

Ethics, Epistemology and Community-Based Research on African Americans

Theresa Ann Rajack-Talley

Department of Pan-African Studies, University of Louisville, USA. tatall01@louisville.edu

This paper explores the relationship among Ethics, Epistemology and Research Methodologies in the study of African Americans. A critical review of the literature on research methodologies is used to examine how epistemological denial impacts ethical issues in research on underrepresented minority populations. The goal is to conduct an analytic review of the role epistemology plays in research aimed at understanding the “other.” Black scholarship is used to illustrate how Eurocentric values are assumed to be universally applicable and can produce “epistemic racism”¹ for people of color and “epistemic injustice”² for underrepresented populations overall.

The paper argues that people-centered research cannot be objective or value-free in design and outcomes, instead, hegemonic paradigms remain embedded in knowledge production, interpretation and validation. As such, ethical concerns are found in how knowledge is generated (data collection procedures), in the knowledge generated (interpretation and analyses), as well as in the use of knowledge (outcomes). While the incorporation of reciprocity or reflexivity are helpful in ameliorating some of the ethical concerns they are found to be limiting and different from approaches that use race-based or ethnic-based epistemologies in their research methodologies.

Race or ethnic-based epistemologies reject Eurocentric worldviews and Western ideals that often goes undisclosed in institutes of higher learning (Asante, 1993; Mazama, 2016). Those who resist often face rejection of their knowledge claims (Collins, 2015). Race-based epistemologies are sometimes referred to as Afrocentric epistemologies, but overall they are defined as the method of knowing and understanding the reality of members of a particular group, based on their racial/ethnic identity intersected with gender, cultural and/or other social experiences (McDougal III, 2014, 2017). Afrocentric or race-based epistemologies address social relations of power and privilege and challenge research in universities that posit epistemic superiority that colonizes or erases other epistemologies that are diversified and globally-centered. They are inherently socio-political in that they challenge hegemonic structures that sustain inequity and injustice (Rodriguez, 2006), external and internal to the academy.

The paper calls for a paradigm shift in qualitative research where race-based or ethnic-based epistemologies are used to rethink how race and ethnicity are studied (McDougal III, 2017; Stanfield II, 2011). Race-based epistemologies inform research methodologies in that they shape research objectives, questions asked, and the data collection processes where concrete experiences are treated as a criterion of meaning and dialogues are used in assessing knowledge claims. Further, there is an ethic of caring in the data collection process and in the personal accountability of the researcher. The paper concludes that the incorporation of race-based and other diverse epistemological perspectives in qualitative research

¹ See reference made by A.J. Lemelle Jr. in Oliver Cromwell Cox: Toward a Pan-African Epistemology for community action, *Journal of Black Studies*, 22 (4), 477-493.

² See the work of Mirander Fricker on *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press, 2007.



makes for best research practices because it reduces ethical concerns, and research findings are more diverse, authentic and transformational.

Keywords: Ethics; Epistemology; Methodology; Race; Ethnicity; African American; Research methods.

References

Asante, M.K. (1993). *Afrocentricity: Theory of Social Change*. Buffalo, NY: Amulefi.

Collins, P.H. (2015). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

Lemelle Jr., A.J. (2001). Oliver Cromwell Cox: Toward a Pan-Africanist Epistemology for community action. *Journal of Black Studies*, 22 (4), 477-493.

Mazama, A. (2016). The Afrocentric Paradigm: Contours and Definitions. Chapter 18 in in James L. Conyers, Jr. (Ed), *Qualitative Methods in Africana Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Examining Africana Phenomena*. New York, NY: University Press of America.

McDougal III, S. (2014, 2017). *Research Methods in African Studies*. Black Studies and Critical Thinking Series. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishers.

Rodriguez, D. (2006). Un/masking identity: Healing our wounded souls. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12 (6), 1067-1090.

Stanfield II, J. H. (Eds.) (2011). *Rethinking Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast.

