Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice
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Uma Narayan attempts to clarify what the feminist notion of the 'epistemic privilege of the oppressed' does and does not imply. She argues that the fact that oppressed 'insiders' have epistemic privilege regarding their oppression creates problems in dialogue with and coalitionary politics involving 'outsiders' who do not share the oppression, since the latter fail to come to terms with the epistemic privilege of the insiders. She concretely analyzes different ways in which the emotions of insiders can be inadvertently hurt by outsiders and suggests ways in which such problems can be minimized.

TAKING EMOTIONS SERIOUSLY

Dialogue between members of a group that has a heterogenous composition in terms of factors like class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference etc., and in coalitions of such heterogenous groups, is often hard to sustain, despite the presence of common interests and political goals. My concern in this paper is, therefore, a practical one, despite my touching on theoretical considerations. I think it would be a helpful practice for groups with heterogenous components to talk about ways in which dialogue between people who share and people who do not share the experience of a certain form of oppression can be damaged because the emotions, and hence the sense of self, of the members of the oppressed group are unintentionally violated by non-members of the oppressed group who participate in the dialogue.

I have tried to analyse a number of ways in which this can happen. I think the cases I have considered are common enough to be easily recognised, and hope they will provide a starting point for people to talk together about and work through problems in dialogue they may have had or may fear having. The cases I have considered are by no means exhaustive, and I am sure that

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any group that sincerely focuses on these problems will discover many more. I
for one do not think that such a collective self-examination of the problems
of communicating across our differences is a form of collective self-indul-
gence. Rather, it seems to be a pre-requisite for any group that sincerely in-
tends to keep working together across, and despite, differences.

Though I shall focus on problems in dialogue between heterogenous mem-
ers of political groups, it is also the case that such problems occur in commu-
nication between friends of heterogenous backgrounds. Working across differ-
ences is a morally and politically important enterprise in either context. Both
in political contexts and in the context of friendship, such differences in ele-
ments of background and identity can be enriching resources, epistemolo-
gically, politically and personally. Learning to understand and respect these
differences can make more complex our understanding of our selves and our
societies, can broaden the range of our politics and enrich the variety of con-
nections we have as persons. But such efforts are not without costs, and these
costs are what I shall focus on.

Of course, these problems in dialogue have different implications when
they occur in the domain of politics than they do when they occur between
friends. Often, the intimacy that characterizes friendships may permit such
problems easier articulation. They may also arouse less hostility because in-
siders may be more willing to make allowances for outsiders who are friends.
Outsiders may be more concerned about having caused offense to insiders
who are friends and hence, more willing to try and understand the nature of
the problems that arise. It is only because I regard working across differences
as an unavoidable and valuable project, personally and politically, that I
think understanding the costs and trying to minimize them is something we
must work towards.

In focusing on the role of the emotions in these problems of communic-
ation, I am following the injunction of several strands of feminist theory that
insist that the emotions must be taken seriously and not regarded as mere
epiphenomenal baggage (Baier 1986, 235). Thus, although I shall be address-
problems that have to do with communicating across all sorts of differ-
ences, not gender differences alone, my project is still primarily inspired by
the feminist commitment to take emotions seriously.

A lot of feminist theory’s projects to take emotions seriously has focused on
the positive contributions that emotions make to knowledge and commu-
nication. This is both understandable and appropriate, since feminist theory is
trying to oppose perspectives in which the emotions have been regarded as
totally opposed to reason and as always impediments to knowledge.

One of the most attractive features of feminist thinking is its commitment
to contextualising its claims. It would tend to be skeptical of claims that re-
garded emotions as always a hinderance to knowledge as well as to claims that
emotions always make a positive contribution to knowledge. It would prefer

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to examine the specific roles emotions could play in particular contexts and critically examine their contributions in such concrete contexts. In keeping with this commitment, feminist theory, in opposing perspectives that are contemptuous and/or dismissive of emotions, would fail to live up to its own standards if it countered with another absolutist perspective on the emotions—one that said that emotions always had a positive contribution to make in the domain of knowledge and communication.

Therefore, I shall not apologize if at least some of my focus on the emotions is ‘negative’, in that I see them as capable of creating problems for communication across differences. However, even where my focus is thus negative, I am still committed to taking emotions seriously and to understanding their validity in the contexts in which they arise.

**THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE AND WORKING TOGETHER ACROSS DIFFERENCE**

Iris Young, in her paper ‘Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory’ (1986, 381-401), argues powerfully for both a political theory and a political practice that not only recognizes, but values, the different cultures, experiences and interests of different groups.

