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## **REFLECTIONS ON A DISPUTE ABOUT ‘RACIALLY-JUST EPISTEMOLOGIES AND METHODOLOGIES THAT DISRUPT WHITENESS’<sup>1</sup>**

[...] previously, one's adversary, as the representative of a certain political-social position, was accused of conscious or unconscious falsification. Now, however, the critique is more thoroughgoing in that, having discredited the total structure of his consciousness, we consider him no longer capable of thinking correctly. (Mannheim 1936:61-2)

I want to examine some questions arising from a dispute prompted by a recent special issue of this journal. While a minor local incident, I believe the questions raised are of considerable significance for academic social science at the present time. They concern the criteria by which candidate contributions to academic journals should be judged; as well as, much more generally, what is the legitimate goal of academic inquiry. In recent times, these have become increasingly contentious matters, particularly in the context of qualitative research.

### **Chronology of the dispute**

The disagreement discussed here arose from the decision of the Journal to have a special issue focused on ‘racially-just epistemologies and methodologies that disrupt whiteness’. While I was a member of the editorial board, I did not attend the meeting at which this decision was made (I am a very poor attender of editorial board meetings). Subsequently, I provided a detailed response to the editors about the draft call for papers relevant to this special issue (I had provided responses to earlier proposals for special issues, though not of the same length). I raised questions about what the term ‘racially-just epistemologies and methodologies’ means, and about some of the assumptions that appeared to underly what was proposed.

The call went ahead unchanged in its fundamentals and, given this, I decided to submit a paper for the special issue that would deal with many of the questions I thought ought to be addressed. The abstract for this paper was accepted, entitled ‘Can epistemologies and methodologies be racially unjust? The case of Allison Davis and cultural deprivation’, and I submitted the full paper before the deadline (Hammersley 2020).

As a member of the editorial board, I reviewed two other papers submitted for the special issue, one of which I recommended be rejected, the other to be sent back for major revision – though I also expressed fundamental reservations even about this paper: It seemed to take for granted much that needed supporting argument. The editors’ decision on the first paper was to accept it subject to major revisions, while the second was accepted subject to minor revisions. The first paper was not resubmitted, but when the second came back in revised form the authors had responded to the comments from other reviewers but not to mine. Prompted by me, the editors of the journal sent it back to the authors and asked them to respond to my comments as well. When they did, their response was that, since they had a different ‘onto-epistemological position’, there was no need to offer counter-arguments to the specific points I had made. Instead, they simply quoted extracts from what I had said as exemplifying what they rejected. They claimed that the differences between us were ‘irreconcilable’ and outside the scope of their paper; and that my ‘standpoint’ informed my ‘personal opinion of “valid data”’, so that my concern about inadequate evidence did not require a response. The

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<sup>1</sup> Submitted to the International Journal of Research and Method in Education in October 2022, and rejected in January 2023 without being sent out for review.

stated reason why they judged the issues I had raised to be beyond the scope of their paper was that the ‘methodologies’ they had relied on had been ‘thoroughly vetted by the academy as reliable, valid and trustworthy’. In other words, since they were able to appeal to a literature that shared their commitments, there was no need to justify these in the paper. Because there had not been specific responses offered to the questions I had raised, and since in my view it still had fundamental defects, I recommended rejection of this paper. The other reviewer recommended acceptance, declaring ‘Kudos to these authors for their pushback to reviewer 1’. (The paper was subsequently included in the published special issue.)

