

‘We are moving away from independent research and thought’: An investigative study of epistemological diversity inside an academic humanities conference

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This study applied an investigative research framework to explore a persistent discourse about the practice of epistemological diversity and inclusion in Canadian higher education. Drawing on pre-conference Zoom seminars with conference administrators over eight months, two main themes became obvious. The role epistemological diversity enjoys inside an academic humanities conference and the fragile and controversial role of epistemological diversity. The study suggests that epistemological diversity in higher education is a contentious practice that could undergo renewal and replacement. Being open to the possible outcomes, the author advances the belief that expanding rather than restricting epistemological diversity in higher education, including academic conferences, can advance a multitude of intelligences, leading to shared problem-solving, tolerance, respect and empathy among diverse peoples.

Keywords: Epistemology; diversity; Canada; higher education; humanities conference; worldview; investigative

INTRODUCTION

This research offers a discussion on the topic of epistemological diversity in higher education. Epistemology is the study of knowledge. Banks (1993) describes the diversity of epistemology as ‘that knowledge people create which is influenced by their interpretations of their experiences and their positions within particular social, economic, and political systems and structures of a society’ (p. 5). ‘Epistemologies’ can also be described as ‘plural systems of knowledges’ or ‘ecology of knowledges’ (De Sousa Santos et al., 2007, p. xxxix). Although the term is generally accepted, ‘epistemological diversity’ can be used differently.

One goal of epistemological diversity is to advance and give justification to a broad range of ideas, beliefs, belief systems, research methodologies, methods of inquiry, research questions, cultural epistemologies, ways of knowing and epistemological perspectives. One outcome of epistemological diversity is to give validation that reflects and reinforces the diversity of beliefs and values of Canadian society. Using epistemological diversity encourages critical thinking and tolerance, promotes a wider range of viewpoints and helps to identify biases in research and knowledge production.

Canada is highly diverse in terms of ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In 2021, Statistics Canada (2021) referred to more than 450 ethnic and cultural groups. As higher education and people in Canada diversify regarding ethnicity, religion, and worldviews, society will continue to be exposed to many epistemologies. In academia, epistemologies are often

referred to as ‘ways of knowing’, which really means there are types of knowledge and knowing., and could involve learning about concepts, ideas or skills from indigenous, scientific, mathematical, historical or spiritual knowledge. The accessibility of knowledge types provides individuals and society with opportunities to learn, consider other perspectives, acquire problem-solving skills, and increase understandings. Consequently, it is reasonable for higher education to prioritise knowledge types and advance epistemologies within an increasingly knowledgeable society. A survey conducted with professors at Canadian universities revealed that the changing knowledge society was more important for students to learn about and engage with today than ever before, with 53% of professors selecting epistemological awareness as their second most important goal as educators in higher education (Dummitt & Patterson, 2022). The higher education system is recognised as essential to Canada’s prosperity, including newcomer integration and civic engagement for learners.

To reflect this reality, there have been changes to higher education research courses, which have included textbooks and publications that explain epistemological diversity in the form of paradigms taught to undergird all phases of the research process (Mertens, 2024), confirming that, for some time, epistemological diversity has been recognised as an integral aspect to the craft of research (Pallas, 2001, p. 6). The concept of paradigms provides the broader context for understanding how knowledge is generated and, most importantly, expressed.

RESEARCH AND EPISTEMOLOGY

With a focus on a social science and humanities conference, research in higher education takes place in one of Canada’s largest educational conferences. Traditionally, higher education has been where people can gather and learn together. People with diverse belief systems and research methodologies congregate, discuss and interact. In general, academic conferences offer attendees established and ongoing research studies, keynote lectures and poster presentations. Therefore, attendees are exposed to diverse epistemologies and research methodologies. This is uncontroversial, as noted by Siegel:

The general thesis that there are many legitimate ways to conduct research is unexceptionable . . . and epistemological diversity is taken to refer to alternative beliefs or belief systems, the phenomenon in question is uncontroversial because all are agreed that beliefs and belief systems do indeed differ.

