassment and the legal and social assumption the concept now communicates (for example, "boys will be boys" does not justify inappropriate touching in the workplace). The lack of a shared concept, "sexual harassment," harmed women in terms of physical and mental stress, but it also occasioned an "epistemic harm" because the experience of women was unintelligible to others.[3]

"When you call it an achievement gap, that means it's our fault. The real problem is an opportunity gap; let's place blame where it belongs — in society and in the schools" noted a metro-New York City youth in 2002.[4] This teenager was working with community organizers and researchers from the Public Science Project[5] to investigate why students of color perform less well on standardized state tests than their white counterparts did/do. This phenomenon was then and still is often mistakenly referred to as the "achievement gap" problem in education.[6] However, like women during the 1960s, the student quoted above was challenging a widely held social construct in the dominant hermeneutical framework. Just as "boys will be boys" was used to marginalize the dehumanizing experience of being groped at work, so too is the "achievement gap," which works perniciously from assumptions latent in the dominant interpretive resource that construct students of color as achieving less than their white counterparts because students of color are in some way deficient and unable to measure up to the explicitly white standard to

which they are compared.[7] The quoted student used his experiences of society and school to reject the dominant interpretation and argue for another in its place — that there is an opportunity gap that structurally prevents students of color from benefiting from the same academic opportunities as their white counterparts. The students were able to document this experience in a Youth Participatory Action Research Project (YPAR) call the Opportunity Gap Project.

This essay explores Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as a type of social justice pedagogy that can decrease hermeneutical injustice because it empowers structurally non-dominant students to produce counter-narratives that disrupt the hegemonic ideologies that work to perpetuate prejudice in the collective interpretive resource. In arguing that YPAR can increase hermeneutical justice, this essay suggests that Fricker's definition of hermeneutical injustice should expand to include explanatory schemas[8] in addition to concepts.[9] Finally, this essay will argue that social justice pedagogies that decrease hermeneutical injustice are important for democratic education.

Youth Participatory Action Research as Social Justice Pedagogy

Researchers and youth participating in YPAR initiatives act in coalition or as part of a collective, addressing the same problem or research question (for example, the discrepancy in performances on standardized tests between students of color and white students) as school administrators and teachers.[10] Additionally, YPAR positions students, whose lived experiences offer unique insight into schooling and education, as active participants in the research community.[11] PAR, however, "*is not a method*"; it is a "*radical epistemological challenge* to the traditions of social science, most critically on the topic of where knowledge resides"; it recognizes that "expertise and knowledge are widely distributed," and it assumes that "those who have been *most* systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom."[12] Drawing on Paulo Freire's concepts of praxis, or critical reflection accompanied by action, YPAR is also pedagogical by design.[13] Because it positions youth not just as those to be researched, but as epistemically privileged co-researchers, YPAR in education can more ethically take up social justice research questions than education research that begins from dominant assumptions (for example, that students of color are low-achieving because they are less supported at home by family than white students are).

When participating in YPAR projects, youth learn that injustices are not natural; rather, they are produced to privilege some and to oppress others. They also learn that oppression can be challenged and transformed. Youth collectively and with adults analyze power to resist the structures of oppression by "redefin(ing) knowledge as actions in pursuit of social justice."[14] However, it is not only concepts like "achievement gap" that youth and those engaged in YPAR are trying to transform. Rather, YPAR investigates, develops, and introduces new explanatory schemas into the collective hermeneutical resource. Let us turn now to a specific example of an YPAR initiative and draw out the ways in which it works to decrease hermeneutical injustice.

THE OPPORTUNITY GAP PROJECT

The Opportunity Gap Project (OGP) brought together twenty-five high school youth from six schools and organized them into research camps in order to train the students in research methodology, history, and theory. Once the research collective began to work, youth researchers guided research design, questions, methods, interpretations, and desired products. They designed the research protocol, administered surveys, and conducted interviews and focus groups.

Kareem, a Black male high school student member of the OGP team, presented data of school suspensions to teachers during a feedback session at one of the participating schools. He tried to articulate the relational and racial characteristics of school suspension (for example, Black males are twice as likely to get suspended as white males; Black males and Black females have nearly identical suspension rates, but white males are three times more likely to be suspended than white females).[15] Kareem ended his talk by inviting school faculty to research these patterns with him. Faculty rejected Kareem's analysis and instead offered alternative conceptions of the problem, one even claiming that the suspension room gets "whiter" in June indicating an assumed belief that white kids act out too, but they wait until the end of the academic school year. Maria Elena Torre and Michelle Fine witnessed the exchange, in which "Kareem provided clear evidence that tore at the ideological representation of the school as integrated and fair. And yet, before our eyes, the school in their adamant refusal to hear, threatened to become ossified."[16]

