Humility in Community: Uncertainty and Solidarity in Transgender Theory

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Gender identity-related issues continue to generate controversies in public school policy while transgender and nonbinary communities continue to demand recognition and respect. These unsettling contexts require not only a determination to advocate for trans people but also a willingness to recognize as well that gender identity is an unsettled and unsettling concept, a kind of category-related humility. This paper will suggest that educators ought to understand the relationship between gender identity, critical thought, and uncertainty and that a focus on epistemic and relational humility can help that process. Further educators ought to use that complex understanding to counter the increasingly damaging laws made against transgender youth. Not all bias can be countered with the kind of community-based uncertainties and humilities I will be discussing, of course. I am suggesting it is better to understand gender identity diversity as an unfinished and emergent approach to living within systems of gender. This political/community-based humility, an openness to change, is not the same as determinations to set definitions that shut down gender diversities.

I begin by discussing humility in relationship to epistemic injustice and relational humility, noting how the connections among justice, thinking, and interconnection provide educators with models that encouraging rethinking in community. I turn to educational moments where this process has either gone astray because educators seek to limits who women are or miss the intersectional complications of gender better. Finally, I turn to contemporary transgender theorists to discuss how differences within transgender and gender diverse communities create solidarities out of relational humilities and how these ideas might also help schools.

EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AND RELATIONAL HUMILITY

Humility may be an especially helpful way to think about learning together as it combines epistemological stances (open-mindedness, uncertainty,

skepticism) with an attentiveness to ethics. This hybrid quality, both focused on knowledge and attentiveness, heightens the intersubjective and even political meaning of relationalities. Humility resides not in an individual's self-described insufficiency but in their willingness to remain open and interested in what others do to challenge their thoughts and actions. Locke indicates this connection:

> human knowledge, under the present circumstances of our beings and constitutions, may be carried much farther than it has hitherto been, if men would sincerely, and with freedom of mind, employ all that industry and labour of thought, in improving the means of discovering truth, which they do for the colouring or support of falsehood, to maintain a system, interest, or party, they are once engaged in.[1]

Miranda Fricker continues this tradition of combining ethics, politics, and epistemology, arguing that arrogant strategies of knowing that misjudge and misrecognize the credibility of certain knowers contribute to "epistemic injustice."[2] In her view, those in dominant positions are encouraged to maintain that dominance by not knowing and so they are made fools by their own determination to remain ignorant. Those in marginal positions are denied recognition for what they know and are also potentially denied access to knowing more about themselves. Fricker further suggests that harms to those who are not understood to have knowledge include both testimonial injustice, a hearer who is unwilling to consider the truth claims a non-dominant person makes, and hermeneutical injustice, when a group lacks the conceptual tools to understand a claim made by a non-dominant person. In the example of transgender youth, a teacher unwilling to respect the gender identity of one of their students would be doing a testimonial injustice, refusing to hear what the young person is saying about who they are. Should that teacher be in a school or state that prohibits recognition of transgender youth or that condones school professionals who ignore gender identity or deny the existence of gender diversities, that student would be experiencing a hermeneutical injustice.

Vrinda Dalmiya brings together caring and epistemology arguing for the importance of "relational humility," "a dynamic between self-ascribing ignorance and other-ascribing knowledge."[3] If we care about others, we also

change how we think about them, understanding that our relationship will push us to rethink our own perspectives and to attempt to think more from theirs. Dalmiya suggests that such rethinking can startle us into connections as well as realizations about our own insufficiencies of knowledge:

> thinking of states of ignorance as being 'about' objects as unknown, makes it possible to relate to objects (and other subjects) in their alterity—where what is grasped in these states (the unknown) can surprise, resist, and clamor for engagement. Self-ascribing such ignorances becomes a mode of consciousness that reinforces the reality of what is beyond our knowledge, rather than erasing it.[4]

Dalmiya's tactic of self-ascribing ignorance can help counter what seems anti-transgender determinations to maintain normative gender categories. Relational humility, that is, humility that focuses on building connections to how others think and how new forms of knowledge might change one's own definitions, even those definitions that are so central as to be unrecognized as definitions, can help us to be willing to learn about the limitations of our current thinking and the relationships that are impeded by that determination to not know. This is more than humility as a personal quality (a person's self-characterization as humble is so often suspect) but rather forms of humility related to how communities begin to understand themselves and how they maintain their sense of change as integral to who they are.