She, like many others, wants to rethink the liberal democratic promise of equality and fraternity because the promise has not materialised. Liberal democracy’s ideas of a ‘civic public’, and of a public realm of the state that somehow expresses “the impartial and universal point of view of normative reason” (1986, 382) seem to her to serve to cover up the racism and sexism that are endemic to modern politics.

I have no quarrel with, and much sympathy for Young’s prescription for the institutionalised representation of differences as a political goal. I would, rather, like to focus on another level, and look at another nest of problems that come out of differences. If we are going to strive for a coalitionary politics, as Young suggests, we still have to work together continuously across our differences.

Such coalitions can break down for internal reasons if 1) people do not learn to trust one another across divisive social differences, and if 2) people do not learn how to sustain working relationships in contexts of sometimes powerful distrust and disagreement. It would seem that even when people are working together for powerfully binding and common social and political goals, a progressive organization or movement cannot be sustained unless the prejudices and problems which arise between members are examined and programmatically addressed.

There is yet another reason why such differences must be addressed and worked through. Even within the specific groups that make up the coalition,
that is, within the autonomous organizations of the sort that Young recommends, supposedly representative of a common interest and experience, members are necessarily going to be heterogenous in some respects. Such groups are then necessarily going to be confronted with questions of difference. Any autonomous group that is going to represent the interests of, say, women is going to both consist of and represent women from different classes and ethnic backgrounds, with different sexual preferences, cultures, experiences, etc. It seems well nigh impossible to have groups whose members will have no significant differences among themselves, despite the commonalities of their oppression and of the interests that bind them together.

So, 'working together continously across our differences' seems to be a project we cannot avoid or get away from. We are condemned to either ignoring and annihilating differences, or to working tenuously across them to form always risky bonds of understanding.

**Epistemic Privilege and the Politics of Difference**

My starting premise about what it takes to work together across differences is that 'good-will is not enough'. What I mean is that a simple resolution on the part of individuals or groups that they will try to understand the experiences of more disadvantaged persons or groups, whose oppression they do not share, and a resolve to try and empathize with their interests, although a useful thing to have, is not going to solve or resolve the thousands of problems that are going to crop up in discussion and communication. Too often, even the most resolute possessors of good-will will find themselves baffled and angered by failures of communication.

The possession of such resolute goodwill on the part of members of more advantaged groups (men, white people, straight folk, westerners, etc.) towards members of more disadvantaged groups (women, people of colour, gay people, members of Third World cultures, etc.) may be an important foundation for the beginning of trust-building experiences between them. But the advantaged would be wrong to expect this to be sufficient to cause strong, historically constituted networks of distrust to simply evaporate into thin air. If anything, such good-will must help sustain communication through situations, issues and discussions which inevitably cause resurgences of mistrust.

Annette Baier, in her paper "Trust and Antitrust", says:

One leaves others an opportunity to harm one when one trusts, and also shows one's confidence that they will not take it. Reasonable trust will require good grounds for such confidence in another's good-will, or at least the absence of good grounds for expecting their ill-will or indifference. Trust then,
on this first approximation, is accepted vulnerability to another's possible but not expected ill will (or lack of good will) toward one (1986, 235).

The situations I am concerned with differ in significant ways from the sort of situation of trust that Baier seems to have in mind, since they are characterized by the presence of historically constituted relations of power, privilege and lack of understanding on the part of members of advantaged groups, and reasonable grounds for mistrust on the part of members of disadvantaged groups. Members of disadvantaged groups may be willing to set aside their mistrust of members of advantaged groups they work with in political groups, to the extent of accepting good will on the part of the advantaged. But they cannot fail to be aware of the fact that presence of good will on the part of the members of advantaged groups is not enough to overcome assumptions and attitudes born out of centuries of power and privilege.

The disadvantaged cannot fail to realize that being hurt by the insensitivity of members of the advantaged groups they endeavour to work with and care about, is often more difficult to deal with emotionally than being hurt by the deliberate malice of members of advantaged groups they expect no better of. Here, members of disadvantaged groups render themselves more vulnerable because they accept the existence of good will on the part of members of oppressed groups, and they have good reason to expect that they will, often enough, be hurt, good will not withstanding.