My own paper was rejected by the editors on the grounds that it was ‘unsuitable for the special issue’ and was ‘not a good fit for the theme of the SI’. One reviewer had described the paper as ‘fascinating’, but suggested that ‘I am not sure that the paper would fit in the special edition – although the issues it raises about methodology and epistemologically being racially just or unjust are relevant’ and they also raised questions about the ‘historical’ focus on Davis’s work. They concluded: ‘I think that more of an argument should be made for the author’s view [...] that research should not be used as a form of political activism. There are plenty of people who would vigorously challenge that view’ [I should point out that references were included in my paper to publications where a defence of this view could be found – the methodological writings of Max Weber (1949), and some of my own]. The other reviewer said the paper was ‘interesting’, ‘well-written’, and provides ‘important insights’, and commented ‘I do agree with the author that a simplistic analysis of what is or isn’t racially just research is problematic’. However, this reviewer also went on to say: ‘It just doesn’t seem critical, but, rather, quite detached from the topic’, questioned the focus on Davis and complained about insufficient citation of more recent relevant material. He or she ended with the following: ‘Several CRT scholars describe activism as an important goal of racially just research. And, several contemporary scholars are arguing that CRT is not active enough – doesn’t go far enough – isn’t practical enough for the needs of education and society. Educational research is meant to be practical. The author dismissing this aspect of racially just research reveals that they are not familiar with this large literature in CRT in the field of education. This paragraph seems to conflict with the goal of this special issue’. [Again, a brief comment: I am quite familiar with the literature on CRT, but don’t find some of the arguments there convincing. Also, I don’t believe that all educational research should be ‘practical’, in the sense apparently intended; nor would a substantial number of other education researchers.]

Informally, I asked the editors for some elaboration of the reasons for the rejection decision, since the reviewers’ comments seemed to imply ‘major revision’ rather than ‘rejection’, and because it seemed to me that my paper *did* fit the topic, that the choice of references and illustration could be justified, and that it looked as if the paper had been rejected primarily because it did not accept without question the assumptions built into the notion of ‘racially just epistemologies and methodologies’. I also indicated that I believed there could be grounds for a formal appeal since the character of the paper had been evident in the abstract; had the abstract been rejected, time spent writing the paper could have been saved. The gist of the response from the editors of the special issue was: ‘we invited this contributor’s full submission for the same reason we accepted the others-- because we thought that it might expand existing knowledge around racially-just research methodologies. We agree with the reviewers that his manuscript does not do this’. They go on to state ‘we believe that this paper is an attempt to subvert the entire aim of the special issue, not complement it’. And they suggest that ‘the request for appeal actually undermines the peer-reviewing process’. Following this, I contacted the journal editors asking whether they endorsed this response, pointing out that an appeal process is available to anyone, according to the Journal’s website. They replied that they

did not endorse the response. However, subsequently, when I requested an update on developments, I was told by the lead editor that: ‘The practice for IJRME in SIs has been for many years that the SI editors choose the papers’, and ‘ultimately I support the peer review process in all its vagaries and therefore the SI editor choices’. There was, however, an offer to consider my paper for a subsequent issue of the Journal, and I took this up. This eventually resulted in an offer to publish the paper subject to ‘minor revisions’. (An earlier version of the present paper was shared with the editors soon after initial rejection of my paper.)

At publication, the special issue took up two issues of the Journal, each with an Introduction by one of the special issue editors. The Introduction to the first part (Rizvi 2022a) expressed hope for progress in educational research, this presented as amounting to the emergence and recognition of new epistemologies and methodologies associated with subaltern racial and ethnic groups. It was implied in this Introduction that any criticism of these new approaches amounted to racism, with Republican challenges to Critical Race Theory in the US used as an example. Not only was no attempt made to state the grounds for claiming that these new epistemologies and methodologies are epistemically superior to existing ones, but any criticism was pre-emptively dismissed as reflecting prejudice, as a failure to ‘unlearn’, on the part of the critic. I wrote a Comment in response to this Introduction and submitted it for publication. This was initially rejected by the editors of the Journal on the grounds that members of the editorial board should not criticise special issues since these had been agreed by the Board and collective responsibility should hold. However, it was later sent out for review. [Seven months later, it was rejected on the basis of 6 reviews, two of which seemed to have recommended publication, the others presumably rejection. Some of the reviewers’ comments were inaccurate, and most of the criticism of the paper was ad hominem, rather than engaging with the points raised. I had also submitted an earlier version of the present paper to the Journal. This was rejected a few days after the Comment, having been with the Journal for three months, but apparently not sent out for review. The rejection letter stated that, given that the Comment had ‘been rejected following a robust review process’, and since this paper ‘is more detailed but makes many similar and certainly related points [...] the editors took the decision not to send [it] for review’.]

