The Progressive Stack: An Intersectional Feminist Approach to Pedagogy

Abstract

The “progressive stack,” a heuristic that arose in progressive social movements, has recently gained traction as pedagogical technique, although currently there is virtually no peer-reviewed scholarship surrounding its use in the classroom. This paper aims to establish an ethical infrastructure governing the progressive stack’s adoption as a pedagogical technique while also theoretically engaging common objections. First, it explores recent scholarship on epistemic injustice, oppression, and exploitation and its applicability to the educational environment. Second, it explains the progressive stack and how it can temporarily address and remediate injustices in the classroom. Third, it replies to objections for using the progressive stack by applying Robin DiAngelo's “White Fragility” and offers suggestions for conditions of solidarity through experiential reparations in the classroom setting. Finally, it argues that educators should engage these objections by means of critically compassionate intellectualism without recentering the needs of the privileged.

Keywords

progressive stack; epistemic oppression; epistemic exploitation; privileged fragility; pedagogy of discomfort

Epistemic Oppression in the Classroom

Over the last two decades, considerable attention has been paid to issues of social justice in relation to epistemology. This is a particularly difficult and complex area of study, not least due to its intangible nature and the difficulty of evaluating an epistemological system from within. This paper considers social justice and epistemology in relation to pedagogy and offers a simple, user-friendly framework known as the *progressive stack* that has the potential to remediate epistemic injustice in the classroom.

Of considerable importance to social justice, epistemology, and their combined pedagogical application is the work of Miranda Fricker, particularly her investigation of *epistemic injustice* (Fricker 2003, 2006, 2007). For Fricker, epistemic injustice can be categorized into two primary types: "testimonial injustice, in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge," and "hermeneutical injustice, in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding" (2007, 5). She argues,

> Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences. (2007, 1)

Both injustices constitute chronic and challenging problems within education, which are exacerbated by the fact that they can be self-fulfilling or self-augmenting (Fricker 2007, 57–58). Moreover, these injustices "can cramp self-development, so that a person may be, quite literally, prevented from becoming who they are" (Fricker 2007, 5). We see this often in classrooms where non-white students are expected to abnegate the authenticity of their cultural heritage to adopt the "correct" vernacular, diction, spelling, and grammar of (white) received (American) English. Of note, Fricker identifies that there is no epistemic injustice unless there is (identity) prejudice (Fricker 2007, 2017). It is of relevance, then, that it has been conclusively established that prejudice exists in classroom discourses, both by subjective measures like Students of Color self-reports and by empirical data (e.g., Chesler,

Wilson, & Malani 1993; Hutchinson 2014; Jacoby-Senghor et al. 2016; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso. 2000). Likewise, it is well established that marginalized knowers confront epistemic oppression and injustice: “For marginalized persons in dominant institutions, unjust conditions and unequal bargaining power are the rule, not the exception.” (Davis 2016, 8).

Fricker’s conceptualization of epistemic injustice, however useful and groundbreaking, has been limited in its capacity to lead to justice in the classroom environment. As such, Kristie Dotson is recognized among the most influential voices in discussions taking place at the intersection of applied epistemology and social justice, especially as she identifies *irreducible* problems within epistemic systems themselves. Dotson’s concept of *epistemic oppression*, which subsumes and expands much that was observed by Fricker, “refers to a persistent and unwarranted infringement on the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources that hinder one’s contributions to knowledge production” (Dotson 2014, 116). Going beyond Fricker, then, Dotson demonstrates three orders of epistemic oppression experienced by marginalized groups as a result of prejudiced assumptions about their capacity as knowers. For Dotson, Fricker’s testimonial injustice represents the core of *first-order* epistemic oppression, while hermeneutical injustice underlies that of the *second order*. In this, however, Dotson spots an important absence: a *third-order* form of epistemic oppression that is “caused by an epistemic agent’s situated ignorance, in the form of willful hermeneutical ignorance, in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm to the epistemic agency of a knower” (2012, 31). This yields a useful separation of reducible and irreducible forms of epistemic oppression.