I shall try to examine where some of the difficulties in communicating across differences may lie. I shall start by examining the claim that members of oppressed groups may have 'epistemic privilege' (Harding 1982; Hartsock 1983; Jaggar 1985). The claim of 'epistemic privilege' amounts to claiming that members of an oppressed group have a more immediate, subtle and critical knowledge about the nature of their oppression than people who are non-members of the oppressed group.

I shall, for the sake of convenience, use the term 'insider' to refer to a member of an oppressed group and the term 'outsider' to refer to non-members. These terms have a disadvantage in that they lack an explicit sense of hierarchy, but have the advantage of reversing conventional ideas of what is central and what is marginal. People are 'insiders' or 'outsiders' only with respect to specific forms of oppressive social structures—racism, sexism, compulsory heterosexuality, etc. An individual who is an 'insider' with respect to one form of oppression (say, by being a woman) may be an 'outsider' with respect to another form of oppression (say, by being white).

I shall try to flesh out what I understand by the notion of the 'epistemic privilege of the oppressed' while simultaneously trying to state what, at least in my understanding of it, this claim does not imply.

Firstly, the claim of epistemic privilege for the oppressed need not imply that the oppressed have a clearer or better knowledge of the causes of their
oppression. Since oppression is often partly constituted by the oppressed being denied access to education and hence to the means of theory production, (which would include detailed knowledge of the history of their oppression, conceptual tools with which to analyze its mechanisms etc.), the oppressed may not have a detailed causal/structural analysis of how their specific form of oppression originated, how it has been maintained and of all the systemic purposes it serves.

Explanatory theories and conceptual tools (like 'class structure' and 'patriarchy') that help us understand the specificities of a certain form of oppression and its links with other forms are often developed by people who are not members of the oppressed group and whose relative privilege in that regard has given them greater access to the means of theoretical reflection and production.

So, what is it about the nature of their oppression that the oppressed can be said to have epistemic privilege about? I think they have epistemic privilege when it comes to immediate knowledge of everyday life under oppression—all the details of the ways in which their oppression is experienced, seen to be inflicted, and of the ways in which the oppression affects the major and minor details of their social and psychic lives. They know first-hand the detailed and concrete ways in which oppression defines the spaces in which they live and how it affects their lives. I think that the emotions play an important role in the knowledge that is part of the epistemic privilege of the oppressed. I shall return to this shortly.

I do not wish to suggest a rigid distinction between description (which the oppressed do better) and explanation (which the dominators may do better), between questions (which the dominated may raise) and answers (that dominators may have theoretical tools to provide). No explanation of a form of oppression that totally fails to account for the way it is experienced and described by the oppressed can be adequate; questions that the oppressed raise have assumptions and are theory-laden, and may serve to shatter the neat, explanatory paradigms of outsiders.

Secondly, the claim to epistemic privilege for the oppressed does not mean, as far as I am concerned, that people who are not members of the oppressed group can never come to understand the experiences of the oppressed or share in their insights or knowledge.

Such a claim would have very undesirable political consequences. It could be taken as a license to excuse all those who are not members of any oppressed group from any concern with that oppression. After all, if they can never understand many or most significant aspects of that oppression, how could they meaningfully take an interest in it or help fight against it? Taken this way, the claim to epistemic privilege would make communication between member of an oppressed group and sympathetic non-members pretty close to useless.
Besides, such an "unconveyability of insights" thesis simply seems untrue. Many of us would claim to know, say, a few men who are sympathetic to and understand a good deal about feminist concerns, or white people who are concerned with and understand a good deal about issues of race.

But I think that the claim to the epistemic privilege of the oppressed does imply that people who are not members of the oppressed group will have to make a great deal of effort to come to grips with the details of lived oppression. Having members of the oppressed group as friends, sharing in aspects of their life-style, fighting alongside them on issues that concern them, sustaining a continuous dialogue with them, etc. can all help non-members develop a more sophisticated understanding of what a form of oppression involves. But 'outsiders' who do none of the above, who simply have an abstract sort of goodwill towards members of the oppressed group, are unlikely to have much of a clear or detailed awareness of the forms in which that oppression is experienced.

Outsiders should not yield to the temptation to use the thesis of the epistemic privilege of the insider as an excuse for the view that they can learn nothing about a form of oppression unless 'educated' about it by insiders. If insiders have epistemic privilege about their oppression, outsiders cannot educate themselves about the situation of insiders except by listening to or reading about their experience of their situation. But concerned outsiders must recognize that their concern carries with it a responsibility to actively seek out and acquire such knowledge, rather than see it as the insider's responsibility to bring such knowledge to their attention because the oppression is 'the insider's problem'. This attitude on the part of outsiders would merely add a pedagogic burden to all the other burdens the insider suffers from. Sympathetic outsiders must recognize that their concern for a form of oppression must be reflected in their willingness to actively educate themselves about it.

