



SERRC

Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Suicidology is for Cutting: Epistemic Injustice and Decolonial Critiques

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White, Jennifer. 2020. "Suicidology is for Cutting: Epistemic Injustice and Decolonial Critiques." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (5): 75-81. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-53F>.

In their seminal piece, “Suicidology as a Social Practice,” Fitzpatrick and colleagues (2015) made a convincing case for why we need a more “critically reflective suicidology,” which adopts “a less prescriptive view of science ... to more fully embrace creative, open-ended methodologies alongside more conventional ones so as to capture the silences and absences of contemporary suicidology” (319). Five years later, in the special issue on critical suicide studies published in *Social Epistemology* (2020), we begin to see the creative and productive potential of alternative philosophical, epistemological, political, and ethical framings of suicide and the practices they make possible.

Suicidology is Ripe for Cutting

In their Introduction, “Knowledge is for Cutting,” co-editors Jaworski and Marsh (inspired by Foucault) ask us to consider critical suicide studies as an “intervention in relation to the unjust epistemic effects generated by suicidology” (3). They suggest that by making cuts into the dominant regime, we can reveal “limits in knowledge, which can offer different ways of theorising, analysing, and envisioning suicide and suicide prevention” (4). Knowledge in the field of suicidology is very often expressed through the confident, unitary, and authoritative language of science (Fitzpatrick 2015). Uncertainties, discontinuities, and disruptions are smoothed over and progress in the field is narrated as a series of progressive milestones and notable (i.e. predominantly white, European, male, scientific) achievements (Spencer Thomas and Jahn 2012). These privileged truths, which are based on scientific and expert knowledge, sit alongside a deep reservoir of exiled and disqualified knowledges (i.e. suicide attempters; youth; mad, racialized, disabled, queer, Indigenous peoples, inhabitants of the global south, etc.) and this is what makes the project of mainstream suicidology ripe for cutting.

Within suicidology, “cutting” most often refers to self-harming practices, which are generally conceptualized as pathological, problematic and a target for professional intervention. And yet, there are alternative (subjugated) meanings, informed by those who engage in self-harm, which can offer some interesting parallels for how we might embrace cutting as an analytic tool in critical suicide studies. For example, in *Self-Injury, Medicine and Society: Authentic Bodies* (2016), Chandler suggests that the people she interviewed who engaged in self-harming practices were at times “... testing out bodily responses and limits in order to discover what [a] body could do” (Chandler 2016, 2). I like to imagine that we, in critical suicide studies, are doing something similar: testing out responses and limits in order to discover what a *body of knowledge* can do. This is potentially risky, mad, liberating and illuminating, all at the same time.

Might this be an example of what Jaworski (2020) has in mind though, when she calls for “an ethic of wonder and generosity,” in the study of suicide? Jaworski draws on Foucault to suggest that suicide itself is an ethical act (i.e. the art/practice of finding out who and what we are). In a creative and unexpected move, she then takes up LeCaze’s (2013) work on ethics, and asks us to consider the ethical postures of *generosity*, which is an expression of surprise at the other’s difference, and *hospitality*, which is a practice of recognition. Jaworski

suggests that wonder and generosity might help us to better understand suicide, without automatically collapsing the suicidal other into an already familiar and known category (i.e. person-at-risk). Through generosity and wonder, expressions of suicide and desires to die would no longer be read through the predictable registers of risk and pathology, but rather, as complicated, contradictory, and relational modes of interacting with, and responding to, multiple circumstances and diverse milieus. In other words, suicide—just like life itself—cannot ever be already known in advance.

The language of wonder and generosity is explicitly relational and open-ended, which implies a co-constituted, mutually negotiated, and inclusive understanding of ethics and meaning-making. This contrasts with the familiar vocabulary of ethical rules and principles which, despite their undeniable importance in protecting against harm, tend to draw on a restricted and privileged view of ethics that locates responsibility for ethical conduct with researchers and clinicians. By ‘cutting’ into our conventional understandings of what it means to ethically respond to suicide, and deeply listening to the voices and testimonies of suicidal persons, Jaworski helps us to catch a glimpse of what else might be possible in this field. This includes “...the gradual reassembling of an alternative style of thought, and alternative way of rendering experience into thought, making encounters with the mental health apparatus and its practices of knowledge and power intelligible in a different way” (Rose 2019, 169). To make this move towards alternative styles of thought, we need to consider how experiences of suicide are currently rendered intelligible through specific knowledge-making practices, cultural vocabularies, and categories of meaning.