Attentiveness to the damages of epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice, and hermeneutical injustice may provide educators with category-type humility that may help them problematize and challenge policies under which they work. The added link between caring theory and epistemic justice provided by Dalmiya may also act as a reminder that while what teachers think and know may be important to their lives, teachers also need to be willing to take on the role of the one-caring and determine more closely and respectfully how their students want to be known. An additional reason to bring in caring theory together with epistemology is also to underscore that transgender youth, like all youth, are in progress. Like all categories of gender, transgender, nonbinary, and gender creative ways of being and organizing communities are also in process.

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So, while Dalmiya and Fricker provide excellent analyses of the various links between epistemology, ethics, and justice, it is important to remember that discussions and understandings occur in the time of students' knowing and in social contexts in which meanings continue to change.

Fricker's cautions on the damages of arrogant knowing and Dalmiya's addition of relational humility, may help educators become more critical of their own limitations with respect to knowledge about gender and become more willing to help transgender and gender creative youth become who they are. These capacities may not change the minds of those who are determined to oppose transgender people and communities, but attention to epistemic justice and relational humility may provide conceptual and practical tools for those who feel they need better justifications to be supportive of gender identity diversity.

RADICAL FEMINIST EDUCATORS AND LIMITS

Attentiveness to epistemic injustice and moving toward relational humility could help those who are not transgender to understand that gender assignment at birth is not the sum total of what could be known about their—or anyone else's—gender. Not thinking further about gender may indicate cisgender privilege, that is, may be the occasion to realize one has not had to think further. But understanding that transgender and nonbinary people *do* rethink that assigned gender can be an invitation to rethink, no matter what one's gender identity is. In addition, the rethinking and even shifts in gender that transgender and gender creative people engage in can also be thought in conversation with shifts in normative binary gender as well. One might be surprised at an invitation to consider a previously unconsidered category or meaning, of course, or even resistant. But one way that one might be invited into a more relational form of humility could be look more closely at how arrogance emerges in discussions over transgender identities and compare that to conversations within transgender theory.

For instance, radical feminist philosophers may focus too much on what they want to preserve in the concept of "woman" and not enough in how their limitations on the category resists new possibilities for both the category of "woman" and goals of feminism. Making claims for "biological women," they claim the distinctiveness of gender lies not in identity or social meaning

but rather in the "reality" of gametes.[5] The reliance on gametes as the site of distinction between genders, a distinction not used in feminist theory prior to transgender activism, appears to be developed only as a resistance to recognizing transgender women as women. To their credit, some radical feminist educators and philosophers understand that misrecognition of transgender students would be damaging and so they limit their arguments against transgender membership to their research and writing while maintaining a caring relationship with all students, including transgender students. Judith Suissa and Alice Sullivan are careful to indicate that they do not misgender and misrecognize transgender students, using the pronouns and categories the students provide them with. But they argue that feminism cannot give up the category of women to everyone and that academic freedom, as well as feminism, needs to keep space open for disputing that transgender women are women. They also point out that is a difficult conversation to have. While our cultural contexts are different and they live in a country with more legal protections for transgender people, their point does echo some anti-transgender rhetoric in the U. S. They argue:

> the view that males who reject the gendered forms of presentation and behaviour typically associated with males should not suffer discrimination or abuse for doing so is an entirely different position from the view that doing so equates to 'identifying as a woman,' thereby constituting their 'gender identity,' and that this equates to the claim that such a person is a woman.[6]

This line of argument seems a form of aspirational domination, seeking to erase knowledge claims and relationships that disrupt taken-for-granted categories and I think is not necessary to their goal of maintaining attention on gender inequities.