The Introduction to the second part of the special issue, which appeared some months after the first, had much the same character. Quoting Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), the author insisted that ‘we cannot draw boundaries between “inquiries into ways of knowing” from “inquiries into ways of intervening in the world with the purpose of attenuating or eliminating the oppression, domination, and discrimination caused by global capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy” (p. 238)’ (Rizvi 2022b:323). There is acknowledgement that some researchers may criticise the new epistemologies and methodologies as ‘not only deeply political and ill-placed in a field such as educational research, but that they also fall short of conventional standards of rigour and validity’. The response offered to this criticism was that: ‘issues of legitimacy are neither new nor specific to racially-just epistemologies and methodologies’. Furthermore, ‘as Evans-Winters (2019) suggests, “our ‘truths’ must be validated from within, with less concern for how outsiders legitimate (or receive and perceive) our assertions” (p. 23)’. At the same time, (in apparent contradiction to this) appeal was made to the fact that: ‘national organizations such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA) have [...] acknowledged the legitimacy of theories such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) within educational research [...]’. (In short, no substantive argument was presented in response to the criticisms mentioned.)

The Introduction also stated that the papers included in the special issue:

Are consciously political because historically, educational research has problematized many minoritized communities to construct the dominant political discourse. They also speak to the dangers of co-optation and the intellectual erasure of scholars of colour from within educational research, when mainstream scholars are eager to utilize racially-just methods without careful reflection. (Rizvi 2022b:323)

The claim here appears to be that currently prevalent epistemologies and methodologies, by their very nature, have contributed to, and continue to support, a dominant, racist political discourse; and that this can only be challenged by people of colour deploying alternative ‘racially-just’ epistemologies and methodologies. The author concludes: ‘My hope is that every scholar within the field of education approaches racially-just goals with intellectual humility and makes the changes necessary in their own everyday practices at every level possible.’ (It seems to me that intellectual humility is a one-sided requirement here.)

The papers included in the two parts of the special issue are diverse, and certainly not without interest, but they tend to adopt much the same political stance as the Introductions, and in much the same uncritical manner. The result is that the special issue as a whole has a political slant that is simply taken for granted, and any questioning of this is effectively dismissed as racist.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Issues Raised**

There are a number of interrelated topics for discussion coming out of this case. One concerns whether editors of a special issue can legitimately exclude a paper on the grounds that it questions some of the assumptions on which the special issue is based (this seems to have been the main, if not the only, reason for the reviewers and special issue editors rejecting my paper). But, beyond this, these materials prompt reflection about what are the appropriate rules of engagement within academic research communities; and, most fundamentally, about what should, and should not, be the goal of academic research.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In outlining the methodological perspective underpinning the special issue I am discussing, I have drawn not just on what was written in the proposal and call for papers but also on the literature which the writers of these cite, as well as on the contents of the published papers.

<sup>3</sup> There is a side issue raised by the reviews of my paper concerning what priority should be given to more recent as against older literature. If we assume a model of science in which there is gradual cumulation and correction of a body of knowledge, it would seem clear that it is imperative to use the latest contributions, that older ones will be out of date. However, there are questions about whether this model has ever been closely approximated even by the natural sciences (both Popper’s 1959 and Kuhn’s 1970 accounts are at odds with this), and it could hardly be argued that it fits social science: it would be difficult to claim that there has been a continuous cumulation of knowledge in most of its areas. Not surprisingly, then, in practice social scientists do frequently draw on work from the past, albeit highly selectively (the call for abstracts for the special issue used references that were on average around 20 years old and two of them were thirty years old.). Given this, any objection to the use of ‘old’ references requires careful justification; and any complaint about neglect of more recent contributions equally demands some indication that those contributions do indeed advance understanding. It seems to me that if social science fails to learn from its past it may be doomed to repeat the same mistakes over again. And such is, in my view, a common vice (see Hammersley 2004; Rock 2005). Even aside from this, one might have expected the editors to have regarded a paper addressing the now largely forgotten work of a previously influential African-American anthropologist working in the field of education as of value in itself. One of the reviewers of my paper admits that he/she was unaware of Davis’s work. He was included in a collection of papers on *African-American Pioneers in Anthropology* (Harrison and Harrison 1999), but while his work was highly regarded during his lifetime it is rarely cited today.

