In the late twentieth-century, the question ‘Who is an epistemic agent?’ began to challenge mainstream epistemology, whose ‘neutral’ epistemic agent mirrored those dominating the halls of the academy – white, middle to upper class, western, heterosexual males. Sandra Harding in *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988); Helen Longino in *Science as Social Knowledge* (1990); Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (1991); Lorraine Code in *What Can She Know?* (1991), and Susantha Goonatilake in ‘Modern Science in the Periphery’ (1993) critique this homogenous and privileged view of epistemic agency. Harding, Longino, and Code critiqued the male-centered nature of the epistemic agent. Collins’ analysis furthered this discussion by also questioning the dominant view that privileges white bodies as the assumed generic epistemic agents. Spivak’s and Goonatilake’s work significantly repositioned the epistemic agent through critical questions about dominant knowledge centered on western colonial productions of ideas and practices, and how these silence, objectify, and ignore colonized epistemic agents. These arguments presented a critical lens for generating questions regarding epistemic justice and injustice. For example, Spivak’s argument in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ is a question of epistemic justice: can colonized subjects have the autonomy to speak and be heard in situations of epistemic violence, when one’s knowledge and voice are utterly denied by another culture?

Although these feminist and post-colonial critiques challenged dominant assumptions in mainstream epistemology, like mainstream epistemology, they also start from the assumption that the epistemic agent is an individual. This individualistic view of epistemic agency makes it challenging to understand how communities, especially oppressed communities, experience epistemic injustice and how these communities collectively engage in epistemic resistance. Fortunately, there have been alternative models of epistemic agency proposed that recognize the epistemic agency of communities. These present pathways through which one can generate insights about how epistemic communities can be formed under conditions of oppression and how communities engage in resistant epistemic strategies.

The chapter begins by developing an understanding of epistemological communities and how they form under conditions of oppression. I then explore how these epistemic communities become ‘communities of epistemic resistance’. From there I engage work on epistemic justice, tying these to arguments about epistemic resistance to make the claim that if we take seriously the idea that communities are epistemic agents, this provides a more robust understanding of
Epistemic communities and institutions

epistemic injustice and illuminates how individuals and communities actively resist epistemic injustice. I finish with an example of a community of epistemic resistance generated via a prison writing group.

Forming communities

The epistemic agency of communities and the formation of communities have played an important role in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy by raising critical questions about how knowledge is constituted, who counts as a legitimate knower, and how conditions of epistemic injustice shape communities and individuals. Lynn Hankinson Nelson initiated this discussion in contemporary feminist epistemology by arguing in ‘Epistemological Communities’ that ‘it is communities that construct and acquire knowledge’ and thus ‘epistemological communities’, not individuals, should be recognized as ‘the agents of epistemology’ (1993:123). She claims that it is communities who develop standards of evidence, practices, and methodologies that lead to knowledge. Knowledge is experiential, social, and built holistically, where the knowledge one acquires is interdependent upon and interconnected with the knowledge others acquire (1993:141). Thus, ‘you or I can only know what we know (or could know), for some “we”’ (1990:124).

Although Nelson was perhaps more explicit in her formulation of the epistemic agency of communities, writing in the mid-twentieth-century W.E.B. Du Bois and John Dewey were prescient in their writings about how epistemological communities are formed. In The Public and Its Problems, Dewey argues that communities are not loose associations of individuals but are formed by pertinent conditions that create meaningful linkages among people (1954:38). Furthermore, according to Dewey, we are not members of a community by virtue of birth, though this can contribute to our belonging to a community; ‘[w]e are born organic beings associated with others, but we are not born members of a community. The young have to be brought within the traditions, outlooks, and interests which characterize a community by means of education: by unremitting instructions and by learning in connection with the phenomenon of overt association’ (154). We become members of a community by being ‘brought within’ or experiencing the pertinent conditions of that community. Although it is tempting to see the use of ‘education’ in a positive light, this was not Dewey’s intention. ‘Education’ is descriptive of particular situations – negative, positive, or both given the conditions in which it is taking place. Furthermore, he uses it more broadly than how ‘education’ is normally conceived. Thus, education and acquiring knowledge are not primarily done in academic settings; they are what happen when we live and experience the world. ‘Education’ should be seen not only as a set of practices that can lovingly confer tradition, but also as practices that confer habits of privilege, experiences of marginalization, ways of viewing our own and others’ bodies, practices that sediment social relationships and interactions, and an epistemic lens through which to experience and know the world.

