Epistemic Wrongdoing

I. Intro

Decades of social science research argues that one's race affects one's educational opportunities. Although clearly correct, in some sense, this way of putting it misses an important part of the story: education also *creates* race. In terms I've used in previous lectures: education is a social structure consisting of interdependent practices. The practices, in turn, consist of interdependent schemas and resources. Knowledge and educational credentials are valuable resources. In many contexts, schemas that distribute access to those resources are responsive to "color" differences in unjust ways. The result is a broader social structure in which people of color are positioned as subordinate in a racial hierarchy.

Recall that on my view, to have a race is to stand in a complex and hierarchical set of social relations.

> A group is *racialized* (in context C) iff$_{df}$ its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) (in C), and the group is marked as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region (call this "color").

School is a site of intense socialization that creates kinds of individuals. It does not do this in a deterministic or mechanical way, for part of the goal of any disciplinary regime is to form individuals who voluntarily enact the social structures that are to be perpetuated. And because we are individuals with genuine agency, our voluntary action always has the potential to be oppositional, resistant, subversive.

However, in the current educational context, it is African-American success that is oppositional and subversive, not African-American failure. That is to say, the process of racialization that occurs in schools prepares African-Americans and other people of color for the subordinate status they can expect to occupy, and it does this very effectively. This "success" is at odds with the explicit egalitarian ideology that many Americans hold dear, but implicit ideology – the implicit schemas that govern our educational (and other) practices – are not egalitarian.

II. Practices Generate Roles, Norms, Identities, etc.

Recall: *P=S+R:* Practices consist of interdependent schemas and resources "when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time." (Sewell 1992, 13); sets of interdependent practices constitute social structures.

Roles: In solving coordination/access problems, schemas define different roles in relation to resources.

Norms: Excellence in a role requires the right dispositions; norms consist in what counts as acting well in accordance with the schema.

Identities: Imposing roles on individuals is costly and creates resistance. Instead, it is better for there to be practices that encourage internalization of norms and roles in individual identities (self-understandings, patterns of thought and action).

Symbols/Narratives: Internalization of schemas, norms, roles, requires a well-defined diet of symbols and narratives that script our responses to resources in accordance with defined roles and norms. This is culture.

III. Studying While Black or How to Create Race

A. Epistemic mistrust

> [*Spanish Class*, Ms. S.] In 10th grade, Jonathan took honors Spanish. Fairly often he would come home complaining about how the teacher picked on this or that student. He suspected that race and ethnicity were factors determining her targets. Over time, he noted a clear pattern of Ms. S. picking on his Egyptian friend, Mustafa. By Jonathan's report, one day Ms. S. was talking about life in Chile and Mustafa asked if the women in the community she was describing could go about freely or whether they were limited mainly to the home. Ms. S replied, "It isn't like *your* culture, Mustafa. You should be aware that in most parts of the world women can go about freely, and it is your culture that is the exception." Mustafa objected that in Egypt women *do* go about freely, and Ms. S. disagreed with him. When Mustafa expressed disbelief that she would disagree with him about this, he was sent to the Dean's office. Jonathan's reaction was that the teacher is "an idiot." Jonathan withdrew, emotionally, from the class, both in a gesture of support for Mustafa, as a protective measure.

Membership in an epistemic community requires mutual trust and trustworthiness.

> In all aspects of our lives, we function, in part, as epistemic agents. Epistemic functioning often, and perhaps always, involves the exchange of epistemic goods, and a shared acceptance of the epistemic norms that guide the practices that

yield those goods. Social functioning, then, requires epistemic cooperation; and epistemic cooperation requires trust. (Daukas 2006, 109)

First order trust/trustworthiness: grant those with whom you are in conversation basic credibility; abide by basic rules of conversation: be relevant, informative (but not too much!), perspicuous, truthful. (Grice 1975)

Second order trust/trustworthiness: be alert to your own cognitive capacities and the cognitive capacities of others. Failures of such self-assessment include being overly confident in our own epistemic capacities (close-minded, dogmatic, or impatient), or overly diffident (deferential or gullible). Failures in judging our interlocutor include being ungenerous (suspicious or skeptical) or excessively generous (uncritical).