What does it mean for school officials to refuse to hear Kareem's evidence that Black students are suspended at rates much higher than their school population percentages, especially when compared to white students? Why can't schools officials imagine that more than student behavior leads to suspension and that, perhaps, "cultural agendas and assumptions are part of the background assumptions and auxiliary hypotheses" that increase the likelihood that Black students will be suspended?[17] I ask these questions in the spirit of the women who gathered together before the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to ask, What does it mean for men to think they can grope us whenever they want? Why can't we receive unemployment insurance when we leave a place of employment because the environment is too hostile for us to maintain our dignity?

LEARNING WHILE BLACK: HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE AND INTERPRETIVE SCHEMAS

Kareem offered scientifically researched data on a concern (suspension) and a population (Black students) that he not only investigated but also identified with. He worked in collaboration with a research team from the City University of New York, including a "distinguished professor,"[18] and still the adult faculty of his school rejected the knowledge claims of his research camp. The teachers, so deeply entrenched in a system that renders injustices like tracking, inadequate resources, and low expectations invisible to them, were not able to hear or to understand that their internalized assumptions about youth of color might actually affect how they perceive their students' behaviors. The dominant deficit discourse assumes that Black students (and other students of color) will act out because they do not have the cultural capital to know how to behave in schools and so they should be suspended.

Kareem's findings were not acceptable to the teachers given their interpretive framework. The dominant interpretive framework, which positions students of color as "low achieving" and "at risk," obscures the implications of poor funding, inequitable resources, and tracking within and across schools. In our society, racial profiling is understood as penal (for example, a police officer pulling over a car because the driver is Black); it is not understood in terms of school structures that make true the assumptions that Black bodies belong in suspension rooms. For the research of Kareem and his team to be perceived as credible, we would need a shared interpretive schema of racial profiling in schools — a "learning while Black" corollary to the oft quoted "driving while Black" rallying cry. The example of Kareem highlights how power operates to create marginality not only in concepts, but also in interpretive schemas. Fricker tells us that hermeneutical injustice harms people in how their very identities are constructed.[19] She warns of the harm caused by this construction: "hermeneutical injustice can mean that someone is socially constituted as, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not, and which it is against their interests to be seen to be.… [T]hey are prevented from becoming who they really are."[20] This social constitution influences how people and social situations are interpreted. Kareem and students of color are not permitted full participation as students in public schools because their school identities come socially constituted as poor, sickly, disruptive, and socially lacking. Suspension then becomes the clear place they belong when viewed through deficit discourse. Students, particularly students from non-dominant identity groups, lack social power. Power matters, Fricker tells us, as "relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources."[21] The powerful can appeal to the dominant collective understanding to interpret their experiences, and their experiences are intelligible to others. The powerless, however, "find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on the effort to render them intelligible."[22]

These students are disadvantaged in terms of a hermeneutical lacuna, but also in terms of the construction of their individual identity. Members of the social contexts in which they teach, most educators do not have access to the students' interpretive schema and thus reject their findings. Educators thus actively perpetuate hermeneutical injustice in schools. YPAR is a social justice pedagogy that offers students and teachers alike an opportunity to work toward epistemic justice. Starting from the standpoint of students, YPAR empowers youth to challenge the deficit discourse that biases the collective hermeneutical resource. Students learn that the dominant narratives "act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society."[23]

In arguing that YPAR decreases hermeneutical injustice because it starts from the standpoint of the oppressed, I am not arguing that the interpretive schemas put forward by youth participating in PAR projects are automatically the most accurate. Rather, as Wylie asserts, I believe "those who are subject to structures of domination that systemically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial aspect" precisely because they may know what dominant

identity groups seek not to know.[24] Combining the lived experience and growing research skills of youth, YPAR practices what Anderson calls a model of "bidirectional influence of facts and values" in that youth researchers bring their knowledge and standpoint to the inquiry; however, their lived experience neither determines the outcome of their investigation in advance nor does it automatically render their analysis as accurate.[25] Rather, YPAR acknowledges that fact and values cannot be completely isolated from one another. The students' experiences enter the research to provide a starting point to inquiry and analysis, to provide access to knowledges that are often rendered invisible by dominant narratives.