It would be widely agreed (and seems to be agreed by the editors of the special issue) that the main criterion used by journals for accepting/rejecting papers ought to be whether they make a contribution to the relevant field by advancing knowledge or understanding. However, this leaves open the question of how we are to judge ‘contribution’. And this will vary somewhat according to the academic community to which a journal relates. Since the journal involved here is concerned with methodological issues in educational research, articles submitted to it are presumably to be assessed, not in terms of their contribution to empirical or theoretical knowledge, but rather according to what they add to collective methodological understanding about how best to pursue educational inquiry. However, within the Journal, there is some variation in the papers published as to whether they are likely to be of relevance to a large portion of the Journal’s readership or whether they focus on specific areas within the field, being relevant mainly if not entirely to researchers in those areas. Such variation arises particularly with the topics of special issues. This has implications not just for what will be judged a sufficient contribution to warrant publication but also for what can reasonably be taken-for-granted as given, and therefore as not in need of discussion, within a special issue.

Previous special issues of IJRME have been devoted to: multilevel structural equation modelling; mixed methods; interdisciplinarity; the ‘what works agenda’; research methods for pedagogy; e-research; visual methods; inclusive methods; ethics and academic freedom; theory; and quality in educational research. Some of these are quite specific topics that are likely to be of primary interest to sub-groups of educational researchers; even if there is hope of wider interest. And the special issue involved in this dispute may appear to fall into this category, as being directed at researchers who investigate matters relating to race and education. Whether this was the main intended audience is an interesting question, but it must be noted that the very concept of ‘racially-just epistemologies and methodologies that disrupt whiteness’ has implications for all education research: it logically implies that most of this, in the past and today, has been racially *unjust*. And this implication is confirmed in the introductions to the first batch of special issue papers: it is made clear that the aim is to speak to all educational researchers. Indeed, this had been endorsed in the call for abstracts, where the editors stated: ‘there are a number of challenges that educational research methods need to address. This includes [...] that whiteness in educational research is sustained by the epistemological ignorance of race (Mills, 2007) and that European colonisation contributes to epistemicide, or the destruction of knowledges held by the subaltern ([Santos] 2014)’. The implication of this is that the papers in this special issue must engage not just with what one of the reviewers of my paper called ‘race scholars’ but with educational researchers more generally. And this implies that a case needs to be made in support of the accusation of racial injustice at the level of epistemology and methodology, one that engages with the background knowledge and assumptions of the wider educational research community, rather than relying simply on those of race scholars. But here lies a problem.

At one level what is demanded by the editors of the special issue is that alternative epistemologies and methodologies tied to particular ‘racial’ identities are recognised as legitimate, and therefore given space within the field of educational research. But the argument goes beyond this to claim that knowledge is tied to racial identity, and that ‘subaltern’ racial groups gain such knowledge directly from their experience of racism, whereas whites are ignorant about their own societies because of their dominant social position (Mills 2017). In short, the notion of racially-just epistemologies and methodologies implies that educational

research has been racially unjust not simply because it (allegedly) rejects epistemologies/methodologies characteristic of people of colour and other marginalised groups, thereby establishing a form of ‘apartheid’ (Delgado Bernal and Villalpando 2002; Pérez Huber 2009), but also because it relies on a defective epistemology/methodology that reflects the position and experience of the white majority.

There are several assumptions built into this argument:

1. That different epistemologies/methodologies are characteristic of different (socially constructed) races.
2. That the dominant epistemologies/methodologies are ‘white’.
3. That these specifically exclude ways of knowing characteristic of subordinated racial groups.
4. That ‘alternative’ racial epistemologies/methodologies should be treated as legitimate in their own right and given equal space within the field of educational research; and
5. That ‘white’ epistemologies have been rendered defective by their role in racial subordination and therefore must be rejected.