Both reducible and irreducible forms of epistemic oppression are products of socially and historically contingent power relations, but the former is a consequence of social and political oppression while the latter is a feature of the epistemological system itself. Dotson’s analysis therefore provides an explanation that epistemic exclusion impedes the ability for the epistemically oppressed to produce knowledge by excluding certain situated knowledge from the realm of shared epistemological

resources. These include, for example, the lived experience of oppression, the affective, and epistemological approaches that fall outside of the "rational" Western philosophical tradition (cf. Wolf 2017). (This precise sort of exclusion was codified in that tradition nearly from its beginning in *Symposium*, which begins with Socrates ejecting all women and slaves.) Despite recent advances in justice-oriented pedagogical research, epistemic oppression in its various forms remains a demonstrated problem within the classroom setting. It is therefore of particular interest because it puts marginalized students at a disadvantage and perpetuates a stunted epistemological system that restricts learning (Bailey 2014, 2015, 2017; Dotson 2011, 2014; Wolf 2017).

Any meaningful attempt to address irreducible epistemic oppression requires what Dotson (2012, 2014) describes as a third-order change of organizational schemata, in which the (privileged) knower becomes aware of the limits of her (dominant) epistemological system. To get a sense of this, imagine the situation in which someone, student or instructor, insists that a marginalized student explain the affective or spiritual content of her lived experience in terms deemed suitable only in the Western logic-centric mode of interpretation (cf. Wolf 2017). Specifically, consider the case from my own class in which a South Asian Hindu immigrant student attempted to describe her complex relationship with her racial experiences across two cultures, her religion, and *dharma*. She was met with incredulity and dismissal by white students who possessed the epistemic resources (1) only to understand accounts in terms of "reason" and "evidence" as prescribed by the Western philosophical canon and (2) only to understand knowledge that draws upon the symbols and beliefs of (white) Protestant religious narratives. They could not comprehend or give credibility to a South Asian Hindu knower or recognize the limits of their own epistemic system as causing this credibility deficit. They thus simply regarded her account as incredible. Only by understanding the limitations of the dominant epistemological system being imposed—which, if it can be done at all from within, is extremely rare—might such a third-order change be possible and thus this demand be rightly rendered illegitimate.

Dotson therefore describes such a change as “extraordinarily difficult” and “impossible for many” (2014, 131–132).

Alison Bailey is another scholar who addresses epistemic concerns within the classroom but, for Bailey (2009; cf. Dotson 2011), Tuana and Sullivan’s (2007) concept of *willful ignorance* on the part of the privileged is the more pressing issue. In that light, she painstakingly sets out the source of the most common form of resistance put forth by students in classrooms that adopt diversity and inclusion initiatives. This is the problem of *privilege-evasive epistemic pushback*, which Bailey defines as “the variety of willful ignorance that many members of dominant groups engage in when they are asked to consider both the lived experience and structural injustices that members of marginalized groups experience daily” (Bailey 2015; cf. Wolf 2017). Immediately coming to mind is a classroom discussion in which a white male student demanded of a black female student that diversity and inclusion initiatives be justified in terms of “equality of opportunity” or else be considered “(reverse)-racist.” This kind of resistance, which assumes a (non-existent) level societal playing field, is common in such situations. Take for another example the student who insisted, in reply to a black student talking about her uncomfortable lived experiences with Whiteness, that she is being “racist” because “racism is discrimination based upon race,” thus revealing a willful ignorance of the significance of social power structures to experiences of racism (cf. Applebaum 2017). By pushing back in this way, as comports with the observations of Dotson (2014), privileged students avoid understanding the perspectives of marginalised students and/or recognizing them as knowers because doing so threatens their epistemic security, which undermines their sense of themselves and their access to a belief that society is just and fair.