However, as personal experience suggests, and as this experience reveals, the homogenisation and narrowing of epistemology and research methods at a higher education research conference is less implausible than it might initially appear to those who teach, work and present research in the context of educational conferences and associations in Canada.

METHODOLOGY: INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH (IR)

My account as a representative for a scholarly association at a conference led me to utilise investigative research to explore this topic. Investigative research (IR) describes information about a specific subject, or in this case, an incident that may not be apparent to those directly or indirectly involved in the topic under investigation. IR searches out the influence of those parts frequently overlooked by other approaches.

This study involves an incident with elements of special interest to IR. First, IR requires investigators with a genuine interest in the phenomena and are motivated to understand the incident or event (Stake, 1995). My interest in a social science and humanities conference in

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higher education is due to my identity and experience as a research-educator who regularly collaborates with various faculty working inside and outside higher education.

IR links data to propositions and builds explanations and direct interpretations from the data. Stake (1995) describes direct interpretation as its own type of analysis. Yin (2003) notes that a critical practice during the analysis phase of IR is returning to the propositions under investigation and conducting focused analysis. The proposition I return to, discuss and analyse concerns the following: 'We are moving away from independent research and thought'.

As a final note, investigative research requires an investigative site that places the issue in sharp relief. It should be a site to which the researcher has direct access. Since I am investigating an incident and phenomenon that occurred at a social science conference in the humanities in Canada and a conference in which I am intimately involved, I am better able to evaluate the processes in my local setting and investigate a central proposition and potential social changes that could influence the social science conference in terms of epistemological diversity and research methods.

THE PRE-CONFERENCE ZOOM SEMINARS

My personal experience as vice president of a participating scholarly association that offers presentations, panels, workshops and cultural events to stakeholders in higher education makes it possible to discuss the incident with some experience and accuracy.

I participated in and contributed to pre-conference Zoom seminars over eight months with conference administrators in Canadian higher education.¹ The pre-conference Zoom meetings were in preparation for a humanities and social sciences conference in the month of June 2023. According to the Conference website (York U, 2023), the annual conference is the 'largest academic gathering in Canada and one of the largest in the world'.

In 2023, the conference registered 10,300 attendees, with 67 academic associations represented. During the pre-conference meetings, the organisers supplied structural information to all the key association representatives, who would later be asked to communicate the information to their association members and conference attendees. One of the instructions to be transmitted to all association members was to inform researchers and presenters that we were 'moving away from independent research and thought'.

The conference representatives spoke of this as the 'conference vision'. They challenged all Zoom attendees to consider what steps they could take to assist their association members in adopting this change of position. The two areas that would undergo the most change were *independent research* and *independent thought*. The following instruction is verbatim: 'We are moving away from independent research and thought'.²

This was not a one-time instruction. Instead, conference representatives gave the instruction during every meeting over the eight months leading up to the conference. No one present on the Zoom calls (except the author of this paper) appeared to display any surprise that a

¹ This is not a criticism of any conference administrators, but a critique of the recommendations issued regarding future researching.

² Please note, there were no details offered to attendees about what preceded the decision to adapt a change of position involving independent research and thought.

humanities and social science conference in higher education would recommend researchers, scholars and attendees to ‘move away from independent thought and research’.

Moreover, no discussion or question time was provided to answer or clarify misconceptions or questions, such as why this was a significant change to promote. As noted, the statement was delivered at the start of every Zoom meeting with no invited response and no opportunity in any format made available for attendees to discuss or review how this could be achieved.

This lack of surprise and the experience itself is worth a discussion. For generations, the epistemic tradition of independent thought and research in higher education has dominated knowledge production. It has become fixed in not only the academic consciousness but also the public consciousness. Moving *away* from independent thought and research would be a substantial paradigm shift that would restrict potential research programs, conference dialogues, methodologies and the application and funding of grant applications. For these reasons alone, its potential outcomes are worth examining.