I suggest that, as a matter of empirical fact, some of these assumptions would not be widely accepted amongst mainstream educational researchers. But, in any case, that many researchers would not accept them follows directly from advocacy of ‘racially just epistemologies and methodologies’: if most educational researchers did already accept them then their work would, presumably, not be racially unjust (at least not in the sense implied). The key point, though, is that if most educational researchers do not currently accept them, for this audience at least, these assumptions need spelling out *and justifying, in terms that readers could come to accept without simply being browbeaten into accepting them in order to avoid being accused of racism.*

Yet, browbeating is precisely the strategy adopted in the introductions to the special issue: the strong implication is that any criticism of the claims made there about epistemic racism necessarily comes from a ‘white’ perspective that is defective. For example, it is claimed that such criticism stems from the critics having been ‘socialised and trained to see alternative ways of knowing as irrelevant and inferior’ (Rizvi 2022a:225). What is involved here is a form of standpoint epistemology, along with a demand that all educational research should actively challenge white racism, in what are alleged to be its epistemic forms. According to standpoint epistemology, those belonging to a specified social category (or set of categories) are epistemically privileged, while those of a contrasting category suffer an epistemic deficit, as a result of their social position. As Rizvi 2022a) indicates, an influential illustration of this form of argument was provided by Mills (1997:18): ‘To a significant extent, then, white signatories [to ‘the racial contract’] will live in an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland, a “consensual hallucination”’. The implication of this is that the arguments of critics are immediately discredited *ad hominem*; moreover, they are rejected not just as false but as morally offensive. Adopting this epistemological stance clearly implies that any paper questioning its assumptions should be excluded from the special issue; and any reviewer’s comments that question those assumptions should be ignored.

It is of some significance, in this context, that standpoint epistemologies have been a feature of Western social thought for at least a couple of centuries: they are not external to it. They have been put forward on behalf of peasants, the working class, women, sexual

minorities, and people with disabilities. Furthermore, the problems with this kind of epistemology have long been identified. One of these is determining who belongs in the epistemically privileged category, given that there are anti-communist working-class people (and middle-class communists), anti-feminist women (and pro-feminist men), blacks who question Critical Race Theory (and white advocates of it), and so on. In the context of the special issue this demands a re-specification of what is to count as ‘white’, it becomes largely a matter of ideological or political definition. A second problem relates to how any particular set of ideas can be treated as essentially tied to a particular social category (what Child 1944 referred to as ‘the problem of imputation’). An even more fundamental issue is that the initial adoption of *any* standpoint epistemology can only be a matter of irrational commitment, because it cannot be convincingly justified in its own terms, since that would be circular, and to justify it in more conventional epistemological terms undermines it by suggesting that it is dependent upon what it rejects (Hammersley 2011:ch4). This problem is highlighted if it is asked: why should we adopt one standpoint epistemology rather than another; how are we to decide *which* ‘marginalised group’ has epistemological privilege, given that their perspectives differ?

Not only are standpoint epistemologies intellectually unjustifiable, they have damaging consequences for the process of academic inquiry, and therefore for the production of the reliable knowledge that is essential for tackling racism and other social problems. Such inquiry depends, essentially, upon the willingness of researchers to engage with points of view that conflict with their own; so long as adherents of those alternative views accept the legitimacy of mutual engagement in a self-correcting process of inquiry, one that is designed to build a body of knowledge about some set of value-relevant topics by relying on evidence that is, in principle, accessible to all. This conception of inquiry is not essentially ‘Western’, it was initially formed in multicultural engagements across Europe and Asia from the early Middle Ages onwards, notably within universities. Any approach that operates on the basis of fixed assumptions that are psychologically and socially defended (in this case about the racist character of existing epistemologies and methodologies), in the sense that criticism of them is immediately rejected as defective and offensive (in this case, as racist), is fundamentally at odds with how academic inquiry operates.