To consider marginalized students simply “disadvantaged” epistemically, however, is to risk understating the magnitude of the problem and further inflict psychological harm. To be asked to justify one’s knowledge and then be undervalued as a knower and dismissed is not merely epistemic exclusion; it is epistemic abuse. Nora Berenstain (2016) makes this clear in her development of

epistemic exploitation, which is a problem inadvertently attendant to many diversity and inclusion pedagogies that seek to forward marginalized perspectives within the classroom. Such exploitation occurs when privileged persons feel entitled to demand that marginalized persons justify their claims or expect them to educate the privileged on the oppression they face. These recenter the needs of privileged groups while enabling their assumption that they are both better able and entitled to evaluate marginalized knowledge under “legitimate” epistemologies. This occurred in my class when a black student spent nearly fifteen minutes answering questions about how rape culture affects black women differently than it does white women due to racialized assumptions around gender, sexuality, and male entitlement. She found the apparent interest in understanding her account encouraging at first but soon became upset and exhausted as white women and men pressed to to explain in ever-increasing detail *how* she knew that a certain behavior arose due to racist assumptions (from white women mostly) and *why* she read it as male entitlement and sexual harassment (from men mostly). Not only was her credibility immediately put up for questioning, but also other students then felt entitled to increasingly detailed accounts of traumatic experiences from her (and others) and for the analyses of these experiences to be put in terms *they* understand. As a result, I ended the interrogation. Epistemic exploitation therefore can be seen to maintain structures of oppression by pressing marginalized students into providing a free and often painful and demeaning service to privileged ones. This injury is intensified when the shared experience goes on to be dismissed, which is what led Spivak (1988) to identify it as a kind of “epistemic violence.” As Berenstain (2016) makes clear, epistemic exploitation is very commonly witnessed by those working within pedagogy, and strategies to prevent it are currently underdeveloped.

It is therefore important to consider the need for a solution which incorporates both the structural and individual element of epistemic *injustice* and acknowledges both reducible (socially-based) and irreducible (epistemically-based) epistemic *oppression*—without relying upon the epistemic exploitation of marginalized students. This is no small task! To avoid oversimplifying the issues or

placing too much confidence in the capabilities and good faith of individuals, the structure should be informed by Bailey's observations about pushback, Boler's advice on utilizing discomfort pedagogically, and Davis' warning that rigidity can lead to unwitting perpetuation of oppression. One direct way to approach this complex problem is by a means that levels the field within the classroom; that is, by de/reprivileging the classroom environment so that systemic inequities and injustices can be overcome. A *progressive stack pedagogy* can offer this as a starting point; an initial, relatively simple and user-friendly framework for addressing endemic epistemic problems in classroom environments that retains enough versatility to combine and enhance with other established justice-oriented pedagogical methods.

A Progressive Stack Pedagogy

"Progressive stacking" is a practice developed by social activists (and used during the Occupy Wall Street Movement, hereafter OWS) as a way of navigating movement politics and for determining which people deserve to stand nearest to the front of public venues, such as meetings and concerts (Friend 2017; Quintana and Supiano 2017). As described by Brucato, it is a heuristic "in which people from historically oppressed groups talk first, and when frequent contributors to the discussion are moved back in the speaking order" (2012, 81; cf. Maharawal 2013, 179). In general, a *progressive stack*, in this sense, is a heuristic (or set of heuristics) by which members of oppressed and/or privileged groups can be appropriately prioritized in access or opportunity in a way that can counteract, disrupt, or remediate prevailing social injustices. In agreement with Maharawal, I deem that the impact of a progressive stack architecture depends specifically upon "the inclusivity of decision-making structures [which] may be judged by the metric of how they either enable or restrict participation by working class people, minorities, women, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and those who are differently abled" (2013, 180). Particularly, forwarding these qualities defines the progressive stack in terms of its capacity as a tool of remediation, as Maharawal went on to argue in the context of the OWS movement:

> My argument is that it is only through its *radical* politics of inclusion that Occupy recognized this political imperative and strove (with varying degrees of success and failure) to move beyond an *exclusionary* liberal universalist interpretation of the 99 percent. This is the strand within Occupy wherein organizational forms took seriously privilege and uneven power relations, wherein those involved were self-reflexive and deconstructed/dismantled their own forms of privilege and power, indeed, wherein the work of anti-oppression and dismantling privilege were considered fundamental *political* work. (2013, 180)