EDUCATION: HOMOGENEITY AND HETEROGENEITY

The directives given during the pre-conference meetings suggest future epistemological changes in higher education are on the horizon. If the changes were to be administered, there would be fundamental changes to research practices in terms of epistemological autonomy, diversity, and, of course, epistemic inclusion. My first thought was how this might prevent researchers, educators, learners, colleagues and my research projects from proceeding in ways vastly different to proven and established research and learning goals that have been ongoing for years.

The proposition is perplexing because Canadian higher education is already increasingly diverse regarding student identities, ethnicities, religious affiliations, and worldviews. Therefore, the question remains how epistemic diversity and research can be practised in the academy, including independent study and thought.

The consequence of not safeguarding epistemic diversity, including independent thought and research, is obvious. For example, in Canada, since the release of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action* in 2015, recent initiatives to broaden ‘ways of knowing’ in the academy and indigenise higher education have led to a commitment by Canadian higher education to expand epistemologies and methodologies. However, as Gandry and Lorenz (2018) observed, higher education institutions have not taken this seriously; instead, they have focused on identity inclusion, a policy that aims to increase the number of identities in higher education in terms of students, faculty and staff, but epistemology diversity or other ways of knowing besides Western epistemologies have yet to occur beyond the theoretical.

The result is there is no or very minimal wholesale epistemological overhaul of the academy to fundamentally broaden and reorient knowledge production. Consequently, epistemic diversity has contributed minimally to higher education because higher education acts as the gatekeeper for what counts as knowledge—genuine or valuable, which has led to a surface level and add-on approach to ‘other ways of knowing’. As St. Denis notes, ‘We need the perspectives and knowledge, not just the beads and feathers’ (St Denis, 2011, p. 36). Canadian historian Jean Barman (2012) explains the error in Canadian education policy by making the mistake of assuming the sameness of people groups. Similarly, the government viewed Indigenous groups and nations as a single ‘object’ or people to be acted upon by restricting independent thought and research. Knowledge and research are homogenised when an epistemological ‘straitjacket’

is placed on what counts as 'legitimate'. Indeed, we can learn from our Indigenous history and act wisely to prevent a return to the suppression of knowledge production.

One example of the demand to narrow knowledge production in education is taken from the Canadian lawyer Sheldon Chumir.³ He believed in a homogeneous public education, which was designed, he argued, 'to mix children of different ethnic and religious groups and eliminate those differences' (Bateman, 1988, p. 8). Although Chumir is correct in supposing that one goal of public education is fraternity, the problem here is when diverse communities are regulated to epistemological conformity that is not genuinely fraternal.

Suppose an organisation insists that independent research and thought should have less importance in the spirit of unity. What if collective knowledge practices turn out to be incorrect or harmful? This does happen, and there are examples of collectivist thought practices becoming government policy, such as with the Sami Parliament in Northern Finland, which represents the Sami as a collective people but limits their culture and identity to speaking the language fluently.⁴ Moreover, collectivist research practices promote epistemological uniformity if they oppose the locally diverse epistemologies of marginalised communities and individuals.

Is the way forward in higher education to disparage epistemological differences or ones we do not like in favour of a predominant view? This has occurred recently in fiery school board meetings in the United States, where epistemological disagreements between school boards and parents have become epistemological combat zones.

Eradicating or reducing independent thought or research has a greater chance of lessening critical thinking skills. Epistemological uniformity generates a learning environment where conformity is the outcome. Epistemological democracies require that people be interested and adequately skilled to engage productively with each other. Without communication skills and dispositions, it seems inevitable that a hostile environment will develop between epistemological groups. Civil society is threatened when ignoring knowledge differences and practices becomes the norm.

While Canadian higher education has theoretically supported independent critical thinking, the collective and independent intelligences of cultural, religious and Indigenous epistemologies continue to advance slowly or sometimes superficially.

THE IDEA OF EPISTEMOLOGY DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

What is the purpose of higher education in terms of epistemological diversity, intellectual inquiry and research? Since the birth of the modern Western university, the idea of the academy has been a vigorous promoter of independent thought, research, intellectual inquiry and critical thinking. This is one of the reasons why 'critical thinking is associated with the goals of higher education' (Dunne, 2015, p. 89).

