

Paper of the Year 2023 - Conversation

"Epistemic injustice and hegemonic ordeal in management and organization studies: Advancing Black scholarship" *Human Relations*, Vol 76, Issue 1.

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Smriti: Let me begin by congratulating you. It's a huge honor to win the Paper of the Year and we are very pleased that you chose us as an outlet for your work. Can you briefly tell us why and how you decided to pick up the concepts of epistemic injustice and hegemonic ordeal? What made you find these areas so significant and important?

Penelope: It was really based on my personal experiences. I had tried to publish research that was related to Africa and Africans and was often getting feedback that was very negative. I was starting to give up. Then I went to a talk that Rashed (Rashedur Chowdhury) held about Rana Plaza (Chowdhury, 2018) and I listened to what he was discussing. I realized that he was studying violence, with the goal to try and find solutions. I approached him, he looked through the draft and he said we need to go and consider something that is broader, more than just my personal experiences. Rashed suggested that we look into the experiences of Black scholars in general. That's when I started reading and that's how we eventually got to the idea of epistemic injustice based on the work of Miranda Fricker (2010), and then started breaking it down with regards to epistemic survival.

Rashedur: The paper I was presenting was on Rana Plaza, and I was talking about paradoxical obedience (Chowdhury, 2018). I was in a depressive mood around that time, due to the Rana Plaza field work I was conducting, and I was reflecting "what was the point of writing if it doesn't help or if I can't help somehow". When Penelope approached me, it was comforting, and we connected quickly. Quite a lot of substantial work on the paper happened through the WhatsApp messaging. That was good, it was a back and forth, constructing ideas and challenging each other. That was the foundation of the paper, where both of us felt that there is an injustice happening around us, even within academia, and we wanted to highlight those issues.

Smriti: Thank you for sharing that. I was born and raised in India, so I can relate to the background. Would you maybe tell us about your backgrounds?

Penelope: Yes, I was born and raised in Zimbabwe, and that's where I acquired most of my early education. Then I moved to a country in the European Union (EU) where my adoptive father is from.

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When I was there I started to have a stronger connection to the African identity, not because I wanted to, but it was the context which taught me that I was not Zimbabwean and I was not my father's adoptive daughter, instead I was seen as 'just' an African. I was called a Black African girl and that drove my passion for going back to my roots and trying to understand why a continent would be homogenized to the extent that everyone is African. I am African, but I thought my identity as Zimbabwean was core to who I was, but in that EU country it just wasn't.

This guided my research interests through my PhD where I looked at branding the continent of Africa and sustainable development. This research continued growing when I came to Ireland, where I'm currently based. I joined a charity that was committed to integrate African context in business education and my role at the time was to share ideas on how we to make Africa part of the curriculum.

Smriti: I can relate to so much of that. Growing up in India, I always thought of myself as my father's daughter, I belong to this family, I belong to this town. In India we are very proud of our state-based identity, so I always saw myself like that. But after I came to the US, something funny happened where suddenly nobody knew where I was from, and the Indian community was so small that nobody cared which part of India I was from. Later, when my children were growing up, we became South Asian because in the school system there weren't many Indian American kids. The few kids from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka banded together, forming a shared South Asian identity. I really relate to your experience, Penelope and I applaud you for choosing to translate your experience into scholarship.

Rashedur: When doing my PhD, I really wanted to tell stories that resonated with reality, but it felt like talking about reality was the hardest thing. You need to be subtle; you need to frame things correctly; you need to play the language game. As an example, during my PhD I was introduced to this idea of 'subaltern', which Spivak (1988) popularized over the years. That term I was writing a paper and a friend of mine had seen it and said "Oh, you're talking about Gramsci (1971), that's really scary. Why don't you reconsider how you want to frame it." It felt like I had to change the tone of my thesis on 'subaltern' to make it palatable. If I'd used the term 'marginalized stakeholder' instead, suddenly it's a more viable concept, but to me it's the same thing. And then everything becomes all about framing and I had this sense of not being able to tell the story I wanted to tell.