Nelson frames this process in a similar way, arguing that although sensory experience might be an individual experience in the limited sense, that it is happening in and through a body; that experience is a social experience, an experience shaped by the communities in which one is immersed. Any experience and any knowledge that arises from these experiences is shaped by the history, culture, physical location, standards of evidence, methods, and ontologies of the communities through which one lives (1993:138). Knowledge is the product of communities, not only in the sense of the explicit and implicit collaboration necessary to acquire a new piece of knowledge, but also that epistemic communities set the conditions so that particular types of knowledge and particular interpretations are accepted.
In ‘What is Africa to Me?’, Du Bois’ understanding of ‘social heritage’ drives home the significance of epistemological communities and how these are formed through conditions of oppression. He describes the process of forming communities as occurring through ‘social heritage’, indicating how one learns to be a member of a community through the habituation, experience, or education of being in that community and how that shapes the way one comes to develop knowledge and action in the world (1995:655). Like Dewey and Nelson, Du Bois emphasizes the experiential and epistemic nature of communities, but much more explicitly shows how the ‘social heritage’ of oppression shapes and links individuals into epistemological communities. Thus, although Nelson and Dewey note that oppression contributes to the formation of epistemological communities, Du Bois views it as fundamental in how it shapes and links oppressed communities together, even those that are geographically distant from each other. Du Bois’ use of ‘social heritage’ in his essay is key. Du Bois states that prior to the Trans Atlantic slave trade, people of the African continent lived in small communities, tied together by face-to-face interactions. Yet, as he argues,

one thing is sure and that is the fact that since the fifteenth century these ancestors of mine and their other descendants have had a common history; have suffered common disaster and have one long memory. The actual ties of heritage between the individuals of this group, vary with the ancestors that they have in common and many others: Europeans and Semites, perhaps Mongolians, certainly American Indians . . . [T]he real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery.

(655, my italics)

Slavery, he argues, created ‘one long memory’ – an epistemological connection that crosses the immediacy of local contact to form a community in which African Americans are united more broadly by a ‘social heritage of slavery’, an experiential and epistemological heritage providing ongoing ‘education’ that creates and recreates global systems of racism and racist exploitation.

An understanding of how epistemological communities are formed under the experiential nature of oppressive conditions can be further developed through Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Chandra Mohanty’s *Feminism without Borders* (2003). Benedict Anderson argues that all communities that are larger than those that can sustain face-to-face interaction are imagined communities. Much like Du Bois’ formulation of social heritage, Anderson is articulating a view of community that is joined together not by immediate geographical bonds like a neighborhood or university, but by overarching and shared epistemological, political, and experiential conditions. Mohanty builds on this conception to consider how Third World women are imagined communities that can constitute ‘communities of resistance’. Mohanty argues that imagined communities suggest a ‘political rather than a biological or cultural bases for alliance. It is not color or sex that constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class, and gender’ (47). Thus, these communities are not formed based on biology or primarily physical location, though location can be significant, but instead how bodies-minds are conceived, enacted, and acted upon, in and through social, political, and epistemological structures. These conditions instigate what Mohanty calls ‘communities of resistance’. Like Du Bois’ understanding of communities arising out of a shared social heritage, ‘communities of resistance’ are those that are formed out of resistance to persistent, systemic domination and oppression (47). These communities of resistance reformulate and counter the dominant framework that dehumanizes them, that denies the significance and validity of their experience and knowledge, and that speaks for them and frames the groundwork for knowledge and epistemic legitimacy such that the voices of oppressed people are invisible, silenced, and discredited. As I will point to later
in the chapter, oppressed groups resist these conditions through a number of epistemic strategies, including epistemic separatism, i.e., refusing to engage in dialogue and knowledge generating projects with oppressors; proposing alternative epistemic frameworks and practices; creating strategic alliances with other oppressed groups and/or allies with epistemic resources; and learning to use the epistemic skills of the dominant framework to develop epistemic strategies to counter the framework. These provide openings for new knowledge that reflects the experience of oppressed groups, new practices that meet their needs, and collaborations that give witness and legitimation to the voice and knowledge of oppressed groups.

Thus, if we bring together Anderson and Mohanty with Nelson, Dewey, and Du Bois, we can see that oppression creates pertinent conditions and social heritages, systems of education/experience, that link similarly affected people into epistemological communities. When we understand epistemological communities in the sense that epistemological communities can and frequently do arise from persistent oppression, the ‘unremitting’ ‘education’ that arises from the shared social heritage of this oppression, it becomes clear that communities experience epistemic injustice in virtue of being an oppressed community. Furthermore, this understanding provides the clarity that they resist epistemic injustice as an epistemological community. Following Chandra Mohanty’s lead, I am going to describe such communities as communities of epistemic resistance.