Higher education acts as a producer of knowledge; however, the interpenetration of what higher education is today in terms of knowledge production and the wider society is nuanced. One

³ Sheldon Chumir was a prominent member of the Alberta legislature, who led a campaign in the 1980s against alternatives in public schools because he held that isolating children in segregated schools would cause intolerance.

⁴ This is based on research I have been conducting in Northern Finland with the Sami people.

reason is that higher education today has many ‘faces’. Consider the types of higher education available that provide instruction:

- Research-led internationally respected universities,
- Community colleges that conduct no research,
- Corporate universities,
- Global universities,
- Virtual universities.

Due to their distinct structure and focus, some types of higher education emphasise theoretical and academic learning, while others prioritise accessibility, applied learning and practical skills for specific professions.

Even in times of political turmoil, higher education concerned itself— at least in theory, with autonomy, the pursuit of learning and knowledge, and exercising academic freedom. For example, between the 13th and 16th centuries, academics at the University of Paris, although strife with political influence and power struggles, still defended their autonomy and initiative. In more modern times, there are examples of epistemic independence and critical thinking in higher education. In 2023, the University of Edinburgh noted its commitment to students for the exercise of critical thinking, epistemological independence and initiative:

Developing critical thinking skills is essential to your success at university and beyond. We all need to be critical thinkers to help us navigate our way through an information-rich world.

With the explosion of information in the digital age, higher education held itself to the highest standards for critical inquiry, open-mindedness and learning through diverse perspectives and knowledge. Although there have been examples in history where this has not been the case, the idea of *higher* education has been to encourage low conformity and independent thinking, which have been the crucial traits and desired outcomes of liberal thinking in higher education. Consequently, there is an expectation that independent critical thought will be exercised. Students question everything, are exposed to other epistemologies, including assumptions and conclusions, and even question the question. In fact, as an institute of *higher* learning, education is the home and sponsor of critics, although it is not itself the critic.⁵

Even in the 18th century, John Locke (1800), a British Enlightenment scholar, argued against what he called ‘the legal coercion of knowledge’ and placed a tremendous premium upon the individual’s independence to search for truth. Those privileged to graduate from a university value our exposure to other worldviews and epistemologies besides our own. We begin with a narrow mind and finish with an open, more educated one.

If epistemological diversity and open-mindedness are or at least should be a shared feature of the higher education experience, tolerance and empathy are its by-products since empathy starts with a level of curiosity. Empathy helps people to inquire, investigate, ask questions and move value judgments aside as they place themselves in the ‘shoes’ of another. Although it is challenging to execute, the goal remains. In its classical sense, tolerance acknowledges preserving other ways to know and live. Moreover, tolerance creates an environment where beliefs can have their day, as it were (see, e.g., the defence of freedom of speech by the language

⁵ Perhaps the most famous defence of the principle was offered by Chicago’s Kalven at the University of Chicago during the height of the Vietnam War. The Kalven report, a 1967 document by the University of Chicago, urges neutrality on behalf of institutions to ensure free and open debate.

philosopher John Stuart Mill (1859/1993)). Therefore, epistemological diversity and tolerance are necessary for truth to advance and untruths to recede.⁶

The *Theory of Mind* (TOM) is a principle of learning regularly introduced to students in their early years of higher education. TOM is related to epistemological diversity because it requires learners to draw on their intellectual skills to unlock awareness of other beliefs, desires, hopes and worldviews that differ from their own. TOM encourages learners to engage in epistemological networks, so the many ways of researching, teaching and learning are open to discussion and investigation. In other words, TOM expects diverse epistemologies to be present because they can unlock an intellectual powerhouse of ideas to solve problems and help learners respond to diversity with a posture of learning and empathy to counter intolerance and intellectual egotism.