Their research sheds light on counter-stories. Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso explain that "counter-storytelling … is both a method of telling the story of those experiences that are not often told (i.e. those on the margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse."[26] Not only do these counter-stories challenge the dominant narrative, but they also build community among marginalized groups, provide a context "to understand and transform established belief systems," show the marginalized that they are not alone and that there are possibilities outside their present lived experience, and provide the elements to construct a society that is richer than either the story or the current reality alone.[27]

HERMENEUTICAL JUSTICE AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

This essay has explored the ways in which participatory action research epistemology empowers members of socially marginalized groups to use their standpoints as a starting point of inquiry to uncover, name, and challenge dominant epistemic assumptions. While "racial profiling" is a complex and contested issue in the public interpretive framework, students engaged in YPAR, like Kareem, are able to show how race impacts their ability to be perceived either as knowers or as those who are to be suspended and pushed out. Through presenting research findings, Kareem and students like him are able to introduce a counter-narrative into public discourse that at once exposes and calls into question racial assumptions in schools that are supported by policies like tracking, inequitable resource distribution, and re-segregation. Hermeneutical justice is found in slowly but deliberately transforming the "economy of collective hermeneutical resources."[28] Kareem and other students involved in YPAR are doing just that.

There is a related way in which YPAR acts to encourage hermeneutical change. Schooling holds a distinctly social role in the United States; it "is the means of … [the] social continuity of life."[29] John Dewey shows us in *Democracy and Education* how education acts as a structure of social transmission. Dewey asserts, "democracy … is primarily a model of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."[30] In 1916, Dewey argued that schools require the "intermingling" of youth from different races, religions, and customs to create a broader environment. Why did he think it was important to expand interpretive horizons? Because a democratic society is one that "makes provisions for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and … secures flexible readjustment of its intuitions through interactions of different forms of associated life."[31]

The intermingling of youth is occasioned through many YPAR projects. Firstly, youth come to YPAR collaboratives embodying multiple intersecting identities. Kareem, for example, is not only a Black youth but also a man from a low-income socio-economic background. Additionally, many YPAR projects, like the Opportunity Gap Project, intentionally bring students together across dominant-subordinate identity constructs. Specifically, white youth from middle-high socio-economic classes partnered with youth of color from working-poor socio-economic classes to investigate school inequality. In addition to crossing the fault lines of identity power, these students traversed the boundaries of geography as suburban students joined inner-city youth. Kareem's data comprised the suspension results of not one school, but many schools across the tri-state New York area, showing how the suspension rates of youth of color are generalizable across districts and across socio-economic class.

The value in researching across identity lies in more than the generalizability of data. When students work together — subordinate *with* dominant — students research to transgress lacunae in the collective hermeneutical resource. Dominant students are taught the "epistemic practice" that designate them as dominant at home and at large in the normative structures of society.[32] White youth are often taught that the United States is a meritocracy and if youth of color just worked a little harder, if their parents just cared a little more, youth of color too could achieve. They are not taught about the structural inequalities that maintain the subordination of youth of color, while at the same time enabling the privilege of white youth. Because of the privilege that comes with power, it is not in the interest of white students to opt out of these prevailing epistemic practices.

It is, however, the responsibility of a democratic school system to help students uncover how knowledge production and privilege can be both intentional and unconscious. YPAR is a hermeneutically just way to do this as it centers marginalized knowledge, that of non-dominant students, while at the same time making present to dominant students the knowledge that it would be more beneficial for them to go on ignoring. In the case of Kareem, the white students who worked with him on the Opportunity Gap Project learned first hand that students of color are not suspended solely because they do not know how to act in school. They also learned that students of color are more likely to be educated in poorly resourced schools with less qualified teachers and, because of these structural features, students of color are given less educational opportunity while they, white students, are given greater resources and more highly qualified teachers. Through inter-group collaboration, dominant students are more likely to identify racism and to express an awareness of both racial and structural inequality.[33] Both dominant and non-dominant students are more likely to engage in civic activities, like working for educational justice, as a result of engaging in inter-group learning praxis.

Education as a vehicle for democracy must ensure the participation of all of its members; it must include participation of students across, within, and through identity constructs so institutions may change to accommodate all forms of life.[34] Education has a responsibility to unsettle dominant narratives by foregrounding the

experiences of the marginalized precisely to change institutions that silence the knowledge of non-dominant identity groups. Fine writes, "In the absence of counter-stories we are left, tragically, with a false consensus, believing that what is must be; that present conditions are inevitable and natural; that things have always been the same; and that most everyone else believes it is just fine."[35] Things are not just fine. YPAR is one type of social justice pedagogy that exercises the responsibility of schools to function as institutions of social re-articulation. Through YPAR projects, students are positioned as and work from the stance of civic agents; they perceive their power to act as members of society, and this has educational as well as civic outcomes. Students develop problem solving, critical thinking, and literacy skills while also learning how to create social change.