It is, of course, true that the background experiences of social researchers will give them preconceptions and attitudes that can lead to error, particularly where they are interpreting the lives of people very different from themselves. But ‘white’ is a category that covers a very wide range of different experiences, as does ‘black’ or ‘people of colour’. Furthermore, this danger of bias has long been recognised, and efforts made to counter it. And from these it could be learned that statements of claimed fact on the basis of lived experience should not be accepted (or rejected) at face value, because everyone’s experience can lead to distortions as well as insights. There is great value to be gained if people from diverse backgrounds participate within a research community, since some of what each of them takes for granted will be challenged, and they will be forced either to provide convincing justification or to abandon what cannot stand up to scrutiny. However, for this productive critical process to operate, all participants must comply with the ground rules that standpoint epistemologies reject. While it is tempting to suspend these rules to serve important causes (not least, seeking racial justice), for the reasons just explained doing so will leave us without the academic knowledge we need to bring about any improvement in the world. It should also be noted that

standpoint epistemology can be used to protect views from criticism that most of us would wish to resist, from neoliberalism (business people know best because of their practical market experience) to fundamentalist Christianity (the appeal to revelation).

The other source of opposition to any questioning of underlying assumptions built into the notion of ‘racially just epistemologies and methodologies’ is commitment to the idea that academic inquiry can legitimately be, or should be, a form of political activism (a point noted by both of the reviewers of my rejected paper). Aside from being indefensible (Hammersley 1995, 2017), this prompts rebuttal of other views, rather than engagement with them, as well as efforts to stifle criticism. The model is that of a battle not a dialogue. Yet academic institutions, including journals, still operate largely on the basis of the rules of academic inquiry I outlined earlier, according to which, within a research community, there should be engagement with any questioning of one’s assumptions, and reliance on reasoned argument in defending them, irrespective of the source of the questioning (in the context of the dispute discussed here, this amounts to what has come to be derogatively referred to as a ‘colour-blind’ approach). This principle is why journals usually employ anonymous peer-reviewing. It is also why contributions to them are assessed in terms of their potential contribution to knowledge, not their political credentials nor (as yet) their ‘impact’ in bringing about ‘change’ (whether as envisaged by the Right or the Left).

While there are many social scientists today who seek to redefine the goal of academic research to include the pursuit of political or practical goals, what remains unclear is how research communities could operate if, as is likely to result, they contained multiple groups pursuing goals that are in conflict with one another (Hammersley 2017)? This would turn research into a field in which groups representing different orientations compete for power using whatever means at their disposal (as portrayed, for example, by Bourdieu). We are still some way from this in educational research, thankfully. While it may be comforting to anticipate a situation in which one’s own views have secured dominance, the probability instead is that endemic and mutually destructive struggle will be the outcome. Furthermore, any public funding of such pitched battle would be hard to justify. And it is difficult to see what theoretical response there could be to a non-liberal government simply imposing its own ‘political truth’ and suppressing any social science at odds with this (a genuine prospect given the spread of authoritarian populism).

In short, then, advocacy of ‘racially just epistemologies and methodologies’ is at odds with the conception of academic inquiry that underpins how educational research, and social science more generally, continue to operate today. This conception assumes equality among educational researchers, in the sense that their work should *not* be judged on the basis of who they are (racially or in any other sense) but on the basis of its quality. And ‘quality’ here refers to whether or not it contributes to the production of knowledge, rather than its perceived political complexion or ‘impact’. Equally important to note is that the ‘liberalism’ (Hammersley 1995:ch8) built into this conception of academic inquiry places no obligation on researchers automatically to treat as legitimate, or even to tolerate, ‘alternative’ approaches that challenge it: these can be rejected as failing to meet academic requirements. While the norms the academic model lays down are not beyond dispute, there is no obligation simply to accept breaches of them, even in the name of equity, especially when what that term means is left unclear (one of the points I made in the paper I submitted for the special issue).