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH AND SHARED THINKING

There is no question that collaborative research and a community of practice are essential for higher education. Research suggests that researchers become increasingly cautious, less creative and risk-averse in a wholly autonomous environment (Kummerfeld & Zollman, 2016). Moreover, collaborative research practices, such as interdisciplinary research practices involving multiple researchers, have the potential to transcend traditional sector boundaries and build authentic and healthy relationships between academia and marginalised communities. Also, research suggests that 'unfree' research organisations have produced autonomous research while free research societies can be appropriated to serve political and economic interests (Jost et al, 2003). Finally, collaborative research practice can solve complex local problems with local co-designed solutions, which is becoming less common as higher education brands themselves as global institutions.

One example of community practices in research is when investigators work alongside marginalised communities and ensure, to the greatest extent possible, that these communities have their 'voice' heard in all stages of the research and decision-making process, including the final 'product'. This *community-based participatory research* is a collaborative process between communities and academic investigators and is essential for cultivating trust and virtues.⁷ This is because virtues are primarily generated by a community and not just by one individual. Collaborative research and shared thinking are vital in quality research and methodological decision-making.

ADVANCING SHARED DECISION-MAKING: THE CHALLENGES

It is also possible that enthusiasm for moving away from independent research by increasing collective thought and research methodologies might be an innocent and worthy commitment to advancing shared decision-making and ideas while using scarce resources wisely. If so, this

⁶ John Stuart Mill argued that although we do not now inflict so much evil on those who think differently from us, as it was formally our custom to do so . . . our merely social intolerance kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men (sic) to disguise them.

⁷ Cultivating virtues can occur within the classical Greek cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom, which differ from the Christian theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Jewish virtues recognise six virtues: justice, truth, peace, loving-kindness, compassion and self-respect. Buddhism lists three virtues: detachment, mindfulness and pity.

is a noble and praiseworthy goal that would have the support of the majority of those involved in higher education. However, significant challenges may incur more losses than gains.

First, wholesale changes in education are often homogenising, one common feature that frequently runs through attempts at educational restructuring. A wholesale move away from independent thinking and research might be ‘fashionable’ in the humanities but is epistemologically discriminatory if the goal is to apply a particular uniform epistemology and method to everything and everyone while silencing epistemological ‘non-conformists’. Consequently, educational reforms can normalise monolithic imaginations and decrease the freedom of critical thought and the discovery of new ideas and perspectives.

Normalising monolithic imaginations ensures that the humanities do not give the types of knowledge that a community hopes to get from them. An inquiring community of learners should never put all their ‘eggs into one epistemological basket’. A variety of knowledge approaches can create the best possible scenario for learning because it captures and includes a broader array of intelligences. For this to occur, epistemologies need to expand, not decrease, so that individuals are free to think, teach and research.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS: CULTURAL COMMONS AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL SELF-EXAMINATION

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Indigenous author Robin Kimmerer (2020) describes how using two different epistemologies, which she describes as ‘two-eyed seeing’, provides a way to investigate life in all its fullness through the ‘eye’ of Indigenous knowledge and the ‘eye’ of the Western scientific lens. Kimmerer allows both ‘eyes’ to join forces to study nature and the world. In this way, knowledge is pursued ‘through the stream of the inner space in unison with all instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing’ (Ermine, cited in Battiste & Barman, p. 108). Research with young children has revealed that a ‘two-eyed’ seeing methodology encourages an awareness of other ways of knowing and locates children to their local contexts (Acharibasam & McVittie, 2021).

The following ideas are recommended for all knowledge institutions that brand themselves as diverse, equal and inclusive. The learning goal is for traditional, cultural, religious, scientific and Indigenous epistemologies to coexist as reputable and reliable intelligences for studying, solving, explaining, recognising, while acknowledging epistemic pluralism (Simpson, 2000).

The cultural commons

Epistemological diversity and promoting ‘cultural commons’ have much in common. They both add significant value in allowing different hermeneutical horizons of experience and reservoirs of local knowledge. The ‘commons’ includes the ‘intergenerational knowledge systems, skills and patterns of mutual support that local communities have enjoyed for generations’ (Bowers, 2011, p. 128). The ‘commons’ thrive on knowledge, communal life, partnerships, local resources, materials and ideals. As the natural environment of which humans are part, the ‘commons’ are open sites of shared cultural and intellectual exchange, and social and biological diversity matrices, which are all vital to the flourishing of people and the planet. The knowledge that is overlooked, exploited, unseen, unheard or untrusted by mainstream culture is respected, heard and seen within the ‘cultural commons’. This is especially important in higher education, where students move across cultural contexts.