More specifically, a progressive stack is applied whenever privilege-salient (i.e., intersectional) variables such as race, gender, class, and other identity statuses form the basis for selectively providing marginalized individuals greater opportunity to be heard, considered knowers, and granted access to shared epistemic spaces. This is not just theoretical. As demonstrated by Maharawal (2013), progressive stacking was effective in this capacity where it was applied within the OWS movement. Similarly, Juris et al. also observed that, in practice, the progressive stack constituted an effective means for navigating power and difference within the OWS movement in Boston, particularly for generating "an awareness of internal differences, privilege and intersecting racial, class, gender and other forms of domination typical of the wider society" (2012, 436). Their analysis indicates the progressive stack may be especially useful for avoiding (epistemic) exploitation of marginalized knowers, as it addresses a need for "a self-reflexive, adaptable approach toward negotiating and bridging such differences" (p. 435). As further noted by Picower, educators played one of the most significant roles in facilitating successful organizational efforts within the context of political movements: "TAs [teacher activists] used an additional tool called a 'progressive stack' to ensure that patterns of racism and marginalization were not reproduced within their space" (2013, 52). In practice,

> a 'stack keeper' was designated to keep the 'stack,' a list of people who want to speak. Rather than chronological order of who indicated they wanted to speak, they used a

> ‘progressive stack’ prioritizing the voices of historically marginalized people (i.e., people of color, women, people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, Questioning (LGTBQ), youth). (2013, 52)

In that context, the progressive stack was effective. As described in Picower by an educator named Xiomara, “The benefit… is that people who are members of dominant groups are made aware of their privilege and are reminded to step back … Historically marginalized groups of people are encouraged to have their voices heard and to step up” (Picower 2013, 53). Moreover, the progressive stack achieves this through a recognized and intersectional prioritization schema that fluidly de/reprivileges the (learning) environment.

Though criticized in the movement environment for “act[ing] as a Band-Aid solution covering over pervasive power dynamics that are hard to pinpoint and resolve” that can lead progressive activists to “feel slightly better” about themselves while eschewing real work (Seltzer 2011, n.p.), there are compelling theoretical and demonstrable reasons to embrace the progressive stack in educational arenas. These are bolstered by the effectiveness documented by Picower’s (2013) teacher activists when applied *by educators*, even within the movement environment. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Daniels, a progressive stack pedagogical approach has the capacity, in practice, to mitigate biases even if only within the classroom, both implicit and explicit (Flaherty 2017). This successful application may follow because, as a pedagogical tool, the progressive stack is specifically designed to align with Dotson’s (2014) observations about organizational schemata and decrease epistemic oppression within that space by increasing the range of the shared epistemic resources in the space. It would accomplish this by drawing from and applying an intersectional hermeneutic in order to de/reprivilege the classroom environment to create learning opportunities in line with José Medina’s (2012) *Epistemology of Resistance*. That is, it can offer an equitable opportunity for speech from all voices in the classroom space—especially voices that are frequently discounted, submerged, marginalized, or im/explicitly discredited/excluded from dominant discourses (cf. Maharawal 2013; Picower 2013). In so doing, it

aims to improve the likelihood that marginalized voices within classroom spaces will set the modes of interpretation and form the shared epistemic resource within the space (cf. Dotson 2014) while more privileged ones will find themselves in an ideal learning environment for challenging their own views (cf. Boler 1999, 2004; cf. Medina 2012).