Wanting to engage in reasonable discussion about what the definitions of sex and gender ought to be part of thinking together about the uses of distinctions, hopefully in aid of building solidarities. Such discussions need not be premised on excluding people's self-definition. There is good reason to distinguish between needs related to particular bodies. The rights to abortion and reproductive freedom are good examples of political and educational projects that involve particular bodies though the relational aspects may go beyond

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those individual bodies and into shared concerns of partners and anyone else supporting embodied agency. All women may not have the same need to have access to the means to terminate a pregnancy and some men (some transgender men may become pregnant) may have that need but may have a stake in supporting the rights of those who do. One can be inclusive of women who need to breastfeed, express milk, or bottle feed an infant while also being inclusive of other caregivers who have the same need. One need not drop the use of the word "woman" to include "and other caregivers." When redesigning restrooms in schools, there may be good reasons based on respect for religious diversity and other concerns to maintain single-user restrooms and to also provide gender-inclusive facilities, as well as enable students to use the restroom that matches their gender identity.

One can argue in favor of particular girls' and women's needs, even needs based in particular gamete formations, without enacting a categorical exclusion of transgender girls and women. Not all women, for instance, may have an immediate personal investment in supporting more affordable childcare, pregnancy-related care, or have personal experience of racism but can understand through relational humility that it is in the interests of gender equity to do so. Each of those concerns require potentially going beyond one's own physical and experiential knowledge to extend to solidarity via relational humility and category-related humility.

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND INTERSECTIONAL COMPLEXITY

When asked if she thought trans women were women, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie responded with a complicated distinction between minor justifications based on genitalia and her justification of difference based on recognition in social role:

> When people talk about, "Are trans women women?" my feeling is trans women are trans women. I think the whole problem of gender in the world is about our experiences. It's not about how we wear our hair or whether we have a vagina or a penis.[7] It's about the way the world treats us, and I think if you've

> lived in the world as a man with the privileges that the world accords to men and then sort of change gender, it's difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning as a woman and who has not been accorded those privileges that men are.[8]

Because Adichie is well known for her advocacy for intersectional feminism, an approach that requires relational humility to understand feminist struggles beyond one's own positionality, her unwillingness to include transgender women was problematic. Having advocated for complexity in analysis beyond one's own single story, her position is indicative of how a method that seems to include may sometimes nonetheless stall when encountering new knowledge and new communities. Laverne Cox's response to Adichie filled in additional information that Adichie missed:

> Class, race, sexuality, ability, immigration status, education all influence the ways in which we experience privilege so though I was assigned male at birth I would contend that I did not enjoy male privilege prior to my transition. Patriarchy and cissexism punished my femininity and gender nonconformity. The irony of my life is prior to transition I was called a girl and after I am often called a man. Gender policing & the fact that gender binaries can only exist through strict policing complicates the concept of gendered privilege & that's OK cause it's complicated. Intersectionality complicates both male and cis privilege. This is why it is paramount that we continue to lift up diverse trans stories.[9]

As Cox points out this need to understand beyond one's own experiences is why intersectional feminism is important. Intersectional feminism both provides a way for diverse women to understand they are different from one another and to act in solidarity in ways that enact that understanding of difference and acknowledge, too, what they might share. To return to Dalmiya's relational humility, self-ascribed ignorance—or even curiosity—is necessary to

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thinking inclusively and intersectionally.