As already noted, those championing racially-just epistemologies and methodologies are not the only ones who challenge this academic model, with its commitment to detachment from practical concerns and to objectivity. This challenge can take two quite different forms. The complaint may be about failure to operate the model fairly, that how it is implemented works against certain groups and at the same time serves to legitimate unequal outcomes, for instance as regards what does and does not get published. Certainly, it can be agreed that the behaviour of academics does not perfectly match the norms built into this model of academic inquiry, to say the least; and there may be systematic deviations, including racism. However, no ideal is ever realised completely; so, the key question concerns the *degree* and *nature* of the deviation, and how it can be remedied. However, this immanent critique does not seem to be the position adopted by advocates of ‘racially just epistemologies and methodologies’. They are bound to regard this academic model as itself a reflection of Western culture, in short as ‘white’. The implication would seem to be that it must be abolished and replaced by institutionalised practices that recognise only authentic, not ideologically distorted, experience of the world. The principle of impartiality among tolerable options aimed at the production of knowledge is being replaced here by a criterion of political acceptability. But who is to decide what is acceptable, and by what authority? The principle of impartiality was precisely designed to overcome that intractable problem.

This and other elements of the academic conception of inquiry could be abandoned or modified, but any proposed change needs to be justified and shown to be politically feasible. Furthermore, there must be coherence in any reformed version. As regards the disagreement being discussed here, we would need to know what the justification could be for treating special issues as protected spaces for the expression of views that are at odds with the very model that underpins the operation of academic journals? The answer, I presume, is that such spaces are required because those alternative views have been suppressed. However, there needs to be convincing evidence that legitimate approaches have been suppressed, along with clear justification offered for their legitimacy. At the very least, there is a lot of work here that has been left undone. But the problem goes deeper than this. If the disagreement is at the level of epistemology and axiology, then there is a fundamental impasse: there could be major dispute about what would count as sound argument and sufficient evidence for any change. This might imply that the disagreement can only be resolved by the exercise of power: an authoritative decision on procedural grounds by journal editors, and/or ideological mobilisation and coercion on the part of others. We can find this agonistic view of politics today, of course, on both the far Left and the far Right. But if this is what it comes down to, the likely costs (on all sides) are going to be very substantial.

### **The nature of the impasse**

The impasse arises, to a large extent, from the fact that, as indicated earlier, what I have called the academic conception of inquiry, on the one hand, and the standpoint epistemology central to the notion of racially-just epistemologies and methodologies, on the other, have different goals. Academic inquiry, as currently institutionalized, has the sole aim of producing value-relevant knowledge; whereas, even if this goal is accepted by advocates of racially-just epistemologies and methodologies, they are equally, if not more strongly, committed to challenging racism and working to eradicate it *through their research*. They, at least implicitly, assume that these two goals are mutually supportive, or at least compatible. But this is not the

case – or, at least, no convincing argument has been provided to show this. And there are good reasons for thinking otherwise, as Max Weber (1949) made clear a long time ago.

One of the rules of the academic conception of inquiry is that there are quite severe restrictions placed on prior assumptions – these should either be already well-established by previous research or be sufficiently beyond reasonable doubt and dispute to be accepted at face value (until further notice). The point of these restrictions is to minimise the danger of accepting knowledge claims as true that are, in fact, false. By contrast, the assumptions I identified as underpinning the notion of racially-just epistemologies and methodologies are, as we saw, not already widely accepted; nor has strong evidence been presented in support of them that would itself be widely accepted. Indeed, as we saw, the fact that they would not be generally accepted is one of the assumptions underpinning the notion of ‘racially-just epistemologies and methodologies’, its truth reflecting the racist character of current society. Furthermore, racially-just epistemologies and methodologies are aimed at serving the cause of epistemic racial justice, so they include what is taken to serve this purpose and exclude what does not. This amounts to a bias embedded in the inquiry process.

The problem with the position taken by the editors of the special issue, then, is that it relies on fixed and politically defended substantive assumptions: specifically about the nature, extent, and operation of racism; and, in particular, about its epistemic character (see Hammersley 2022). By contrast, the academic conception of inquiry operates solely on *epistemological* assumptions. These do not rule out any substantive conclusion being reached, they simply lay down requirements that knowledge claims must meet if they are to be accepted as true (until further notice). While, in practice, this leads to some sorts of substantive knowledge claims being rejected, such as those appealing to supernatural forces, this does not reflect any objection to these in principle. Much the same is true of the substantive assumptions at issue here. It is simply that the academic conception of inquiry makes it more difficult for these to be accepted as established knowledge because of the demand for evidence that should be convincing to *anyone* within the research community, irrespective of political beliefs or social characteristics. In these terms, there is no bias built into the academic conception against recognising racism; though this does not, of course, rule out the operation of bias in its application, and there is scope for this because it is not a set of algorithmic rules but a framework of principles within which judgments should be made. A key feature of the academic conception of inquiry that derives from its epistemological character is that any process of inquiry operating on this basis is at least partly self-correcting. This does not mean that all errors will be discovered, or that there is any point at which we can be absolutely sure that our conclusions are true. But it does mean that there is a strong probability that inquiry will move towards true conclusions. All knowledge claims are fallible, but they are not all equally likely to be false.<sup>4</sup>