Thirdly, the claim that the oppressed have epistemic privilege does not amount, as far as I am concerned, to a claim that the knowledge that they have of their oppression is in any way 'incorrigible'. Members of an oppressed group, like human subjects in general, can always be mistaken about the nature of their experience. Other members of the very same group may differ in the way they perceive or interpret certain incidents or even certain general types of incidents. It may well be the case that not all of them can be right, and at times, it may even be that all of them are wrong.

The operations of ideology may sometimes convince the oppressed that their experiences are other than they are, and an 'outsider' may be able to more clearly see and articulate what is going on. It is certainly not my intention to rule out such possibilities a priori.

But the thesis that the oppressed have epistemic privilege does have some implications for 'outsiders' who want to argue that the understanding of an 'insider' is wrong. The 'outsider' must undertake the attempt with what I shall call 'methodological humility' and 'methodological caution'. 
By the requirement of 'methodological humility' I mean that the 'outsider' must always sincerely conduct herself under the assumption that, as an outsider, she may be missing something, and that what appears to her to be a 'mistake' on the part of the insider may make more sense if she had a fuller understanding of the context.

By the requirement of 'methodological caution', I mean that the outsider should sincerely attempt to carry out her attempted criticism of the insider's perceptions in such a way that it does not amount to, or even seem to amount to, an attempt to denigrate or dismiss entirely the validity of the insider's point of view.

Fourthly, the claim to epistemic privilege for the oppressed should not be identified with the claim that the oppressed should speak for themselves and represent their own interests. That the oppressed should speak for themselves may be a thesis to which we may have a moral and political commitment quite regardless of the view that the oppressed have epistemic privilege.

Even if the oppressed had no epistemic privilege whatsoever, there are several other good and important reasons why they should speak for themselves. Historically, those in power have always spoken in ways that have suggested that their point of view is universal and represents the values, interests and experiences of everyone. Today, many critiques of political, moral and social theory are directed at showing how these allegedly universal points of view are partial and skewed and represent the view points of the powerful and the privileged. The oppressed will, therefore, be quite warranted in being sceptical about the possibility of 'outsiders' adequately speaking for them.

Besides, the right and power to speak for oneself is closely tied to the oppressed group's sense of autonomy, identity and self-respect. That it will foster and safeguard this sense of autonomy and self-respect is a good enough reason to say that the oppressed should speak for themselves, questions of epistemic privilege apart.

However, if the thesis of the epistemic privilege of the oppressed can be substantiated, it would provide yet another reason for arguing that oppressed groups should speak for themselves. If the oppressed do have epistemic privilege, they can understand their problems and represent their own interests better than 'outsiders' could.

**EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE AND THE EMOTIONS**

I would like to argue that a very important component of what constitutes the epistemic privilege of the oppressed has to do with knowledge that is at least partly constituted by and conferred by the emotional responses of the oppressed to their oppression. Unlike concerned 'outsiders' whose knowledge of the experience of oppression is always more or less abstract and theoretical,
the knowledge of ‘insiders’ is enriched by the emotional reactions/responses that the lived experience of oppression confers.

In what ways does an insider’s emotional responses to lived oppression enrich her knowledge of the nature of that oppression in ways that are much more difficult for an outsider to achieve? I can think of at least three ways; there are probably more. I shall discuss these three under titles that make clear what the outsider misses that the insider grasps.

1) Minimizing the emotional costs of oppression: Sympathetic outsiders can and do react not only intellectually, but emotionally to incidents of racism, sexism, etc., even though they are not and may never be the targets of such oppression. But, often, the outsider may fail to realize that the insiders’ emotional responses to the oppression may be much more complex than his own. Such failure may lead his understanding of the emotional costs of the oppression to be much more sketchy than that of the insider.

An outsider, when told about or present at an incident that is racist, sexist, etc. most often does feel anger at the perpetrator and sympathy with the victim. The victim, however, may feel a complex and jumbled array of emotions: anger at the perpetrator, a deep sense of humiliation, a sense of being ‘soiled’ by the incident, momentary hatred for the whole group of which the perpetrator is a part, rage at the sort of history that has produced and sustains such attitudes, anger and shame at one’s powerlessness to retaliate, a strong sense of solidarity with those who face the same problems, and maybe even pity for the stupidity of the perpetrator. The outsider, not having been at the receiving end of the oppression, may fail to wholly grasp its effects on its victims and his understanding may, therefore, fail to do justice to the costs of that experience.