We develop our second-order epistemic competencies in social interaction. Under conditions of race and gender hierarchy, attributions of trustworthiness will go awry, and racially dominant groups will become over-confident of their trustworthiness, and subordinate groups will become less confident than they should be. (Daukas 2006, 115) Because those who are **less confident** in a domain are less likely to be successful and highly visible as authorities in that domain, "unjust epistemic exclusion on the basis of social location is therefore self-perpetuating: its consequences perpetuate the inequalities that fulfill, and therefore seem to justify, the discriminatory expectations that, in turn, perpetuate unjust epistemic exclusion." (Daukas 2006, 116) Let's call this the *exclusion feedback loop*.

Note, however, that the students who disengage in *Spanish Class* are not ignorant, unmotivated, or self-doubting; rather, they are knowledgeable and have epistemic self-respect. Moreover, their withdrawal of epistemic trust is warranted (even if not practically wise). However, an unwillingness to cooperate in the epistemic exchange is harmful to them. What emerges is an *epistemic distrust feedback loop*: if, due to my race, teachers do not grant me epistemic credibility, or show themselves to be epistemically untrustworthy, I will, reasonably, withhold epistemic trust; but if I withhold epistemic trust, I will show signs of distrust, will do less well on my work, and may appear to be stupid and unmotivated or resistant to authority. When I appear this way, teachers act towards me in epistemically distrusting and untrustworthy ways. And the cycle begins again.

B. Ego Depletion
[*History class,* Ms. H.] Eli took an honors history class in the spring of 11th grade. During class he regularly sat next to his Israeli friend Maya. He liked the teacher and thought she was "smart" but found her hard to relate to. One day after school he came home very angry. He explained: "In history class today, Ms. H. spent about five minutes talking to Maya about xxx. I was listening because I was sitting next to Maya, as usual. Their discussion was *so* interesting; you could see them both just popping with ideas. I wanted to join in, but didn't want to interrupt their conversation. Then Ms. H. turned to me and said really slowly: "Eli…did…you…do…your…homework?" I just wanted to say, "F--- you, Ms. H." But instead I just said "Yes," and she moved down the row."

According to recent work in social psychology, "there is a faculty of willpower – something like a muscle. When desires and resolutions clash, we can succeed in sticking to our resolutions by employing this faculty. Moreover, employing the faculty is hard work: it requires effort on the part of the agent." (Holton 2009, 130) A notable feature of willpower on this model is that "willpower comes in limited amounts that can be used up." (Holton 2009, 128) This is called "ego depletion." (Radish example.) Willpower is a central aspect of executive function; ego depletion lowers one's ability to stick to resolutions, lowers IQ, and makes one susceptible to bad arguments. We all suffer from ego depletion, but in contexts of racism it disproportionally affects students of color.

So the options look worrisome: when teachers are epistemically untrustworthy, students of color might
   (i) accept the teacher's mistaken judgment of their credibility and lose confidence,
   (ii) challenge the teacher and face the stigma of being disruptive and the punishment for it,
   (iii) withdraw from the epistemic exchange and lose valuable learning opportunities (and look stupid?),
   (iv) exert self-control over their emotional responses of insult and (temporarily) deplete their capacities for cognitive work and epistemic agency, or
   (v) develop a Teflon skin that renders one insensitive to input from teachers (and others).
None of these are good strategies for academic success (though there are nuanced ways of modifying and combining these strategies that can work, with considerable effort).