Then I read Medina (2012) and Fricker's (2010) work on Epistemic Injustice and I just felt that it resonated so much with what we experience on a day-to-day basis. When we talk about epistemic injustice, obviously we focus on Black scholarship but in a way it's a signal that we need to open up this space for everyone. It's not always the white, black, brown issues. As an intellectual, our duty is to tell the truth and we prevent ourselves from doing this by categorizing ourselves critical or right-wing, left-wing, central-left, center-right, all sort of labels.

Smriti: Academia mirrors society. Since society is not completely fair, by and large academia mirrors that. But some of it is also that we may not have a structure. As Penelope so very eloquently put it, she had the idea for the paper, she had a story, but you (Rashed) helped her put it in a theoretical framework. Suddenly the implications became broader. Penelope's personal story became about all marginalized scholars. At *Human Relations* we get a lot of papers from different parts of the world and

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the stories are great, but because the framing is not there, the structure is not there, it becomes very difficult to accept them.

Rashedur: One of the challenges I have seen is even if you come up with a construct or advancement of knowledge, it's not enough. You need to go the extra mile to prove that you are developmental, you are less critical, and I feel you cannot be political. And I think that's where sometimes problems arise because there are subtleties within communities in writing style that shouldn't be excluded. Personally, I feel that inclusivity is one of the greatest strengths of Human Relations and I love to submit papers for that reason.

Smriti: Thank you, we love to hear things like this. We try very hard at *Human Relations* to be inclusive. It is one of our core missions to include everyone and allow all stories so that everyone has a voice, and everyone has equal right to voice and all voices can be heard by everyone.

Yasin: It is funny actually, because in this conversation we are all internationals, and we have all been more or less successful in a country where we are not born. That is something for us to all celebrate. I also resonate with your stories, being Turkish. Turkey is big country with lots of different regions and cultures and specialties. And often people meet me and say "Oh, you don't look Turkish". What they mean is they are expecting me to have darker skin with brown eyes. It highlights the subtle implications of language that I think can be used as a tool to discriminate. Moving to the article, I wanted to ask you about the categories that you came up with - compromising, collusion and radicalization.

Penelope: I think the concepts evolved as we continued the dialogue. Initially we submitted a slightly different version of the final manuscript to the Academy of Management, and we got a prize - best paper award. Through those discussions and reviewer feedback, we managed to refine the concepts by drawing on our experiences, reviewers' comments, and existing literature. In some of the existing literature we found discussion of the problems but they weren't labelled as assimilation or collusion or radicalization etc.

Rashedur: We feel extremely lucky Alessia Contu was our editor for the paper. I think most of us, as scholars, want to write the best paper possible. And the editor plays an extremely important role because if the editor is objective, they'll select the reviewers very objectively. We feel lucky, we had a great editor, we had great reviewers. At the beginning of the writing process, it felt like Penelope was extremely radical and I was not radical enough. And then later when we were writing the recent paper, I was complaining to her, "it feels like I'm very radical, you are becoming conservative, what's wrong?". And what we agreed on was having the critical mindset is most important. Can we see each other's points of view neutrally?

Penelope: At the beginning of the process, I was feeling angry. I feel Rashed coached me through the process, offering mentorship and guidance. Our dialogue with reviewers restored my confidence as a potential scholar. I felt for the first time that there were people who saw me as a potential knowledge contributor. Of course, the reviewer feedback was very critical, very tough, but it was also very caring, very constructive and re-humanizing to me as a scholar. That helped to alleviate some of the anger and

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the disappointment that I had. Through this process I have learned to believe that there's a community of scholars and there are journals out there that are willing to accept my contribution. I might be less radical, but I hope I will continue to do my best to speak truth to power and tell truth to people.