2) Missing the subtler manifestations of oppression: An outsider who has not experienced an oppression first-hand and has learned about it second-hand, is more likely to understand the general and commonplace ways in which the oppression is manifested. For instance, if a professor uses openly racist or sexist examples or is openly hostile to minority or female students, sympathetic white male students may be able to spot his attitudes quite as well as the victims of the attitudes. But if his attitudes are expressed more covertly, through dismissing their queries, not taking their contributions seriously, under-valuing their work, lack of cordiality, etc., outsiders may fail to see what is going on.

An insider who is sensitized to such prejudiced attitudes will often pick up cues ranging from facial expressions to body language that an outsider may simply fail to spot and will often also be alerted by her own feelings of unease about the person or situation. As a consequence, the insider is far more likely than the outsider to know the extent to which a form of oppression permeates a society and affects the lives of its victims and of the very subtle forms in which it can operate.

3) Not making connections or failing to see oppression in new contexts: The outsider usually knows about the more widespread and commonplace
contexts in which the oppression is manifested and may fail to carry over what he knows about one context when he sees the same sort of phenomena in new or unusual contexts. Or, he may fail to make the connection between what he knows in theory and what is actually taking place in a given situation. For instance, men who have been sensitized to the 'silencing' of women in public or professional forums may fail to see the phenomenon taking place in informal gatherings or between friends. Insiders are more likely to make these connections and to carry over what they have learned to new contexts because they become more vigilant in their attitudes the more they are exposed to the oppression.

EMOTIONAL COSTS OF WORKING ACROSS DIFFERENCES

Although being an insider to a form of oppression may confer epistemic privilege, it certainly constitutes a burden. The insider lives with all the forms the oppression takes, from everyday and trivial manifestations to violent and life-threatening ones. The insider pays a heavy social and psychological price that no outsider pays. For insiders to work together with outsiders is a project that is often fraught with difficulty, for, in any communication, the two groups do not function as equally vulnerable.

In their paper, "Have We Got a Theory For You!," Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman explain the nature of this unequal vulnerability thus:

And yet, we have had to be in your world and learn its ways. We have to participate in it, make a living in it, live in it, be mistreated in it, be ignored in it, and rarely, be appreciated in it. In learning to do these things or in learning to suffer them or in learning to enjoy what is to be enjoyed or in learning to understand your conception of us, we have had to learn your culture and thus your language and self-conceptions. But there is nothing that necessitates that you understand our world; understand, that is, not as an observer understands things, but as a participant, as someone who has a stake in them understands them. So your being ill at ease in our world lacks the features of our being ill at ease in yours precisely because you can leave and you can always tell yourselves that you will soon be out of there and because the wholeness of your selves is never touched by us, we have no tendency to remake you in our image (1983, 576).

It is the insider who pays the price of oppression and even sympathetic outsiders, since they are prone to blind-spots and clumsiness, can offend and hurt the insider more often than they imagine. The insider can neither simply walk away from the issues, as the outsider always can, nor can she ever
inadvertently hurt the outsider in quite the same way. Thus, since the brunt of possible hurt is most often on the insider, the burden of taking care not to cause offense can fairly be laid on the outsider. Outsiders often assume, wrongly, that good will on their part is a guarantee against causing offense to insiders; and when insiders are offended and express their anger, the outsiders often react with honest bafflement and anger since they cannot understand how someone sympathetic to a form of oppression could conceivably be seen as having offensive views or attitudes.

I shall try to list and analyze a number of ways in which outsiders may reveal lack of understanding and cause affront and grief to insiders. The list is in no way exhaustive. Understanding these ways in which communicating across differences may falter and go wrong may help outsiders avoid these problems and may help insiders to try and understand why the outsider is going wrong.

What all these failures I will list have in common is the inability of the outsider to fully understand and respect the emotional responses of the insider. In some cases, the response of the outsider violates the insider's sense of self-identity, self-worth or self-respect. In other cases, the response of the outsider violates the insider's sense of identity and solidarity with and respect for her group.