C. Effort Optimism
[*Math class,* Mr. M.] Jerome has always been good at math, and in the spring of 10th grade, he enrolled in an honors math class. He was one of two Black students in the class. The teacher's policy was that students would not get credit

for their homework unless the problems were written in a particular format on the page with a box drawn around the answer. Jerome found it difficult to remember to use the right format and for several days he received no credit, even though he had done the problems correctly. Because of the "no credit" homeworks, Mr. M. began to treat Jerome as a failing student and got in touch with his guidance counselor to set up a meeting with his parents. The parents agreed to help out with homework. One weekend Jerome's Dad – a professor at a local university – worked with Jerome on the homework. Later that week the teacher emailed the parents again to say that Jerome was continuing to do poorly on his homework and several more had not been turned in. When questioned, Jerome denied this and showed his parents the homework he'd turned in with Mr. M.'s check marks. The parents and teacher met again and he accused Jerome of lying and claimed that he was still producing sloppy work. Jerome's parents respectfully challenged him and explained that Jerome's father – who is fully capable of doing the math he is teaching – had helped him, so they knew he had done it correctly. Mr. M walked out of the meeting, saying that the parents were disrespecting him. Jerome got through the class, but swore that he would never take an honors math class again. When Jerome took a non-honors math class in 11th grade, the teacher urged him to switch into an honors class, given his abilities, but Jerome refused, saying "There's no point."

Effort optimism captures the general attitude that one's efforts towards a goal will have a positive effect on achieving that goal. Even if one faces setbacks, effort is worth it and will lead, if not to success, then at least further down the path towards the goal. Effort optimism provides resilience. Martin Seligman has argued that

> The traditional view of achievement…needs overhauling. Our workplaces and our schools operate on the conventional assumption that success results form a combination of talent and desire. When failure occurs it is because either talent or desire is missing. But failure also can occur when talent and desire are present in abundance, but optimism is missing. (Seligman 1990, 13)

The classic formulation of how optimism breaks down is also Seligman's (See also Dweck 2000):

> *Learned helplessness* is the giving-up reaction, the quitting response that follows from the belief that whatever you do doesn't matter. *Explanatory style* is the manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen. It is the grate modulator of learned helplessness. An optimistic explanatory style stops helplessness, whereas a pessimistic explanatory style spreads helplessness. (Seligman 1990, 15-16)

We all suffer misfortune, but there are different ways of explaining misfortune. Suppose you fail a math test. It might be seen as permanent or momentary (I always do badly in math v. I didn't study hard enough for this exam); pervasive/universal or specific (Teachers are unfair v. Mr. M is unfair); and personal or not (I'm stupid v. We didn't cover all the material in class). Those who explain misfortunes in a particular domain as *permanent*, *pervasive*, and *personal*, lack optimism. They will be more likely to give up after a failure rather than try harder, and will doubt that effort will make a difference. Under conditions of racism, pessimistic explanations look quite plausible. Although there are psychological strategies for changing a pessimistic mindset, this is difficult once damage has been done.

D. Epistemic Injustice

> [*Biology class,* Ms. B (the substitute)] Kevin is a student with a solid B average in mostly honors classes. He was doing well in Biology until his teacher went on temporary leave and was replaced by a substitute teacher. The substitute, Ms. B., seemed to target Kevin for negative attention. He was ridiculed for his mistakes. He was accused of stealing a piece of computer equipment (that later was found had just been misplaced). He got to the point where he would come into class and wait with his head on his desk until class began. Even with his head on his desk, the teacher would accuse him of "being disruptive." He repeatedly denied the accusations, but was anxious that any attempt to complain would result in retaliation. However, the accusation of theft brought the situation to the attention of the Dean, a Latina. The Dean knew Kevin and trusted him, so intervened on his behalf. When Ms. B. returned to the class, things returned to normal.

Daukas represents the problem as primarily a question of virtue: individuals who are epistemically untrustworthy –are poor judges of their own epistemic authority and/or wrongly judge the epistemic authority of others – lack epistemic virtue. If these epistemic failings are linked to moral failings (racism, sexism, etc), then the individual also lacks moral virtue. Justice is an issue because under conditions of social injustice there is a pattern of epistemic exclusion that systematically disadvantages certain groups in reinforcing loops.