Communities of epistemic resistance and epistemic injustice

Focus on epistemic justice has developed from theorizing primarily about the role of epistemic justice in its relationship to individuals to theorizing about the role of epistemic injustice with communities. Given what I develop in the previous section, this move is critical for putting epistemic justice into action, since much of the social and epistemic injustice that people experience is in virtue of the community to which they belong. Among the important contributions to this area is work by Miranda Fricker, Elizabeth Anderson, Rebecca Mason, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr.

In her initial formulation of epistemic agency and epistemic virtue in Epistemic Injustice, Miranda Fricker’s approach was an individualistic one, even though she acknowledges that hermeneutical injustice results from the ignorance of communities’ and institutions’ lack of collective understanding of the experiences of oppressed communities (2007:130, 154). Fricker states

> the wrong of testimonial injustice [when individuals are not considered to be reliable or trustworthy informants resulting from ‘identity prejudice’] is inflicted individual to individual . . . By contrast hermeneutical injustice is not inflicted by any agent, but rather is caused by a feature of the collective hermeneutical resources – a one-off blind spot (in incidental cases), or (in systemic cases) a lacuna generated by a structural identity prejudice in the hermeneutical repertoire.

> (168)

Even though hermeneutical injustice is the result of collective ignorance of the sort that Charles Mills describes in The Racial Contract as an epistemology of ignorance, ‘a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions’ (1997:18, my emphasis), Fricker argues that ‘as with testimonial justice, the virtue [of hermeneutical justice] is to be individuated at its mediate end . . . The mediate end of the virtue, then, is to neutralize the impact of structural identity prejudice on one’s credibility judgment’ (173, original emphasis). This does not preclude ‘collective exercise’ or that ‘it takes group political action for social change’ (174). But that ‘the primary ethical role
for the virtue of hermeneutical justice, then, remains one of mitigating the negative impact of hermeneutical injustice on the speaker’ (174).

In ‘Can There Be Institutional Virtues?’ (2009) and ‘Group Testimony: The Making of a Good Collective Informant’ (2012), Fricker seeks to develop a more social account of epistemic virtues. She argues that institutions can possess collective epistemic virtues and vices, which are more or less desirable based on the needs of the institution and those that the institution serves (2009). Furthermore, these epistemic virtues and vices are not necessarily properties of any one individual in the collective, but are properties of the overall institutional functioning. Thus epistemic virtues of institutions, such as trustworthiness, must be cultivated at the institutional level to promote democratic ideals (2012).

In ‘Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions’ (2012), Elizabeth Anderson also seeks a more social account of epistemic virtues and argues for an expanded structural account of testimonial injustice, which must be remedied through the development of structural virtues (2012:169). In recognizing that social institutions, such as judicial, educational, political, and medical bodies, function as epistemic institutions, Anderson argues that an institution is testimonially just when its members ‘jointly commit themselves to operating according to institutionalized principles that are designed to achieve testimonial justice, such as giving hearers enough time to make unbiased assessments’ (2012:168–169). When practicing in an unjust manner, these epistemic institutions can create and sustain structural ‘group-based credibility deficits: differential markers of credibility; ethnocentrism; and “the shared reality bias”’ (2012:169), even though when analyzed from the level of an individual epistemic agent, there was no individual epistemic failing. Thus, to create sustainable epistemic justice, epistemic institutions need to be constructed or reconstructed to prevent epistemic injustice (2012:171).

While Anderson’s and Fricker’s analyses of epistemic injustice engage the failings of epistemic institutions and means for remedying these failings, there has also been important work on epistemic injustice that focuses on the effects of epistemic injustice on oppressed communities and the ways communities resist epistemic injustice. In my description of how epistemic communities are formed, I used the phrase ‘communities of epistemic resistance’, building from Mohanty’s work on communities of resistance. In what follows I characterize arguments by José Medina, Rebecca Mason, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. as those in the area of communities of epistemic resistance. These writers develop arguments that recognize: 1) the epistemic injustice inflicted upon communities because of their oppressed status, 2) how epistemic injustice furthers and maintains the oppression of communities, and 3) how communities resist epistemic injustice. I am going to engage the last of these three approaches.