Though the pedagogical literature has given this promising tool virtually no attention, it has been employed in some classrooms at least since the 1990s (Flaherty 2017). For example, as described by University of Pennsylvania teaching assistant Stephanie McKellop, "I will always call on my black women students first. Other [people of color] get second-tier priority. [White women] come next. And, if I have to, white men" (quoted in Flaherty 2017, n.p.). Despite its intersectional merits, however, the progressive stack has not transferred to the classroom without significant pushback and controversy. McKellop was, for instance, asked by the University of Pennsylvania to desist from using a progressive stack classroom architecture after complaints (Flaherty 2017), which led to her story becoming the epicenter of a (largely reactionary) media spectacle. As McKellop explained, "Penn thinks I'm racist and discriminatory towards my students for using a very well-worn pedagogical tactic which includes calling on [people of color]" (quoted in Flaherty 2017, n.p.). Daniels described this pushback against McKellop's progressively stacked classroom as being "ripped from the 'playbook' of the far right" and observed it came in response to McKellop trying to "uphold [the University of Pennsylvania's] values" (Flaherty 2017, n.p.). Indeed, the backlash produced an intense tempest-in-a-teapot social media reaction among reactionary voices, particularly those situated on the (far) political right, including "classical liberals," the "alt-right," and contemporary Nazi sympathizers who view the pedagogy as "reverse" discrimination toward privileged groups (Cowart 2017; Flaherty 2017; Mitchell 2017; Saul 2017; Ubiñas 2017). While it is important to unpack and examine these claims, before doing so I will now take a more in depth look at the application of the progressive stack.

Applying the Progressive Stack Pedagogy

A prerequisite objective for applying a progressive stack is identifying extant structures of privilege and inequality, especially those contributing or related to epistemic injustices. These inequalities are best understood intersectionally. That is, oppression within the classroom proceeds from an appreciation that power dynamics embedded in race, gender, and a suite of other intersecting variables that make up one's identity work in concert. Intersecting oppressions, as such, tend to multiply oppressions at the same time as obscuring their precise sources. In addition to those already mentioned, these include immigration status, weight/body composition, sexual orientation, age, ability status, socioeconomic status, mental health factors, and others, and they can be difficult to counter because they form a matrix of oppression for which there rarely is any single source (cf. Collins 1990; Crenshaw 2012). A progressive stack classroom architecture therefore begins by collecting and coding this information before attempting to de/reprivilege the classroom environment accordingly.

In this way—by engaging directly and materially with the intersectional reality of students in a classroom ecosystem—the progressive stack seeks to de/reprivilege the ancestral, historical, gendered, and other systemic oppressions, inequalities, disadvantages, and advantages embedded in students' lived experiences (thus statuses as knowers) to improve educational opportunities and outcomes. In theory, it would effect this goal by expanding the set of shared epistemic resources within the classroom in accordance with concerns identified by various researchers, particularly Dotson (2014) and Medina (2013). Specifically, marginalized students in progressively stacked classrooms could gain greater opportunity to share knowledge while privileged students have an opportunity to experience a reformed classroom environment, reflect on the ways they have been complicit in maintaining unequal power relations, and momentarily undo the epistemic injustices these dynamics impose. As such, a progressive stack pedagogy would provide a means to interrupt problematic hegemonic processes while simultaneously offering those who benefit from privilege an opportunity to temporarily relinquish them to others who are the beneficiaries of fewer systemic advantages. This result has been, if imperfectly, corroborated by many experiences in the OWS movement environment (esp. Picower 2013).

In practice, applying the progressive stack requires little more than classroom organization and logistics. At the beginning of every semester students would be encouraged to volunteer information about the facts of their personal identities, while being left free not to. Perhaps the most successful pedagogical method currently in use for determining such information through an educational and interactive framework has been a (popular) "step forward, step back"/"privilege walk" methodology (Privilege Walk n.d.; cf. Seltzer 2011; Step Forward n.d.), which I have applied in my own classes. These activities, which students self-report enjoying, invite learners to participate in an interactive event in which they physically or symbolically (say, on a game board or scorecard) step forward by a given numbers of steps whenever they meet certain privileging conditions and step back when described by certain known oppressive features.

Because privilege and oppression can present themselves in both obvious and subtle ways that may not have been critically examined, the specific markers of privilege and oppression employed in each case may be revealed best when queried in both direct and indirect ways. Still, all prompts should be salient to intersectionally material variables like race, gender, sexual orientation, cis/trans* status, ability, credentials, ancestry, and immigration status, among others. Direct means for assessing these variables can include noting such privileging and marginalizing factors explicitly; for instance, "take W steps forward if you are white," "take B steps backward if you are Black," "take M steps forward if you are a man," "take T steps backwards if you identify as trans*," and so on (cf. Privilege Walk n.d.; Step Forward n.d.). Indirect means could assess these variables more subtly by employing statistical assessments applicable to structural inequalities in society; for example, "take R steps forward if you had more than fifty books in your house when you were growing up" and "take S steps backward if you had to explain your sexuality to your parents" (Privilege Walk n.d.; Step Forward n.d.). When tallied, these scores can effectively code students' background levels of oppression and privilege for "stack keeping," as it was termed during the OWS movement.