CASE 1: OVERT DENIAL OF THE VALIDITY OF THE INSIDER'S UNDERSTANDING AND/OR RESPONSE

Given the way difference works, it is hardly surprising that insiders and outsiders may often have very different understandings of what is involved in a situation or issue. For instance, men and women often have very different understandings from men concerning what was involved and who was responsible in cases of sexual harassment. Men often think women are responsible for attracting unwanted attention because of the way they dress, conduct themselves, etc. Women often see this sort of view as a self-exculpating explanation that absolves men of their real responsibility.

When, for instance, men totally blame women for the sexual harassment and sexual terrorism from which they suffer, they wholly deny the validity of the insiders' understanding of such harassment as something inflicted on them. The insider will most often respond emotionally to such attempts to negate her understanding—with anger, tears, etc. The issue, to the insiders, is not a purely theoretical one, and their anger and pain at what they have to endure become exacerbated by the seeming inability of even well-intentioned outsiders to see their point of view.

The situation is complicated by the fact that most outsiders and insiders have been socialized differently and understand and display emotions in very different ways. For instance, public (or even private) displays of emotion by
women, which are experienced as natural and authentic by the women, often seem excessive and artificial to men.

The outsider often reacts to the insider’s emotional response over a disagreement in one (or both!) of two ways: a) the outsider (say, the man) may ‘dismiss’ the emotional response as just one of those silly and irrational responses that insiders (say, women) are prone to; and/or b) the outsider may accuse the insider of ‘using’ the emotional response as a manipulative measure. The insider may be told that since she could not muster arguments that were cogent enough to convince the outsider, she is now resorting to ‘emotional tactics’ to win the argument.

If the outsider takes both tacks (and they often do), the insider is in a strange double-bind over her emotions. If her response is authentic and natural, it is also pathetic and a symptom of her weakness, irrationality and lack of self-control. If her response is not a symptom of weakness and irrationality, it is a calculated, manipulative and inauthentic strategic move on her part. To an insider, who already feels that she has rendered herself vulnerable by displaying her emotions, such dismissals or accusations of manipulation add insult to injury. The outsider must realize that such denial of the validity of the insider’s responses will almost certainly cause a serious breach in the dialogue, since they deeply violate the insider’s self-respect.

CASE 2: ACCUSATIONS OF ‘PARANOIA’

Outsiders often consider the reactions of insiders to be ‘paranoid’ and accuse them of ‘paranoia’. They mean that they think that the insiders are imagining the existence of racist or sexist attitudes, say, in too many cases where the outsider fails to see it and where he therefore considers these attitudes to be absent. (This is another way in which the outsider can deny the validity of the insider’s response, but I think it is common and important enough to treat separately).

I have already examined reasons why even sympathetic outsiders may fail to pick up on subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination. An accusation of paranoia is a particularly dangerous reaction from an outsider, especially since, in many cases, the insider is never totally sure that her judgements are accurate. Often, subtle instances of racism or sexism are such as to be open to interpretation; insiders are often aware of this and are often anxious and uncertain about their own perceptions. They are often extremely ambivalent about whether to make an issue of it, especially since the incident/remark can be ‘explained away’; and once such explaining away occurs, the person who raised the issue ends up being made to feel nasty and suspicious for having raised the issue in the first place.

But if my experience and the experiences of people I know is any indication, the insider is more often correct than mistaken in her suspicions. Some-
times less subtle manifestations follow that give the show away, or else, the insider meets other insiders who have the same feelings of unease and suspect similar prejudices on the part of the same person. For instance, women students and students of colour seem to report an amazing degree of agreement in their individual judgements as to which of their professors are sexist or racist, often in the subtlest of ways.

Outsiders should refrain as far as possible from such accusations, since the outsider is more likely than not to be wrong, and because such accusations undermine the insider’s trust in her own perceptions. This may reduce her capacity for vigilance, something that those who are on the receiving end of oppression can ill afford.

CASE 3: INSENSITIVE REACTIONS TO AN INSIDER’S RESPONSE

Outsiders can be offensively insensitive to the reactions of insiders without necessarily overtly dismissing them as irrational, manipulative or paranoid. I shall illustrate this sort of insensitivity with an incident. A group of people who were interested in various sorts of oppression were discussing the question of whether it was important that women (rather than men) taught courses in feminist theory, and whether it was important that black professors (rather than white ones) taught courses in black literature, philosophy, history, etc.

A black male participant talked about an awful pedagogic experience with a white teacher who taught Richard Wright with little sensitivity to the context of black culture and experience, and who constantly dismissed what his black students had to say. He was, presumably, arguing that there was a point in black writings being taught by black professors. A white participant responded to this by saying that it was better that such works got included on syllabuses, regardless of who taught them, rather than their not being included because there were no teachers from appropriate backgrounds to teach them.