In addition to issues of virtue and disadvantage, however, it is worth considering the idea that a failure to grant others epistemic credibility due to their race is a moral wrong in itself. Miranda Fricker considers one form: *testimonial injustice.* She says,

> Systematic testimonial injustices, then, are produced not by prejudice *simpliciter,* but specifically by those prejudices that 'track' the subject through different dimensions of social activity – economic, educational, professional, sexual, legal, political, religious,…Being subject to a tracker prejudice renders one susceptible not only to testimonial injustice but to a

gamut of different injustices, and so when such a prejudice generates a testimonial injustice, that injustices is systematically connected with other kinds of actual or potential injustice. (Fricker 2007, 27)

On Fricker's view, testimonial injustice wrongs an individual "in her capacity as knower." (Fricker 2007, 20; 44) In the simplest sense, this involves unjustly depriving the individual of knowledge: Individuals are excluded from the epistemic community and so are not granted fair access to a collective good. However, such wrongs of are not aptly understood by simply relying on a commodified understanding of knowledge, "for credibility is not a good that belongs with the distributive model of justice." (19) The cooperative participation in a knowledge community – in the process of giving and receiving knowledge – is essential to who and what we are, for it is the activity that both trains us for and enables us to enact our rational capacities.

Drawing on Bernard Williams' work, Fricker argues further that it is in and through trustful conversation that we are able to form selves at all. It is not just that we need a public language in order to have a sense of self; we need trustful conversation in which each of us can pull together our various thoughts, desires, fantasies, into a relatively stable whole. As Williams puts it:

> In different historical and social circumstances, various structures may serve to build a self that will at once make sense of episodic feelings and thoughts – render the subject, as I have put it, steadier – and also relate the person to others in ways that will serve the purposes of co-operation and trust. (Williams 2002, 200)

He goes on to describe these two tasks, or problems, of steadying the self and situating it in society:

> One is a political problem, of finding a basis for a shared life which will be neither too oppressively coercive…nor dependent on mythical legitimations...The other is a personal problem, of stabilizing the self into a form that will indeed fit with these political and social ideas, but which can at the same time create a life that presents itself to a reflective individual as worth living… (Williams 2002, 201)

What solves these problems, together, is trustful conversation:

> Drawn to bind myself to the others' shared values, to make my own beliefs and feeling steadier…I become what with increasing steadiness I can sincerely profess; I become what I have sincerely declared to them…(Williams 2002, 204)

So epistemic trust and credibility is not just needed to gain access to knowledge goods; it is essential to becoming a socially situated self. In this complex project, two sorts of injustice are relevant:

(a) One is unjustly limited to a narrow range of conversations that do not enable one to form a self that is fully integrated into public space;

(b) The conversations one enters into provide only limited or distorted resources for forming a self.

Conversations with untrustworthy interlocutors may lead one to self-interpretations that are distorted, cramped, or stigmatized. E.g., homosexual desire tentatively expressed in a homophobic context may prompt responses that represent such desire as shameful; this is then internalized. Intellectual aspirations expressed by a Black girl may generate racist replies that represent such desire as ridiculous, thus quashing the dream. Such conversations do provide information about the social identities available, but the prejudice encoded in the replies is hidden, cloaked by an air of moral and epistemic authority.

IV. Conclusion
In a social hierarchy, collective understandings are structured to favor those in power. The selves we become are significantly a product of the social relations we enter into, including teacher-student relations. Individuals are judged by norms and offered identities that make them suitable for particular social roles. Those marked as destined for subordinate roles will not be recognized as full participants in conversations that make them eligible for more privileged roles. Their experiments with selfhood that reach beyond the roles assigned to them will be registered as failures. When the teacher brings to these relations prejudice that is echoed broadly in the culture, it is not surprising that education produces racialized individuals who are most successful at becoming what they are expected to be. Anything else would be radical, dangerous.

References:
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