The machinery of the progressive stack then indexes those scores from highest (more privilege/opportunity) to lowest (more oppression) as a means of determining an order of priority for calling upon or otherwise engaging students within the classroom/educational space. Roughly, these scores order students in a way reflective of Dotson's (2014) Analogy of the Cave, in which the most oppressed are imagined positioned farthest on the left while the most privileged are farthest on the right. It then resets their status as knowers accordingly. This therefore creates a functional tool by which the pre-existing organizational schemata within the classroom can be approximately assessed and intervened upon. Of note, by assessing advantage and oppression numerically according to some appropriately (preferably institutionally) established rubric (such as those in the "Step Forward, Step Back"/"Progressive Walk" documents [Progressive Walk n.d.; Step Forward n.d.]) that could be further tailored to each institution or classroom, subtle and implicit biases (cf. Flaherty 2017) can be avoided and overcome in a fair and inclusive way that takes into account the full spectrum of advantages and disadvantages in any specific educational space.

Consistent with Dotson's (2014) analysis of disrupting epistemic oppression, implementation of the progressive stack thus employed would entail that students with the lowest scores (most oppression) would be preferentially selected to speak first/most during classroom discussion or questions (potentially extending to access/depth/timeliness of email responses from the instructor, etc.), moving up the scale until it came to those students with very high scores (e.g., affluent straight white cisgendered men from stable households). (Students who opt out could be provisionally assigned maximal scores until the instructor feels confident in modifying them, solving the problem of attempted avoidance of the progressive stack pedagogy while gently encouraging participation.) Under a progressive stack pedagogical architecture such as this, all high-privilege students above a (reasonably determined) threshold would be invited to continue listening and learning throughout the semester. Further, they would be asked to enhance the educational opportunity therein by engaging in certain

educational experiences which I have called *experiential reparations*, as detailed below, that aim to further increase the set of shared epistemic resources in the classroom through direct experience.

In theory, by giving marginalized students priority, the shared epistemic resources of the classroom can be expanded while minimizing some of the usual difficulties attendant to such an effort. Typically, overcoming privilege in the classroom has to rely upon privileged students' capacity to recognize a problem within their own epistemic system (Bailey 2017; Dotson 2014) which, for them, works (according to the Western reason-dominated tradition [cf. Wolf 2017]). Instead, it may rely upon their willingness to confront their own pernicious/willful ignorance (Dotson 2011), experience discomfort (Applebaum 2017; Boler 1999), or experience epistemic friction (Medina 2012). Ultimately, this often results in resistance through privilege-evasive epistemic pushback (Bailey 2017) and for undue expectations as in epistemic exploitation (Berenstain 2016). These, however, can be diminished within a system led voluntarily by marginalized persons in a de/reprivileged learning environment in which the classroom architecture itself allows them to take the lead in setting modes of interpretations. That is, the progressive stack offers marginalized students the opportunity to be heard while reifying for more privileged students the self-reinforcing sources of marginalization and oppression. Because the progressive stack accomplishes this by de/reprivileging the classroom rather than by compelling marginalized students to give testimony about their oppression for the benefit of the privileged, it can facilitate the first of these goals while avoiding many circumstances that fall into Berenstain's (2016) category of exploitation.