This reaction was experienced as an insensitive one because a) the insider’s account of his unhappy pedagogic experience was brushed aside and not addressed; and b) because the same basic point could have been made very differently. For instance, the outsider could have said, “I can understand what you are talking about. Such experiences must be awful. But don’t you think that, perhaps, it may be a good thing to push for black writings to be included on syllabuses, regardless of who is there to teach them?”

In this case, the ‘outsider’ who was white was also a woman and a feminist. Then, this becomes not only a case of an insensitive response, but a case of an insensitive failure to analogize. If a woman had talked about how awful it was to do Virginia Woolf with a sexist male teacher, and if a man, whatever his race, had dismissed it similarly, any feminist would have perceived it as a sexist response.
If 'working together across difference' is to at all be possible, we must all learn to analogize from situations of oppression in which we have been 'insiders' to those in which we are 'outsiders. It is sad, but seems unfortunately true, that experience and understanding of one form of oppression does not necessarily sensitize one to other forms. But if we make the effort to analogize, it may give us some clues as to how to avoid insensitive responses in areas in which we are outsiders.

CASE 4: FAILURE BY OUTSIDERS TO AVOID CRUDE AND 'STEREOTYPIC' GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT INSIDERS

Sometimes, even the best intentioned outsiders cannot seem to get away from cliches and stereotypic generalizations about insiders. I am not talking about cliches at the level of 'All blacks are lazy' or 'All women are irrational', which are evidently offensive, but much more insidious and difficult to see cliches and generalizations.

Once again, let me try to illustrate what I mean with example. I have heard more than once from white feminists the following account of the differences between western and non-western feminist agendas. The gist of it is that non-western women are concerned with life and death issues like food, drinking water, etc. and have no time to be concerned with issues like that of sexual autonomy that are of concern to western feminists. Concern with sexual autonomy, it seems implied, has nothing to do with life and death, and it seems to be a 'luxury issue' to be engaged in by western feminists, who, it would seem, have solved their problems of economic survival.

Firstly, this opinion is wrong. Lack of sexual autonomy leads Indian women to be married off to men who are only interested in the money and goods she brings with her as her 'dowry' and leads them to be frequently burnt to death by husbands and their families who would like another dowry and who pass these murders off as kitchen accidents. Secondly, this sort of view is insulting in its implication that concern over sexual autonomy is the privilege of western feminists.

Outsiders should carefully scrutinize their explanations and attitudes for such cliches that are insulting to insiders.

CASE 5: FAILURE TO SEE WHY SOMETHING THAT IS NOT EXPLICITLY INSULTING TO A PERSON OR GROUP MAY BE IMPLICITLY SO

Outsiders are often taken aback by the sharp reactions of insiders to statements that the outsider cannot see as having anything to do with the insider, let alone be insulting to her. For instance, women in a group may react sharply to a man's statements that are frequently insulting to particular women, who may not be present or even members of the group. The
women may suspect, with perhaps some justification, that the man’s statements reflect the man’s attitudes to women in general. If the outsider is to avoid that sort of reaction, he must be very careful to specify what his criticism of a particular insider is and try to show why it is not an expression of a general negative attitude to insiders in general.

Outsiders often fail to understand why, for instance, an Indian may react negatively to implicitly derogatory remarks about say Chinese or African cultures. Outsiders fail to see that the insider may quite legitimately suspect similar derogatory attitudes on the outsider’s part towards her own culture, because she suspects the derogatory attitudes stem from a negative view of non-western cultures in general. It may be very difficult, but outsiders will have to try and focus on the more general implications that statements they make may have for insiders, or else they are likely to insult them unintentionally.

CASE 6: INAPPROPRIATE JUDGEMENTS ABOUT WHAT INSIDERS OUGHT TO DO OR FEEL

Outsiders often think that their commitment to a cause or issue which does not directly affect them warrants their making judgements about what insiders ought to do or feel. These judgements, almost inevitably, turn out to be insulting to the insider.

For instance, women philosophers and philosophers of colour I know, who are interested in areas like mathematical logic, are offended by implications that ‘someone like them’ should be devoting themselves to political philosophy and/or feminist theory. Outsiders who imply this fail to see why, for ‘someone like them’, it may be a matter of pride to excel in an unconventional (for people like them) and difficult field like mathematical logic.