One critique of Fricker’s work is that her account of epistemic injustice silences the agency and resistance of marginalized communities. Mason argues that Fricker ‘pays insufficient attention to non-dominant hermeneutical resources to which members of marginalized groups have access in order to render their social experiences communicatively intelligible’ (2011:298). Because Fricker does not identify these epistemic resources, she does not recognize how marginalized epistemic communities resist dominant epistemic frameworks to make meaning and to actively change their material and epistemic conditions; instead on Fricker’s account marginalized communities appear to have little epistemic agency and to share a collective and symmetrical ignorance with dominant knowers (Mason and Pohlhaus, Jr.).

Medina in The Epistemology of Resistance (2013) explicitly formulates arguments that point to the epistemic agency of communities and how they resist dominant epistemologies. Medina argues that epistemic virtues, the sort needed to be epistemically just and to resist epistemic injustice – humility, diligence/curiosity, and open-mindedness – are developed when members of oppressed groups engage in ‘positive epistemic resistance’ (2013:50). Positive epistemic resistance results
from engaging critically both internally and externally to ‘unmask prejudices and biases, react to bodies of ignorance’ and ‘to be self-critical, to compare and contrast one’s beliefs to meet justificatory demands, to recognize cognitive gaps’ (2013: 50). When oppressed groups develop epistemic virtues out of this practice, they are able to develop a subversive lucidity. This epistemic clarity has a high level of epistemic agency, such that the epistemically virtuous subject has ‘the potential to question widely held assumptions and prejudices, to see things afresh and redirect our perceptual habits, to find a way out or an alternative to epistemic blind alleys, and so on’ (2013:45). As Pohlhaus, Jr., along with Du Bois and Mohanty, argues, these epistemic resources develop out of critically engaged shared experiences of oppression ‘that stand outside or beyond any one individual’ (2012:718) such that knowers do not develop this level of epistemic agency merely as individuals in an oppressed community, but within a community with a shared social heritage through which they have developed collective epistemic resources that are resistant to epistemic oppression. Thus, although experiences of oppression may be necessary for subversive lucidity, they are not sufficient.

Communities function as communities of epistemic resistance in spite of and frequently without the notice of dominant epistemic frameworks because oppressed epistemic communities have ‘non-dominant hermeneutical resources to draw upon to interpret their social experiences’ such that they have ‘shrewd comprehension of their experiences’ that are frequently ‘inaudible from dominant social locations’ (Mason 2011:300). When this ‘shrewd comprehension’ is enacted in a subversively lucid manner, these communities are able to ‘recalibrate and/or create new epistemic resources for knowing the [dominant and marginalized] world more adequately’ (Pohlhaus, Jr. 2012:720). One ‘community’ notable for their ability to develop alternative and subversive epistemic resources is the carceral community.

**Epistemology of incarceration**

An oppressed community develops into a community of epistemic resistance through the intentional development of a subversive lucidity that reformulates the epistemic terrain. This is well-evidenced in the collective work of the LoCI-Wittenberg University Writing Group, of which I am a member. We write from behind the walls of London Correctional Institution, a men’s prison in London, Ohio. In ‘An Epistemology of Incarceration: Constructing Knowing on the Inside’, we argue that in spite of the oppressive and dehumanizing conditions that exist in the carceral system, people who are incarcerated can develop a type of subversive lucidity that we describe as an ‘epistemology of incarceration’. An epistemology of incarceration is a ‘strategic epistemology such that people make knowledge and meaning for themselves even under conditions of incarceration’ (10).

For those living outside of prison, developing a critical epistemic consciousness is an achievement of hard, self-reflective work done in concert with a community that productively challenges, questions, and nurtures this work by resisting dominant communities that oppress, deny, and obstruct such a subversive consciousness. An epistemology of incarceration also is the result of hard, critical work. Our group argues that developing subversive lucidity may be even more challenging in prison than on the outside ‘because of the high level of control and management that people experience in prison and because survival in prison requires a level of numbness, that regardless of one’s epistemic acuity, is necessary to survive prison’ (13). Even with the epistemic obstacles people who are incarcerated face, which we detail in our article, many inmates develop the epistemic acuity necessary for an epistemology of incarceration.

This epistemic stance, unique to those that have served time in prison, exemplifies a community of epistemic resistance in three primary ways. First, members of this community have
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developed a shared heightened consciousness, what we describe as a liminal consciousness, that is the result of ‘the prisoner’s internal and internalized perception of self as both once free and now incarcerated; the bureaucratic, historical, and social structure of the prison; and prisoner’s knowledge of the deeply entrenched perceptions, attitudes and practices of people and institutions on the outside’ (11).