Relational humility may provide a way to pull back and look not just for personal differences, as Cox suggests, but to also return to the basic epistemologies undergirding one's political commitments. Epistemic justice and relational humility, in this situation, may reinvigorate what one's epistemological context might have provided but is obscured by other kinds of connections one makes. B Camminga notes that Adichie's epistemological arrogance and disconnection both work together to restage the self/other dichotomy that feminism should be working against:

> Trans women have always had to justify who they are, while cis women, like Adichie, more generally do not or have not had to. It is this continuous creation of 'Other,' to say 'trans women are trans women,' a negative recognition, that situates trans women outside the category of 'woman' as defined and policed by a cis woman.[10]

But Camminga is also concerned, as are other transgender and cis African feminists, that Adichie could have used African feminism to argue against the "bio-logics and Western models of gender identity."[11] Why, Camminga asks, follow the exclusions of someone seemingly committed to a single notion of transgender woman and equally single story about cisgender women instead of engaging the longer project of African and other feminisms to maintain a critical openness to the category of woman? Relational humility might have not only pushed Adichie to understand transwomen better, it may have also encouraged her to see a connection between African feminisms and transgender communities, too, and use her status as an educator to expand others' ideas as well.

TRANSGENDER COMMUNITIES AND HUMILITIES

Kathryn Abrams suggests that the diverse origins of the transgender movement, including varieties of gender identities and intersectional diversities, has enabled transgender communities to continue the project of openness to diversities.[12] As transgender and gender diverse people organize for inclusion and recognition, they use strategies that broaden possibilities, not foreclose identifications. Transgender activists and educators have literally held open definitions of gender, to use a small example, by advocating for inclusive and

open-ended questions in demographic sections on forms. Recognizing that terms are in flux, they've suggested variously male, female, transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, "another term not listed." In some situations, particularly healthcare-related ones, adding another section to enable assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth, or intersex can help ensure that healthcare screenings are accurate. Most advocate as well that forms avoid "forced choice," so that respondents can answer as many choices as help them represent who they are.

This kind of welcome is how transgender communities organize. It is common to talk about the varieties of gender identities that are welcome under the "transgender umbrella." At the same time, the equally common discourse of "being one's authentic self" may seem at odds with that openness. But there is a difference between asserting one's self against those determined to not recognize one and the kind of self-understanding, even authenticity, that recognizes identity as always in process. The strategy of authenticity may be a defensive assertion against others who refuse one recognition. Authenticity does not mean one's subjectivity is no longer in process. The ability to assert authenticity means entering into a process of rethinking. Thoughtful and supportive communities can, for instance, engage what it means for one person to affirm their identity surgically and maintain nonbinary pronouns and another can affirm via pronouns and not have any medicalized affirmation process. Reworking or recognizing gender may be similar projects but strategies may differ.

Teaching about gender diversities can help students and others in school communities understand that these are not new issues (nor is the current conservative trend toward studied ignorance and misrecognition new). The modern movement to recognize gender diversities begins in a few different ways, perhaps at least part of the reason for diversities in terminology. Transgender activists and academics cite practices of cross-gender passing and transvestitism, recognition of intersex people, and people whose gender did not conform to the binary, including "third sex" and Indigenous genders as other forms of nonbinary gender. These differences are not levelled and collapsed under an organizing term like "transgender" but rather that single term is meant to call for mutual recognition. Some gender diversities developed as critiques of prevailing norms. As Leslie Feinberg discusses, gender diversity

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brings together people who lived or passed as another gender for economic, affective, community-based, and other reasons that may go beyond a felt sense of identity.[13] As Alex Wilson has pointed out sometimes gender diversities are re-embraced continuities of traditional genders challenged by colonization and so Indigenous genders may re-emerge resources within communities.[14] This push and pull of critique, invention, reworking, and recovery means that those who make connections with others in gender diverse and trans communities likely find many different approaches to gender identity and community. Blas Radi suggests that transgender epistemologies, too, navigate this complexity, trying to ensure that transgender people are involved in knowledge production but also maintain openness to what transgender means.[15]