Since people can be different together, the ‘commons’ open the door to others and to agency and knowledge sovereignty. As Xu (2021) observes, there are three forms of being together:

Unity in diversity, Harmony with diversity and Together with diversity. Harmony in diversity best reflects the 'cultural commons' because this framework recognises differences and rejects a 'melting pot' approach; people do not merge into one but instead complement and enrich each other in various ways, such as the sharing and allocating skills and knowledge.

The educational philosopher and author Maxine Greene (1988) advocates the 'commons' as having the potential to create authentic public spaces where diverse human beings can appear before one another. In the late 1950s, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958) hoped a similar approach could lead humans to become the best they know how to be. Such places of epistemological sharing require the provision of opportunities for articulating multiple perspectives in multiple idioms, out of which something shared can be brought into being.

For a humanities conference, the 'commons' can provide a space for people to listen, share and interact with different methodologies and perspectives. This implies that independent researchers and thinkers who have examined phenomena and gathered data as individuals will share as compatible beings who study and collect data to pursue what is true and good.

The practice of 'cultural commons' and epistemic diversity fulfils the objective of minimising acrimony toward unvalued epistemologies. The advantage of the 'commons' for a humanities conference is that it counters globalised knowledge and returns knowledge to local contexts. The 'commons' counters epistemological sameness so that researchers and participants do not ignore diverse epistemological and research methodologies but engage with individuals and learning community groups as open, tolerant and curious learners.

Epistemological self-examination

Educational institutions, conferences and institutions of higher education in Canada have a unique mission: to promote a search for and foster rational, diverse and open inquiry.⁸ When this is not the case, the consequences can be diabolical.

In January 1939, the minister of education summoned a professor at the University of Berlin and notified him that he could no longer teach there. The reason was that 'when the state itself has a worldview, there can be no room for a chair of Catholic *Weltanschauung* (worldview) at the University' (Krieg, 1998, p. 457-474). This is one example of the consequences of epistemological and methodological bias.

Therefore, a central action for Canadian higher education should be fostering knowledge diversity by encompassing epistemologies and the many cultural groups that compose Western Canadian culture. To establish epistemological diversity, the practice of worldview 'interrogation' offers a foundational approach to exploration. Sepie (2018) describes the practice:

A worldview interrogation can uncover epistemological assumptions that are not shared by others . . . what worldview interrogation does is provoke a reflexive stance on truth that reveals its constructed nature and situates this truth as a cultural product that can then be revised through different kinds of comparative activities. (p. 85)

Educators and learners examine deeply held epistemologies, which 'involves becoming aware of those origin stories that are working behind the scenes to inform our reality' (Sepie, 2018, p.

⁸ I take this to be true and self-evident based on Canadian Universities agreement and commitment to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action* (2015). The first word 'truth' is not there by accident.

86). As an epistemological examination, worldview interrogation would include how stronger parties tend to impose their worldview on others. It can be a resource for understanding and analysing conflicts when differences divide groups, and it can be the seedbed from which new shared meanings emerge.

The British educator Robert Jackson (2004) understood that with the increase of inter-communal, inter-worldview tension, ‘life itself is no longer a private matter and so what people believe and how they think about the world and issues in the world matter’ (p. 139). Encouraging researchers to share their diverse individual beliefs that inform their research practices and epistemologies in educational settings benefits a tolerant society because everyone has a better chance of becoming conversant with its language.

Concerns that an independent researcher who works in ‘isolation’ has no checks or balances to correct biases and disregards relationship building with others must assume that standard research ethical protocols are not being followed. Yet, standard research ethical protocols already pertain to researchers, which include checks such as obtaining informed consent from participants, voluntary participation, using pseudonyms to protect personal identities, seeking independent reviews of the research, being transparent with personal bias, obtaining research approval, correction and amendment, and, if requested by research participants, eliminating data voiced by contributors as obtained during interviews or observations in the field.