Smriti: This is exactly what we ask our reviewers to do. We push our reviewers to help as much as possible. We carefully add people to our editorial board, and we tell them that kindness is one of the top criteria. Tone is so important, especially in our business where we are going through the blind review process.

Yasin: My next question is actually very much related to the review process. It's great to hear that you had a constructive experience with *Human Relations*. Would you like to add anything about your experience. What could have been improved? What could have been better?

Penelope: I think one point I would add to the wider publishing world is that where there is potential, particularly when dealing with early career scholars, it would be beneficial for journal editors to provide them with the chance to try and prove themselves. Like in our case, in my case. Because if you are published once, your life changes.

Yasin: Very good point. Now we move to talking about the emphasis on theory development in practice. And I love the fact that you emphasize the ignored nature of Black scholarship and its importance and what we can do from a management theory perspective to make it more prevalent. How do you think your work will shape future debates? Do you think there are practical implications of your paper?

Penelope: I have to admit that it's a challenging question. One of the areas that I've been very interested in is artificial intelligence, ChatGPT for example. The knowledge it is gaining and disseminating is Western-centric. I've done a few experiments myself, I asked ChatGPT to explain some things to me. It claims it can communicate in multiple languages, but it doesn't. ChatGPT does very well in terms of reflecting and emulating existing knowledge that is currently on the internet but if we know, from existing research, that the white male is the knowledge producer then we see the extension of white supremacy into these technologies. And this extension needs to be challenged because epistemic injustice is being reproduced in new technological areas such as ChatGPT and artificial intelligence.

Rashedur: I think this is probably the most important question to answer because we are talking about how to take this work to the next level. Penelope and I have been writing quite a lot, and one thing we have to understand, and also admit as a community, is that we are sitting on a white structure where there's a lot of white entitlement. What I mean by white entitlement is the ability to ignore others who come from the margin, the periphery, not white. I have seen, for instance, people picking up some of the ideas we presented in our work without citing us. And, if you look at the work of Du Bois it took a hundred years for Du Bois to get recognition that he was the founder of American sociology who wrote foundational texts on Black scholarship.

That, to me, is the first step, recognizing the structure and recognizing that if something is out there, I should acknowledge it, I should build on it. Obviously, I understand that it is complicated around citations but there is a status quo being maintained.

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Smriti: You make a great point, Rashed. It's not just race though; female scholars often aren't given the recognition they deserve. And this relates to corporate settings, who gets to speak? How often do you see the people from marginalized communities making their points, making sure their voice is getting heard? One final question, do you have any final words for new scholars or just our readers? Any specific advice for these two audiences.

Penelope: For authors that will be submitting to *Human Relations* or other journals and are at the beginning of the process, one piece of advice I could give them is to take your time to reflect or review any feedback. Think about potential answers before sitting down to do revisions. That process of reflection and deliberation is really helpful. Ask yourself "why are they asking me to do this?". And you might discover something that you could have overlooked.

Rashedur: One thing that was so prominent in my scholarly life, was fear. There's always a fear of don't do this, don't do that, don't say that, there's all sort of advice! One of the greatest challenges was how you can overcome those fears. And I don't think to be honest I overcame my fear during my PhD. I only overcame my fear when I went to talk with the victims of Rana Plaza in December, 2014. My advice would be that everyone has their own journey, everyone has their own cause or reason why they're doing things and everyone is equally important in how they want to contribute. You need to figure out how you want to get there, what you want to achieve, what is important for you. Have conviction and realize it's not just about getting published. Noam Chomsky, in response to being asked what he wanted his legacy to be, what's the last sentence he would like to see in his tombstone, said "He tried his best." I found that extremely inspiring.

Smriti: The only way to get rid of fear is by being authentic. And it is so true that in all our work we are only able to do the right thing when we are being ourselves.

Penelope: Before we go, I would like to thank Human Relations for the best paper award. What they have done is to communicate to the world that Black scholarship matters and Black scholars do matter. And they are one of the journals to provide that space for Black scholarship to gain more legitimacy within management and organization studies.

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