Similarly, many western feminists imply that they find some non-western feminists too harsh and critical about their own cultures. They may fail to see how women who have fought against some of the most oppressive aspects of those cultures cannot afford the more rose-tinted view of it that outsiders can.

By and large, it would probably be good advice to outsiders that they should try and learn from the perceptions of insiders, rather than tell insiders what they ought to do or feel, especially about contexts and issues that they ought to suspect they know less about than insiders.

There are, no doubt, several other ways in which communicating across difference can create problems for the participants. For instance, outsiders may fail to understand why their desire for praise or acknowledgement for their interest in an issue that does not directly affect them could be met with resentment on the part of insiders. Or, outsiders may fail to understand why, at moments of crisis, even insiders whom they are close to may prefer to sort their feelings out with and discuss their problems with other insiders.
I think these problems of communicating across difference will be easier to handle if both insiders and outsiders take the idea of the epistemic privilege of the oppressed seriously. Outsiders must try to understand that good will on their part is not sufficient to guarantee that their perceptions and comments are inoffensive to insiders. They must sensitize themselves to the fact that insiders may have more subtle and complex understanding of the ways in which oppression operates and is experienced. They must realize that insiders are specially vulnerable to insensitivities from outsiders whose good will they have accepted and who they have begun to trust. Awareness of these features that impinge on dialogue with insiders would convince outsiders that they have good reason to proceed with what I have called ‘methodological humility’ and ‘methodological caution’ and focus more careful attention on the implications of what they say.

Outsiders may, rightly, feel that the exercise of methodological humility and methodological caution may cramp the spontaneity of their reactions and the ease with which they communicate. However, this loss of ease and spontaneity seems a necessary and small price to pay to avoid causing offense to insiders and causing serious breaches in dialogue. If it is not only possible that insiders have epistemic privilege, but if it is also true that insiders are specially vulnerable to insensitivities from outsiders they trust and work with, it seems both unavoidable and only fair that outsiders bear the burden of exercising caution and of taking care not to offend.

Is there anything insiders can do to help in working across difference? Perhaps taking the idea of the epistemic privilege of the oppressed can make a difference to insiders as well. Realizing that outsiders do not have the subtle understanding of oppression that insiders have may help insiders deal with insensitive perceptions/comments by outsiders with greater charity. Firstly, it may help insiders realize that such insensitivities are not necessarily a symptom of lack of good will on the part of outsiders. Secondly, realizing the difficulties outsiders may have in understanding the subtleties of oppression, insiders may see their insensitivities as less culpable.

This is not to say that such insensitivities must be simply overlooked or forgiven instead of being confronted or dealt with. But the manner in which the confrontation takes place may be different. For instance, instead of reacting with understandable anger that inevitably makes the outsider defensive, the insider could try instead to point out why the outsider’s remarks or perceptions were experienced as hurtful or offensive.

I shall not pretend that this is an easy thing to do, or that this is asking no more of insiders than exercising methodological humility and methodological caution asks of outsiders. It is very hard for insiders not to react with anger to such insensitivities, for each such insensitivity evokes memories of countless others. Besides, anger is a necessary emotion for those who must constantly exercise vigilance and retain their self-respect in the face of systematic social
prejudice and discrimination. Insensitivities from outsiders one trusts make insiders especially bitter and pessimistic about hopes for change, and anger is often an inevitable corollary.

Besides, revealing one’s anger makes one less vulnerable than revealing one’s hurt. In revealing one’s anger, one seems to react from a position of strength, while revealing one’s hurt lacks this quality and seems to open up possibilities of the outsider reacting with either pity or guilt, neither of which the insider can find very palatable. Moreover, insiders are often fed up with the burden of constantly having to explain themselves and their perceptions to outsiders, and bitter about the fact that, while they must unavoidably live and function in the outsider’s world, the outsider has no such imperative to understand their world and their experience. However, perhaps insiders must try, whenever possible, to raise issues of insensitivity from outsiders, with some rein on their anger. And outsiders, in their turn, must try to understand the nature and sources of the insider’s anger.

I am sure that serious discussion of the problems of communicating across differences by groups that are dealing with the problem will reveal several other kinds of problems. What is important is that such groups do address this question programmatically and not just act on the hope that goodwill on the part of its members will take care of all such problems.  

NOTES

1. Alison Jaggar used the notion of ‘epistemic privilege’ in her work for her seminar on Feminist Epistemology, when she held the Laurie Chair in Women’s Studies at Rutgers University in 1985.

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