

Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

Article/Essay Title: “Allies Behaving Badly: Gaslighting as Epistemic Injustice”

Author: Rachel McKinnon

Readability: Easy/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis:

1. Highly privileged people who identify as “allies” to less privileged people (in particular, cisgender “allies” of trans* women), commonly engage in the epistemically unjust practice of gaslighting trans* women about their experiences: failing to accord the appropriate weight to trans* women’s first personal testimony, giving their own assessments too much weight, and baselessly challenging the trustworthiness of the trans* speaker.
2. Because the status of “ally” and resulting “ally culture” is structured as an achievement (not an ongoing behavior which must be subject to regular criticism), focusing on cultivating concrete actions of *active bystander intervention* in harmful situations is a better way to conceptualize this relationship, and it will likely result in fewer harmful actions and defensive reactions by so-called “allies”.

Key Definitions:

Ally: “Allies are...conceived as dominant [social identity] group members who work to end prejudice in their personal and professional lives, and relinquish social privileges conferred by their group status through their support of nondominant groups” (2).

Gaslighting: an often unintentional act wherein “the hearer of testimony [typically about a harm or injustice committed against the speaker] raises doubts about the speaker’s reliability at perceiving events accurately” (3)

Epistemic asymmetry: Occurs when one’s social positioning enables one to perceive a reality better than others differently situated; when there is an epistemic asymmetry, the speakers’ social positioning relative to the harm should be relevant to how much weight their testimony is given. (6)

Brief Summary:

After defining some important terms and providing an outline of the paper in Section 1, McKinnon provides a useful, concrete example of a trans woman’s experience of being gaslighted by a cisgender “ally” at a party: The trans woman attempts to explain how someone

has harmfully mispronounced her, the “ally” expresses doubt that she understood the situation accurately, and instead defaults to her *own* interpretation of the interaction as correct.

Using this example through the rest of the paper, McKinnon argues that marginalized people are better epistemically positioned than their “allies” to assess a situation, and therefore, when the “ally” judges their own testimony to have the same weight as the affected person, they are committing epistemic injustice against them. Further, since the “ally” has positioned themselves as trustworthy, it is a significant betrayal for the marginalized person to encounter skeptical cross-examination or dismissal from them when she reasonably expected support and default credibility afforded to her claims.

In Sections 2 and 3, McKinnon provides some important epistemic context for her claim that “social situatedness matters to [one’s] epistemic positions with respect to [oneself], the world, and others” (5). Some important concepts that McKinnon uses include weighing of various sources of testimony, critiques of objectivity, first person authority, harmful feedback loops of discrediting speakers [“epistemic injustice circle (of hell)”], epistemic asymmetry based on social position, and trust.

Finally, in Section 4 McKinnon identifies the concepts of “ally” and the resulting “ally culture” to be *structurally* prone to give rise to and affirm harmful “ally” behavior toward less privileged targets of “allyship”. She argues that being an “ally” is seen as a status that one achieves and either (1) does not need to actively maintain or (2) someone criticizing an “ally’s” behavior must make a positive case about the overall balance of harm-to-benefit of the “ally’s” life and involvement, instead of being able to solely criticize a particular action or failure to act. “But I’m an ally” is used as a way of rejecting the criticism often of those with whom one claims to be “allied” and often is accompanied by attacks on the marginalized person’s epistemic authority in making the judgment. Therefore, since “allyship” as a status or achievement is prone to this defensive and undermining posture, McKinnon suggests a change. She argues that people should focus on “cultivating concrete actions in people, removing the label and—in a sense—*certification* as being an “ally.” (8) She suggests that the concept of an active bystander, whose standing as such is always relative to a particular incident: were they active or passive?

Possible Applications:

Epistemology Class

- Would function nicely as an intro to meaty social epistemology stuff
- Otherwise, it would probably need its own intro (esp. stuff on stereotypes and epistemic injustice)

Feminist Philosophy

- Especially with regard to allyship

Moral Psychology

- Conversations on character versus actions
- Conversations on the ethics of actions that harm others versus actions that harm one oneself

Intro to Ethics

Philosophy of Race

Complementary Texts/Resources:

Epistemic Injustice Literature

- Miranda Fricker, e.g. “Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing”
- Kristie Dotson, e.g. “Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing”
- Jose Medina, e.g. “Hermeneutical injustice and polyphonic contextualism: Social silences and shared hermeneutical responsibilities”
- Jennifer Lackey, e.g. “Pitted Against Yourself: Credibility and False Confessions”

Standpoint Epistemology Literature

- Patricia Hill Collins, The social construction of black feminist thought.
- Charles Mills
- Rebecca Kukla and Laura Ruetsche, e.g. “Contingent Natures and Virtuous Knowers: Could Epistemology be ‘Gendered?’”

Epistemic Authority

- Talia Bettcher, “Trans identities and first-person authority”

Trust

- Annette Byer
- Karen Jones

Ally

- Mia Mckenzie
- Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others”

Ethics

- Maggie Little

Philosophy of Race

- Allison Bailey, “White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?”

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Solidarity

- Iris Young

Gaslighting

- Paul Benson
- Hilde Lindemann

Possible Class Activities:

- Watch Rachel’s video!
 - Rachel Mckinnon’s Video on Introduction to Standpoint Epistemology

- Watch video on selective attention!
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo>
 - Point: Patterns of salience profoundly shape what we know.
 - And patterns of salience are often consequences of social identity!

- Comics
 - Everyday racism and the role of bystanders
 - E.g. what to do if someone is being harassed on a bus
 - <https://www.facebook.com/themiddleeasternfeminist/photos/a.565332650209980.1073741828.565316806878231/1117370921672814/?type=3&theater>

- Watch the movie!: Gaslight
 - Content Warning: The movie depicts traumatic abuse.

- Discuss: The harms of mispronouncing people!
 - Seems important if you are introducing this in epistemology course
 - Not as relevant if you are discussing the article in the context of a course where these issues have been discussed.

- Bystander stuff
 - Watch videos depicting psychological experiments
 - Discuss empirical data

- Consider: Alternative Critique of Allyship