Recognition of new categories may also occasion the creation of new ways to name dominant identities like cisgender.[16] Using cisgender as a term enables one to avoid saying "non-transgender person" but Finn Enke cautions that using cis and trans as a stable binary elides potential connections between people who identify as trans and other people who also share in dissatisfactions and critiques of binary gender norms. In other words, cis-identification might impede people's ability to recognize gender diversities and suggest that only a certain few people, like transgender or gender creative people, are critically engaging the meaning of gender. Enke discusses this problem in relationship to pedagogy:

> How troubling: Just when queer and trans theory remind us that gender and sex are made and have no *a priori* stability ("one is not born a woman"), cisgender arrives to affirm not only that it is possible for one to *stay* "a woman" but also that one *is* "born a woman" after all.[17]

Enke argues that the use "cisgender" in self-identification if used as a strategy to unproblematically and reflexively claim normative status stalls the project of thinking about gender. The seeming solidity of cis, when it is paired with trans, removes complexity from both terms:

> Cis's peculiar ontology erases location and effects through time and space: To preserve the stasis of cis as non-trans, trans must never have been or become cis but instead be consistently trans

across all time and in all spaces.[18]

Terminologies and their relations matter not only to assert presence of groups that may otherwise be overlooked but they also can function as a welcome to others to rethink how they, too, may find gender attributions limiting. Connecting problems with gender inequality with gender identity inequalities opens possibilities for interconnectedness. Humility, open-mindedness, or even uncertainty about gender may help educators and students to think more deeply about their connections and differences across gender identities. In other words, trans theories offer an invitation to join in solidarity to become more thoughtful and active about categories.

Transgender communities have managed to both maintain a commitment to advocate for gender identity respect while maintaining a recognition of the uncertainties of what gender may become. In their careful reworking of gender, transgender theories provide a resource both to communities and individuals who find normative gender insufficient and a model as well for educators who aim to teach with an open mindedness to the potentials of gender. Such theories and practices of gender diversity combine, too, the epistemic justice and relationality of humility, extending an understanding, too, that what others make of their gender identities are in process and change.

These complicated uncertainties and even tentative humilities about gender offer guidance to educators, helping to ensure that communities of all sorts—learning or otherwise—carefully navigate their own self-understanding, are open to multiple experiences of gender identity, and are willing to offer support and solidarity across different kinds of struggle. Such solidarities have shown the development of simultaneously strong convictions that current normative understandings of gender are insufficient and that recognition of diverse claims for creative forms of gender authenticity are necessary. This openness to what gender may become is both the marker of epistemological uncertainty and desire to maintain ethical connection, encouraging new ways of learning beyond where we are and into what we might become.

There are educators who understand category humility and can enact relational humility, of course, but others struggle under newly restrictive laws.

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In some regions, educational institutions, including K-12 and higher education, are getting better at providing people with the opportunity to self-identify in records in ways that are different from their legal identity. Such schools understand that if teachers use rosters that provide a student's name assigned at birth those teachers may be outing students' gender assigned at birth if the student is transgender and passing. Thoughtful educators understand that recognizing their students using their names and pronouns, and pronouncing names correctly, help ensure that classrooms are welcoming. Such gestures of recognition also remind classes that they will meet people who may broaden their understanding not only of gender diversities but ethnic and language diversities as well. Schools that effectively help students and staff to be inclusive are experienced as stronger communities. For instance when schools are accommodating to diversely embodied students and disabled students, all students rate the school community as more supportive to all.[19] Likewise schools that have Gay Straight Alliances/Gender and Sexuality Alliances are rated as safer by LGBTQ+ students and allies even if those students do not belong to group.[20] The point is that rather than determining to define particular students out of membership and participation, as so many state legislatures are currently doing when they ban teaching Critical Race Theory and teaching about gender and sexuality or prohibit teachers from recognizing students names and pronouns, these school create thoughtful communities willing to engage in relational humility and willing to take care against epistemic injustice.

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