Epistemic Injustice

The focus on epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), is touched on in one way or another by all of the contributors to this special issue, and is of particular interest. Alongside Foucault’s (1980) insights regarding power-knowledge and the insurrection of subjugated knowledges, the concept of epistemic injustice offers a useful vantage point from which to analyze and critique the silencing and/or disqualification of certain forms of knowledge in suicidology (e.g. suicide attempters, mental health service users, critical scholars). Analyzing suicidology through the lens of epistemic injustice, helps to expose the structures, prejudices and interpretive resources that are available for making sense of suicide, which tend to unjustly privilege scientific, biomedical, individualistic, and expert narratives.

Marsh (2020) draws on Rimke’s (2016) concept of “psycho-centrism” to describe the dominant mode of thinking in suicidology, which is to the exclusion of other potentially useful framings, including psychopolitical frameworks and analyses (Mills 2017). Cover (2020) shows us how queer and gender non-conforming youth are typically positioned as victims who are at risk for suicide as a result of being “lonely, isolated, and socially excluded” which leads to suicide prevention campaigns that are predicated on narratives of rescue and empowerment. According to Cover, this overly simplistic take is fueled by dated and stereotypic conceptualizations of queer youth that position them as failures at normative social connections and “ignores the powerful potential of considering what kinds of

disconnectedness, disattachment and dis-integration might be involved in positioning some lives as unliveable lives” (2).

Fitzpatrick (2020) draws on Fricker’s (2007) concept of epistemic injustice to analyze contemporary approaches to suicide literacy campaigns. From the development of “safe messaging” campaigns which regulate which/how accounts of suicide can be told in public, to the prominence given to “tropes of perseverance, personal change and patient hope” (Fitzpatrick 2020, 7), we begin to see the way that certain accounts of suicide are legitimized while others are relegated to the margins. This resonates with my own recent experience studying suicide prevention gatekeeper training programs (Ranahan and White 2019; White & Ranahan, 2020) where we noted that programs like this do not so much *address* problems, but rather they *produce* “problems” as particular types of problems (Bacci and Goodwin 2016, 6).

For example, in our study, trainers drew on familiar conceptualizations and identity categories, including “persons-at-risk,” to teach about suicide and how to respond. Persons-at-risk (i.e. suicidal subjectivities) were often constructed as de-contextualized bundles of risk factors whose narratives of suicidal despair were in perfect symmetry with the intervention tools being taught. Suicide prevention education efforts like this typically begin from the premise that suicidal persons do not want to die. This means that suicide literacy campaigns rarely include testimonials that speak to the moral and existential issues underlying a person’s desire to kill themselves (Fitzpatrick 2020). They do not address the social and political conditions leading to deepening social inequities and insurmountable despair. They do not allow for suicide to be taken seriously as a potential solution to a problem of unliveability (Cover 2020; Yampolsky and Kushner 2020).

By persistently converting the ‘person-at-risk’ into a “ready-to-be-acted-upon Other” (Hosking 2008, 676), which is in keeping with the dominant psycho-centric view, suicide prevention efforts typically miss opportunities for collective social actions aimed at creating worlds worth living in, *for all* (White 2019). To make this kind of move, and to introduce another kind of cut, we need to look to concepts and frameworks that are grounded in a different (non-European) worldview and animated by a commitment to decoloniality (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018), epistemic disobedience, (Mignolo 2012) and language justice (polanco 2016).

Praxis of Decoloniality

In order for critical suicide studies to maintain its critical and creative (cutting) edge, we will need to move beyond the (now familiar) critiques of psycho-centrism, positivism, and scientism to mobilize and amplify other voices, worldviews, and interpretive resources to pursue greater epistemic justice in the study of, and response to, suicide. Turning the critical gaze on ourselves, we, in critical suicide studies, will need to recognize our own complicity in reproducing epistemic injustice by continuing to rely so heavily on Euro-western epistemologies and worldviews when making cuts to mainstream suicidology. Through the vital contributions of de-colonial thinkers (Mignolo 2009; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; polanco

2020), who push for “the unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology and affirming the epistemic rights of the racially devalued” (Mignolo 2009,162), we are invited to consider how to think and do otherwise.

Recognizing the symbiotic relationship between modernity and colonialism, a praxis of decoloniality:

... interrupts and cracks the modern/colonial/capitalist/heteropatriarchal matrices of power, and advances other ways of being, thinking, knowing, theorizing, analyzing, feeling, acting and living for us all- the *otherwise* that is the decolonial *for* (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, 10).

Two brief examples of decolonial praxis are offered by Marcela Polanco, a mestiza from Colombia who shows us how decoloniality might be playfully and productively put to work to undermine and unsettle dominant Euro-western assumptions and traditions, with relevance for critical suicide studies.