Second, inmates with liminal consciousness engage in positive epistemic resistance by generating possibilities for developing epistemic virtues in themselves and in others. Among the ways they do this are: 1) Developing reading and study groups honed on particular topics. 2) Engaging ideas that are inside and outside of the dominant epistemic frameworks, strategically recognizing that ‘to appear to know’ one must be able to reflect and critique dominant frameworks, but in order ‘to know’ they must also study and understand alternative frameworks. 3) Practicing som-aesthetics, such as yoga, martial arts, and meditation, and teaching or practicing these with other inmates, to develop resources for calm reflection, balance, and equanimity, making their lives in prison more bearable and preparing them for challenges they face on the outside. These practices create opportunities for developing ‘the humility to recognize one’s cognitive gaps; the diligence to engage in critical self-assessment; curiosity about what is out there to learn and experience; and open-mindedness to put one’s self in a new learning situation and make one’s self epistemically vulnerable’ (18).

These practices are collective, done not only for the development of one’s own knowledge and one’s own epistemic virtues, but intentionally through an epistemic community that resists the demands of prison life. For example, while I am teaching outside of the U.S. in 2016, some members of our writing group have formed a class on philosophy of science and critical thinking to prepare new students for our class the next academic year. In doing so, they are exercising a level of agency and epistemic subversivity that benefits the collective more so than the individual leaders. This indicates a level of cooperative resistance and clear understanding of the communal nature of knowledge and education that many of us on the outside fail to recognize in our culture, which valorizes individual achievement, recognition, and compensation. The leaders of these groups don’t receive pay, reduced time served, or any material benefits for this service. However, these practices help this community prevent or mitigate a ‘shutting down one’s intellectual and epistemic resources’ through the embodiment of the emotional, epistemic, and physical demands of the carceral system (16).

Although on the outside many think of education as a limited epistemic strategy because we tend to minimize its ability to create sustained, meaningful change, in prison education is viewed by many inmates as a prime means to create change for oneself, inside and hopefully outside of prison, and to create change for the overall social structure of the prison. Moreover, because people who are incarcerated ‘are caricaturized in popular and political culture as unable to control themselves and as intellectually empty, cultivating an intellectual life that promotes epistemic virtues that most people on the outside don’t possess’ is a method to resist the dehumanization of incarceration (16). In organizing and participating in these epistemic strategies, the inmates develop shared epistemic resources that not only changes their situation, but that of others.

Third, through their epistemology of incarceration, these inmates function as a community of epistemic resistance by engaging in individual and collective resistance. This can occur through developing epistemic strategies that the LoCI–Wittenberg University Writing Group refers to as ‘doing a bit’ and ‘picking your shots’, which are shared, but frequently subtle, strategies for physical, emotional, and epistemic survival in prison. Some are resistant by overt displays of heightened consciousness, such as student projects that challenge the view of prison life and the experiences of people who are incarcerated. For example, a student made a poster board for our
class using materials taken from prison bulletin boards showing that the posted rules and practical and administrative structures of prison create a ‘prison habitus’, which works to ensure that inmates will not develop the epistemic autonomy to survive well on the outside. It is important to note that this student could have been put in solitary confinement for taking materials from bulletin boards. He was highly aware of this, yet felt these materials were critical for painting a full picture of his argument.

What these points about the epistemology of incarceration show is that people who are incarcerated, who arguably are those who are the least likely to have their voices and experiences heard and understood by those on the outside, who experience significant levels of epistemic injustice, are also among those who are most actively resisting such injustice. They are actively and collectively creating and articulating meaning in multiple formats for themselves and others similarly situated.

What is important to take away from this chapter is that when we acknowledge that marginalized communities resist epistemic injustice, we can recognize that although epistemic injustice is an injustice, it is not an epistemic dead end. Looking through the lens of epistemological communities allows us to understand not only how communities form under conditions of persistent injustice, but also how they resist this injustice by creating meaning, knowledge, and change.

Related chapters: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 17, 20, 21

Notes
1 All references in this section are to this chapter.
2 Our group refers to this type of shutting down as being ‘institutionalized’.
3 ‘Doing a bit’ is a term used by people who are incarcerated to doing one’s time/sentence (a bit of time) in prison and how one does her/his time. ‘Picking your shots’ is a term used to describe making conscious choices if, how, and at what cost one is going to resist prison’s institutional structure.

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