Thus, among the advantages of a customizable rubric within the progressive stack is the emergence of a capacity for educators to view manifestations of privilege in classroom participation regarding who volunteers to speak, who gets called upon, and how frequently members of different groups are invited to participate. These estimated parameters can then be written into their customized stack inventory to reorganize participation in a dynamic classroom environment (cf. Banks 1988; Baxter 2002). For example, though a fitting progressive stack could be designed within the uniquely

situated context of any cultural milieu, white, cis, hetero, able-bodied, middle/upper class, and male privilege would generally act as a normative standard that grounds and selects for participatory engagement. Of note, then, classrooms in which progressive stacks are applied not only do *not* reproduce social hierarchies of power and privilege (like hegemonic masculinist norms, implicit white supremacism, or heteronormativity), they also make educational tools out of them (Banks 1988; Baxter 2002; DiAngelo and Flynn 2010). In this sense, the progressive stack pedagogy opens a door for marginalized students to gain epistemic resources and justice while providing privileged students a (passive) opportunity to experientially learn Medina's (2012) epistemic virtues of intellectual curiosity, humility, and open-mindedness. Following from Medina's insights, it can achieve this by putting privileged students in a position where they are not "epistemically spoiled," generating educational opportunities through epistemic friction, and teaching them to operate within an epistemic system that was not set by them.

A progressive stack pedagogy thereby offers an easily applied potential means to de/reprivilege classroom environments and, in some cases, creates a less skewed learning field that increases the total set of available shared epistemic resources. Of note, although this paper focuses on the philosophy classroom in particular, a progressive stack pedagogy can be applied in essentially any classroom setting, regardless of course content. Indeed, if it is true that the progressive stack provides an applicable means to remediate oppression, resolve criticisms of overly individualistic approaches, and offer marginalized students access to epistemic justice in classroom environments, institutionalizing it may be a moral imperative not just for feminist, critical race, and postcolonial educators but also for academic institutions.

Addressing Objections

The progressive stack as a pedagogical tool has inspired and will continue to inspire resistance, as do all methods that engage and promote diversity and inclusion. In this section, I characterize this resistance and detail ways of engaging with it in two subsections. The first characterizes resistance to

the progressive stack as a pedagogical tool, while the second argues for why the progressive stack can be successful at overcoming this issue while avoiding some circumstances that induce epistemic exploitation that can limit justice-oriented pedagogies.

Privileged Fragility

One feature that sets the progressive stack pedagogy apart from other justice-oriented pedagogies is its capacity to de/reprivilege the learning field within the classroom. This, in turn, by temporarily and partially reversing patterns of dominance and oppression, provides epistemic opportunities for marginalized students (cf. Medina 2012). In my experience and in agreement with theory, especially that of Medina (2012) and Dotson (2014), this often results expanding the set of shared epistemic resources in the classroom. Specifically, it achieves this by improving access to traditionally marginalized epistemic resources and providing experiential learning that makes those resources more readily accessible without the need to inflict oppressions upon any students.

Predictably, the primary criticism of the progressive stack in a pedagogical context has been motivated by privilege-evasive epistemic pushback (Bailey 2017). Much of this criticism has occurred outside of the classroom (where students often seem interested in learning more when these tools are applied correctly) and has taken the form of outrage on social media and in the popular press (Cowart 2017; Flaherty 2017; Mitchell 2017; Saul 2017; Ubiñas 2017). Among these negative reactions, perhaps most obvious thematically emerges by claiming the progressive stack reinforces "reverse racism." This criticism seeks to (mis)lead people to believe that a pedagogical application of the progressive stack discriminates against students from dominant social, sexual, racial (perceived), educational, ability, and other systemically privileged circumstances for insufficiently just reasons. That is, nearly all criticism of the progressive stack as a pedagogical tool is based upon a fundamental (defensive) misunderstanding of the role of systemic power dynamics defining oppression parameters.

