

## 269. The academic irrelevance of lived experience

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*This article states the main contention of my presentation at Proximity and distance: a conference on the virtues and limitations of group membership for scholarship, Saturday 10 November 2019, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax.*

A scholar neither gains an advantage in research or teaching nor suffers a disadvantage from being a member of a group that she takes as an object of study. Equally incisive research on a group of people can come from both insiders to the group and outsiders. Equally effective teaching about the group can come from both insiders and outsiders.

Scholars who are members of the people they study might be thought to be in a better position to gain and communicate insights into the object of their investigations than scholars who are not on the grounds that insider scholars have shared the common experiences of the people under study—experiences, perhaps, of oppression, subordination, exclusion, or marginalization. They know what it is like to be one of the people they study, for they are one of them. While I accept the premise of this argument, I do not think the conclusion follows.

Alternatively, scholars who are members of the people they study might be thought to be in a worse position than scholars who are not on the grounds that insiders will have sympathies and concerns for the group and its members that will distort their reading of the evidence. Outsiders to the group will be receptive to evidence from all directions and be inclined to weigh evidence accurately. Again, while I accept the premise of this argument, I do not think the conclusion follows.

If it's true that by virtue of their lived experience, scholars who are members of the groups they study will produce better scholarship or be better teachers than scholars not members of the groups they study, then group membership is an academic criterion, and so may be used in making academic decisions. Now the contention is not so crude as to imply that any work by a scholar belonging to the group will be superior to any work by a scholar not belonging to the group. But it must at least imply that scholars who belong to the group can be expected to produce work more original or insightful (or more original while being no less insightful) than scholars who don't.

The argument that insiders will generally be better scholars or teachers is that a scholar possessed of lived experience of the group knows what it is like to be a member of that group.

This knowledge, in turn, provides the scholar with an understanding of the beliefs and values common to members of the group. From this understanding the scholar can articulate insights into the life and ways of the group that are not available to the outside observer, no matter how sympathetic that observer is or how rich her observations.

The argument fails not because lived experience or knowing what it is like to be a member of the group does not generate ideas that might be true or useful in a scholar's understanding of the people under study. It does. The argument fails, rather, because lived experience or what's it like to be a member of the group is simply raw material for the scholar. The claims the scholar makes on the basis of her lived experience must be evaluated and incorporated in a theory of the people she is trying to understand. If they are not evaluated, they are not believed on the basis of evidence or argument, and if they are not brought together with other ideas, they remain inchoate, inarticulate.

The deliverances of lived experience are, for the scholar herself as well as for scholars not members of the group, part of the subject matter of scholarship, not an instance or product of scholarship. To gain a scholar's understanding, a person must reflect critically on lived experiences, their own and others. The better scholar, the more insightful or comprehensive or incisive scholar, is the one who makes the best scholarly use of the deliverances of live experience.

One might object to my position on the grounds that it rests on the view that understanding is theoretical or linguistic. A person's lived experience is not a theory and not even, primarily, a set of cognitive states. But it may well nonetheless contain an understanding of how things are. The scholar who has this lived experience possesses that understanding, and only a scholar who has that lived experience can possess it. Possessing this visceral though inarticulate understanding provides a strong basis for constructing a scholar's articulate understanding.

Yet even if we grant what I believe to be false, that lived experience contains a pre- or non-verbal understanding of how something is, my argument stands. A pre- or non-verbal understanding is not a scholarly understanding; it is, instead, material to be critically evaluated and used in constructing a scholar's articulate understanding. Indeed, it is not lived experience against which theories can be falsified or verified. Theories can be criticized only against judgements regarding lived experience, not lived experience itself.

What about teaching? Perhaps a teacher who belongs to the group about which she teaches will be better able to communicate the experiences of those people to her students. That might be true, although with imagination and empathy an outsider could also do an excellent job. A better response to this concern about teaching, though, would note that a scholar's task is not to communicate experiences, but instead to communicate understandings of those experiences, understandings with which the students might then engage critically.

Now, being an outsider rather than an insider might be thought to give a scholar an advantage for the outsider will not be tempted, consciously or subconsciously, to downplay evidence that goes against her preferred view or exaggerate evidence that favours it. The insider, on the other hand, cares that her people flourish and this care could easily distort her thinking and her research.

The observation is true, but, importantly, it is hedged with “might”s and “could”s. The insider scholar *could* lose her dispassionate attitude and *might* be partial to the plight and aspirations of her people in such a way as to produce propaganda or succor rather than scholarship. But for a scholar passionately dispassionate, that passion might well compete effectively with whatever other passions move her. There’s no general reason to think that a person’s desire to engage the world as a scholar will lose in competition to any other of her desires.

I’ve argued that group membership and lived experience are irrelevant to scholarship and teaching. A scholar’s group membership or lived experience should be a matter of indifference in all academic decisions, including hiring, promotion, grading, course assignments and distribution of research funds.

But what’s so great about scholarship? Contemporary universities are organized around job training, preparing a professional and managerial elite, instilling proper attitudes toward such things as equity, diversity, anti-racism, inclusion, the economy, and the environment, and producing socially useful research. A university organized around one or another of these ends would not be concerned to protect or promote scholarship. Non-academic grounds might be the appropriate grounds on which to make decisions at such universities. The ethnicity or lived experience of the professor or applicant could, then, be entirely relevant.

Indeed, dispassionate scholarship, according to those who favour the post-academic university, is more trouble than it is worth. A history professor at my university opined in conversation that independent thought is greatly overrated. Better, he suggested, that our students believe truly and value soundly as a result of social pressures than that they believe falsely or value unsoundly for their own articulate and examined reasons. The thoughtful racist with empirical studies is much more dangerous than the fearful, know-nothing social justice warrior. Call-out culture can be brutal, but it gets an important job done.

Group membership and lived experience are irrelevant to scholarship and teaching, for scholarship seeks to construct deep, comprehensive, and articulate understandings of things as they are. But that result is not itself a defence of universities as places of scholarship against the alternatives.