Given that journals still formally operate on the basis of the academic conception of inquiry, what should be their response to those who reject that conception, such as advocates of ‘racially-just epistemologies and methodologies’? One strategy is to tolerate such approaches because their advocates do not have the power to obstruct other work, to any great degree, and are unlikely to gain this. However, even if these factual assumptions are correct, is this a satisfactory response? It certainly should not be found acceptable by advocates of

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of truth being relied upon here is defended in Hammersley forthcoming.

racially-just epistemologies and methodologies, for the reasons I have spelt out; but it is a weakness they can exploit in the name of political activism. And tolerating active rejection of the academic conception of inquiry, as opposed to reasoned challenge of it, certainly should not be acceptable to any self-respecting supporter of that conception – since it will ultimately undermine it. The other strategy for responding to the challenge posed by political activism disguised as research is, of course, for journals to enforce the requirements of the academic conception of inquiry, insisting that advocates of alternative approaches make their assumptions explicit and defend them on academic, not political, grounds. That is what did not happen in this case.

## **Conclusion**

I have considered some of the problems that are raised by a dispute surrounding the recent special issue of IJRME on ‘racially just epistemologies and methodologies that disrupt whiteness’. These are complex and contentious matters. However, I have argued that the views exemplified by the special issue (though by no means restricted to it) are at odds with the conception of inquiry that governs the operation of academic journals. Dismissal of criticism as deriving from ‘white’ epistemology, and therefore as racist, is unacceptable unless the grounds for rejection are spelt out in a way that engages with the background assumptions of most researchers. Furthermore, the model implicitly relied upon – standpoint epistemology – is itself ‘white’, and (more importantly) is unsustainable. Any simple demand, in the name of equity, for protection of alternative epistemologies that challenge the academic conception of inquiry is spurious: there are always proper limits to tolerance. If that institutionalised conception is to be modified, a case needs to be made for this on the basis of common ground. (Unfortunately, there seems to be little of this available, this is why I suggested that we are faced with an impasse.)

I believe that the notion of ‘racially just epistemologies and methodologies’ is in need of critical assessment just as much as other versions of standpoint epistemology and academic activism. At the same time, there must be some attempt to learn from the experiences and motivations that lie behind this notion. The idea that taken-for-granted assumptions may be false in significant respects is not a novel one, but its importance is easily overlooked, especially when it comes to our own assumptions. Much the same is true regarding the distinctiveness of other people’s lives and experiences. While I do not believe that there are separate, incommensurable cultures, it is certainly the case that there can be significant differences in experience, that these may offer important insights as well as generating blindnesses, and that sometimes these can be hard to recognise. However, the effort to take seriously the need for understanding others with very different experiences has always been a central strand in qualitative research, especially, even if it has not always been applied as consistently and effectively as is necessary (see Hammersley 2008:ch1); and it can easily be deformed.

The case discussed here highlights serious problems with some developments in social and educational research over the past few decades (ones that I have long been critical of), and how these relate to the criteria by which journals assess articles. The concept of academic inquiry that underpins those conventional criteria is now under great strain; and this comes not just from within research communities, from the sorts of challenge I have discussed here, but also from governments seeking to enforce their own political biases and/or to reduce academic

research to an ‘investment’ that must show an adequate and predictable return in terms of ‘impact’ (Hammersley 1995:ch8; 2011:Intro; 2014). However, I predict that even those who reject the concept of academic inquiry will miss it badly when its institutional forms have been undermined.

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