As society and individuals interact daily and often invisibly, it is necessary to confront injustice, particularly epistemic injustice; YPAR in educational settings does just that. Through YPAR, educators and education researchers invite students to participate actively in democratic life, as knowledge-possessing members of society, by asking them for the words they do not have yet, for the words they need to say.

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1. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 155, emphasis in original.

2. Ibid., 162.

3. The experience of sexually harassed women was unintelligible to others who could only draw upon the dominant collective resource. It was, however, intelligible to women who shared the experience. For more, see Rebecca Mason, "Two Kinds of Unknowing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 294–307.

4. María Elena Torre and Michelle Fine, "Perspectives on Youth Civic Engagement and Youth Policies," in *Beyond Resistance: Youth Activism and Community Change,* eds. Shawn Ginwrite, Pedro Noguera, and Julio Cammarota (New York: Routledge, 2006), 273.

5. For more on the Public Science Project, visit http://www.publicscienceproject.org.

6. For more, see Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools," *Educational Researcher* 33, no. 4 (2006): 3–12.

7. I say "white standard" to capture the constant referential nature of student achievement reports. Reports often state not only how many students of color passed a particular exam, but how well students of color performed on the exam in reference to white students. See for example Susan Aud, Mary Ann Fox, and Angelina KewalRamani, *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010). While there is value in the comparisons embedded in results, for example, documenting the unequal schools experiences of students of color in comparison to white students, these comparisons are extremely dangerous when viewed through assumptions that blame the discrepancy in results not on structural inequalities like inadequate school funding, poor teacher training and lack of resources, but on the students of color and their families. Blaming students of color and their families for a lesser degree of "achievement" than white students instead of addressing the structural causes that ensure students of color do not have the same opportunities to learn as white students is called the deficit model. For more on the deficit model, see Gilberto Q. Conchas, *The Color of Success: Race and High-Achieving Urban Youth (*New York: Teachers College Press, 2001); and Pedro Noguera, *The Trouble with Black Boys … And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

8. Emily Robertson, personal communication, August 3, 2011.

9. To do this I draw on standpoint theory. See, for example, Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity'?," in *Feminist Epistemologies,* eds. Linda Martin Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993).

10. See, for example, Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota, "Introduction," in *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change,* eds. Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota *(*New York: Taylor and Francis, 2006).

11. Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine, "Youth Participatory Action Research: A Pedagogy for Transformational Resistance," in *Revolutionizing Education,* eds. Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine (New York: Routledge, 2008).

12. Michelle Fine, "An Epilogue, of Sorts," in *Revolutionizing Education,* eds. Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine, 215, all emphases in original.

13. Cammarota and Fine, "Youth Participatory Action Research*,*" 6.

14. Ibid.

15. María Elena Torre and Michelle Fine, "Participatory Action Research in the Contact Zone," in *Revolutionizing Education*, eds. Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine.

16. Ibid., 32.

17. Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 149.

18. I do not note that a member of the research team is a distinguished professor to highlight the professor's credibility and thereby undermine Kareem's. Rather, I cite it to foreground the depth of epistemic prejudice internalized by the teachers.

19. Miranda Fricker, "Powerlessness and Social Interpretation," *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3, no. 1 (2006): 96–108.

20. Ibid., 107

21. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 148.

22. Ibid.

23. Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso, "Critical Race and LatCrit Theory and Method: Counter-storytelling," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 14, no. 4 (2001): 473.

24. Alison Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters," in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader,* ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 339.

25. Elizabeth Anderson. "Use of Value Judgments in Science: A General Argument, with Lesson from a Case Study of Feminist Research on Divorce," *Hypatia* 19, no. 1 (2004): 11.

26. Solorzano and Yosso, "Critical Race and LatCrit Theory and Method," 475.

27. Ibid.

28. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.

29. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 2.

30. Ibid., 87.

31. Ibid., 99.

32. See, for example, Charles Mill, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Linda Martin Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).

33. See, for example, Patricia Gurin, B.A. Ratnesh Nagda, and Gretchen Lopez, "The Benefits of Diversity in Education for Democratic Citizenship," *Journal of Social Issues* 60, no. 1 (2004): 17–34; and Ximena Zúñiga, B.A. Ratnesh Nagda, Mark Chesler, and Adena Cytron-Walker, *Intergroup Dialogue in Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2007).

34. See, for example, Elizabeth Anderson. "Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective," *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 595–622; and Debra Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 623–648.

35. Fine, "An Epilogue, Of Sorts," 159.