An epistemological self-examination begins with an understanding that all worldviews are situated to privilege epistemology in a particular way. As such, all worldviews are subjective and prone to epistemological bias; however, bias is seldom the problem. Instead, the difficulty is a lack of knowledge that research paradigms are political and researchers operate in a complex and political environment with legislation frequently driven by specific paradigms.

An independent search for truth also acknowledges that epistemologies, which are a feature of any worldview, can offer solutions for complex real and imagined problems. Therefore, researchers should not neglect their independent research programs but, instead, follow standard ethical research protocol, be transparent in their research aims and methodologies, and commence with an investigation of personal biases and privileged epistemologies.

To diversify and broaden epistemology, one removes the cultural assumptions and structures that dominate the assumptions of teaching, learning and research and restructures it to include diverse ways of knowing. However, diversifying epistemology is not always straightforward because it is human nature to diversify using the same logic, dynamics and paradigms that birthed it in the first place (Opara, 2021). In other words, we must be aware of our biases and be vigilant not to use any one favoured epistemology or method to diversify.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study used investigative research to explore experiences in higher education over several months, focusing on the practice of epistemological diversity and inclusion in a Canadian humanities conference. A proposition given by conference organisers to all research participants was: ‘We are moving away from independent research and thought’. Although the statement might appear uncontroversial, the independence to research and present research independently at a Canadian humanities conference has been flagged by conference organisers as problematic.

It has been suggested that during humanities conferences, people gather with epistemic diverse individuals within a higher framework of thought. Attendees and presenters are often motivated individuals who research, think critically, discuss and question, argue and engage with life's

'big ideas'. If independent thinking is encouraged within ethical guidelines, people can learn from and consider, correct, amend and confirm a diversity of ideas they may have never encountered. Consequently, the question of why a Canadian research conference in higher education would disapprove of any well-established epistemology or ethical research method is important to pursue.

If moving away from independent thought and research intends to increase engagement with disadvantaged and vulnerable communities and form trusting quality relationships, which is valuable and important, is this approach the best way to do so? There will always be examples where independent researchers have formed trusting and respectful connections and relationships with individuals and groups and marginalised and local communities. The more pressing point for higher education and academic conferences is adhering to ethical research practices. Ethical research strives to eliminate or expose personal bias and mitigate researcher power over the researched. Ethical research promotes truth-telling, integrity and the non-interference of a researcher's prospects to pursue new avenues of research and criticise existing views (Resnik, 1998, p. 114).

Protective structures have already been built into research practice, such as informed consent, non-maleficence, honesty, trust, transparency, and always factoring in potential abuse and vulnerability. These are standard protective gateways for researchers and participants.⁹

Consequently, moving away from independent thought and research is unnecessary and undermines the academy's goal of promoting critical thinking and following the evidence wherever it leads. Promoting a broad epistemological and methodological range that includes independent thinking and research can lead to a society that benefits from a collection of combined intelligences.

If reducing epistemic and research diversity is aimed at minimising researchers' power over marginalised and representative groups (Code et al., 2012), one way to control this is to increase ways of collecting knowledge to challenge epistemic dominance.

It is time to begin a serious discussion about how, as diverse human beings, we can, at a bare minimum, tolerate other epistemologies that are not our own. To work towards acquiring this skill and disposition, Canadian institutions of higher education can prepare people to draw on independent and collective intelligences to solve complex epistemological problems. To do this, intellectual humility is necessary, a reminder that no one person or group is omniscient—we can all learn from others. Within pluralistic communities, harnessing diverse epistemologies benefits educators and students by allowing them to use a broader range of abilities, perspectives, worldviews and talents. Fostering epistemic humility is a central part of civic and academic higher education. Whether one holds a minority or a majority position, we are all epistemic peers in an epistemic democracy (Knight et al., 2016, p.144).