In the first example, Polanco (2016) describes how she approached the task of attempting to translate narrative therapy (which she learned in English), into her first language, which is Colombian Spanish. Narrative therapy is an explicitly political practice that is theoretically grounded in post-structural theory. It directly challenges dominant, modernist, and normative cultural discourses that lead people to draw thin, problem-saturated identity conclusions about themselves.

In a nutshell, narrative therapists call forth the local knowledge, insights and resources of persons who consult them; situate problems like depression and suicide within broader sociocultural contexts and discourses; support people to re-author their lives in ways that align with their aspirations and preferred futures; and recruit others to witness, circulate and amplify these re-authored stories (White and Epston, 1990). While narrative therapy’s skeptical and irreverent stance towards global, universalizing, expert knowledge shares much in common with decoloniality, at its core, it is grounded in the English language and draws on Euro-western (i.e. post-structural) ideas and critiques. Thus, Polanco quickly concluded that it was not possible to simply translate narrative therapy into Spanish—just as it was not possible to love in English the same way she *amaba* (loved) in Spanish.

In response to this problem of untranslatability, Polanco endeavored to start all over again, with a commitment to “language justice.” She writes: “Starting all over again, I had to search for new words more suitable for the like of the taste buds of my native tongue, Spanish. This required me to leave behind the untranslatable narrative therapy meanings in English where they rightfully belonged” (69). To make this move, she turned to magical realism from her Colombian culture as a way of re-imagining narrative therapy. Taking further inspiration from Colombian novelist *Gabriel García Márquez*, Polanco reminds us that “interpretation of our realities via methods that are not our own only serves to render us more unknown, less free, and more solitary” (70). This is a potent point that is especially relevant for the task of understanding and responding to suicide through decolonial praxis.

In the second example, polanco and colleagues (2020) bring a decolonial critique to contemporary research and knowledge production practices, specifically, qualitative research. Their article, “How to Be Unfaithful to Eurocentrism: A Spanglish Decolonial Critique to Knowledge Gentrification, Captivity and Storycide in Qualitative Research,” seeks to expose and critique the way that Eurocentric (i.e. western, colonial, white) knowledge masquerades as universal, timeless, and objective. As a decolonial critique and form of academic activism (recognizing the inherently contradictory nature of this position), the article locates the analysis within a specific Andean decoloniality, which is informed by scholars and activists from Abya Yala (“Latin America”) and the Caribbean, which distinguishes decoloniality from related post-colonial theories.

One of the aims of the article is to enable readers to hear other possibilities for knowing, that do not take western, Eurocentric knowledge as their point of departure. To accomplish this, the authors adopt an inter-linguistic, vernacular language—Spanglish—which is itself, a decolonial intervention into the Anglo, Eurocentric world of scholarly publishing, while making their ideas accessible to “everyday people living at the borders of differences” (146). Through evocative stories, written excerpts, and painted images, the authors participate in critical, emergent and creative forms of knowledge co-production. Read together, the stories and accounts are generative, lively, full of humanity, and imbued with moral worthiness.

When interpreted through narrow Eurocentric filters for assessing quality and rigor in qualitative research however, their accounts are often disqualified and/or deemed unacceptable as legitimate forms of knowledge production in the academy. In other words, their stories risk undergoing a form of ‘storycide.’ By producing knowledge that is explicitly unfaithful and disobedient towards traditional qualitative epistemologies, their article works as an effective decolonial critique by historicizing and making visible the colonial logics and exclusions that continue to shape much contemporary qualitative research.

Importantly, the authors do not set out to eradicate Eurocentric knowledge, since as Mignolo and Walsh (2018) point out, “Western thought and Western civilization are in most/all of us, but this does not mean a blind acceptance nor does it mean a surrendering to North Atlantic fictions” (3). Pushing for greater epistemological diversity is “a social political project, whereby new conditions are created to transform a new social, economic, political, order of things in response to the exclusion, domination and inequality *de la colonialidad*. It creates an encounter of narratives that come from the otherwise” (polanco et al. 2020, 162).

The commitment to enabling multiple worldviews, interpretations, knowledge-making practices and cultural vocabularies to proliferate and co-exist carries with it the possibility for greater humanity, relationality, freedom, respect, recognition, and solidarity. It allows lives to be lived *on their own terms*, in all their local, glorious, absurd, idiosyncratic and varied forms and expressions. Creating more spaces to listen and learn across “an encounter of narratives that come from the otherwise” is the next move that we need to make in critical suicide studies. This is a call for more expansive and creative thinking about ways to know, live, die, and co-exist with other living beings.

Author Note: I would like to express my deep gratitude to marcela polanco, Marie Hoskins, and Kerry White-Tucker for their incredibly generous and thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts.

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