Epistemological and research diversity is critical for preparing people to live in this world. As Wildemeersch et al. (1998, p. 255) note, individuals change by being exposed to different configurations in community relationships. As individuals interact across different communities, they bring meanings from one group to another, challenging the new group's

⁹ The Canadian panel on research ethics for research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada notes that research should involve indigenous worldviews and researchers are to work with indigenous people and communities and not *on* them. See, https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/tcps2-eptc2_2018_chapter9-chapitre9.html

definition of reality. Beliefs should not be determined by the other because, in a relationship, both constantly shift through interactions in a continuous process of dialogue and cooperation (Wildemeersch et al., 1998, p. 95).

This investigative case study explored the idea that diversity comes in many forms, and epistemology is a type of diversity that is sometimes neglected but should be applied to higher education and humanities conferences. With an increasing movement of people to Canadian educational institutions, there are a plethora of epistemologies and research methods to appreciate, understand, interact with, employ and evaluate. Institutes of education have been under inspection to reflect this reality as inclusive places where all people can contribute to the common good of living well together.

Consequently, epistemological pluralism is unavoidable, considering the different conceptions of the *good* that pervade individuals, groups and society today. Moreover, epistemological diversity can also offer a way for people to recognise the different conflicts resulting from a knowledge society that promotes human rights and equal, inclusive and universal access to all knowledge creation (Culp et al., 2022). Furthermore, if epistemological conflict cannot be experienced in higher education, a common and often necessary aspect of academic inquiry and learning, where can it be experienced? People will simply move ‘underground’, where misinformation has a greater chance of spreading, causing intolerance towards not only beliefs but people themselves. Moving away from independent thinking is inconsistent with a practice of cultural inclusiveness set within multi-diverse societies. History has shown what happens when people and their worldviews are ignored and restricted. Researchers, educators and the public must engage with one another because epistemological illiteracy is sure to fail (Horsthemke, 2017, p. 2).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE INITIATIVES

The good news is that with the goal and practice of diversity and inclusion in education, there has been, at least, a theoretical awakening within higher education for epistemological independence. For instance, the University of Chicago now offers a ‘Center for Freedom of Expression’ that includes research and training on free speech.¹⁰ Moreover, broadening epistemologies, such as cultural and spiritual understanding, is considered acceptable and valuable within a higher education experience. More institutions of higher education are recognising that epistemological diversity lends itself to more profound knowledge, intelligence and confidence since it replicates an increasingly diverse world.

Researchers who believe that the ‘exclusion of experts is a conscious sacrifice of epistemic quality’ also believe that excluding independent thought is a conscious sacrifice of epistemic quality, which, as noted, reduces a broad range of epistemological intelligences needed to solve problems. If epistemic justification is needed to support epistemological democracy, then excluding independent thought is just as un-diverse and undemocratic as excluding citizens (Samaržija, 2019, p. 1-138).

Educational conferences offer spaces for participants of diverse backgrounds and worldviews. They provide spaces for people to deliberate, negotiate, advocate, agree, disagree and compromise in the messy but essential processes of living life together. It is valuable to include the thoughts of American pragmatist John Dewey (1916, 1938/1965), who perceived public education as a “laboratory of democracy” implied that laboratories of democracy, which

¹⁰ See, ‘Centre for Freedom of Expression’ in the works at University of Chicago’, <https://www.thecollegefix.com/center-for-freedom-of-expression-in-the-works-at-university-of-chicago/>

includes individual autonomy and freedom of speech, must include epistemological diversity. Schools of learning have a duty to prepare their students for cultures that are more diverse than uniform. In a rapidly diverging and polarised world, where power structures and social inequalities rise, common sense should dictate practices that advance epistemological diversity and reconciliation rather than rivalry (Kromydas, 2017).

This study supports the belief that higher education should advance epistemological diversity. Moreover, humanities conferences offer the public a unique higher education experience where different perspectives can be aired openly and collegially, serving individual intellectual development that can foster the highest-quality debate on our time's most pressing and complex issues.

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