This criticism must therefore be understood in a scholarly context. What is needed, in particular, is a theoretical lens that can account for and properly situate such criticisms and the reactionary vitriol

that accompanies them. One fitting lens is that of *privileged fragility*, which naturally expands Robin DiAngelo's (2011) concept of "White Fragility." DiAngelo's observations about White Fragility extend naturally, *mutatis mutandis*, through the systemic dynamics underlying white privilege to other forms of unearned societal privilege, including male privilege (generating "male fragility"), straight privilege (generating "straight fragility"), and cisgendered privilege (generating "cis-fragility"), and so on. Particularly, DiAngelo's development of White Fragility provides an interpretative framework that clarifies why many people who benefit from systemic social, economic, and educational privileges become outraged over the pedagogical application of a progressive stack. In defining White Fragility, DiAngelo observes:

> White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (2011, 54)

In other words, hegemonic social constructs, entrenched and hierarchical power dynamics, unearned social and economic advantages, and an ingrained history of privilege tend to make privileged people more susceptible to "trauma" from equity-based ideas. These include the progressive stack. This trauma pushes them toward defensive/aggressive postures and anxiety concerning their loss of privileged status (DiAngelo & Flynn 2010; Hart, Straka, & Rowe 2017; Matias & DiAngelo 2013), the forfeiture of security in their own epistemic systems, and disruption to viewing their own identity group(s) as "good" (Bailey 2017, 878). This experience is stressful for these individuals, as mere thoughts about

the absence of privilege can cause confusion, backlash, rage, disorientation, and even grief (DiAngelo 2010; Flynn 2015; Matias 2016b; Montgomery 2013).

Particularly, as often occurs when engaging diversity in a way that promotes opportunities for marginalized groups and knowers, applying the progressive stack provokes privileged fragility. It, in turn, engenders the production of privilege-preserving epistemic pushback (Bailey 2017). This, as characterized from within the dominant epistemic system, often manifests specifically as accusations of "reverse-racism." (Though it falls beyond the scope of this paper to determine precisely *why* pushback takes this form in the currently privileged epistemic system, it is plausible that it follows from the fact that the prevailing system does not admit present and historical power dynamics as central to the generation of social realities. Thus, something that superficially appears to be prejudicing upon factors including race is mistakenly branded "racist.") This sort of reaction, of course, is not surprising to anyone familiar with similar pushback against other diversity initiatives perceived to threaten the privilege of dominant groups, including Affirmative Action (Dietrich 2015; Premdas 2016), Title IX (Curtis 2017), and efforts to increase the proportion of women in STEM fields (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull 2016; e.g., Seron et al. 2018).

Speaking practically, educators therefore should expect the progressive stack to appear threatening in its invitation for privileged students to remain silent in the presence of those with whom they are accustomed to speaking over/for. Privileged fragility predicts that when, after a lifetime of discharging speech urges with the impunities of privilege, those with power are suddenly asked instead to listen (testimonial justice), to be placed within the interpretive modes of others who have less privilege (hermeneutic justice), or to recognize the limits of their own epistemic system (third-order epistemic justice), the result often induces rage and backlash, especially in those with the most privilege (DiAngelo 2010; Flynn 2015; Matias 2014, 2016a, 2016b).

This, however, is less a reason for avoiding the progressive stack pedagogy than an opportunity for learning embedded within it. As DiAngelo explains, this resistance arises from the influence of

pervasive privilege. For DiAngelo, pervasive privilege germinates the opposite of resilience in the privileged and, over time, erodes their psychological capacity to understand that privilege itself does not confer any inherent or unlimited rights (DiAngelo 2010, 2011). Concurrent with the loss of fortitude is the emergence of fragility and a concomitant nearly irresistible urge not only to speak (rather than listen) but also to silence those invited to speak in their stead. These reactions stem from the erosion of psychological resilience due to habitual epistemic privilege which are sometimes made salient by progressively stacked architectures. That is, these reactions support Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice being perpetrated by privileged groups that are accustomed to being "constantly epistemically puffed up" (2007, 20) (or "epistemically spoiled" [Medina 2012]). In this, they present an educational opportunity rather than a liability because they generate the sort of "epistemic friction" Medina (2012) indicates is necessary to overcoming epistemic oppressions and cultivating epistemic virtues in their place. As such, we are reminded of Dotson's (2014) assessment that attempts made from within to rectify the epistemic exclusion and oppression of marginalized groups are crucial to manufacturing circumstances that can induce third-order changes in organizational schemata.

DiAngelo, Bailey, and others, then, offer cogent explanatory mechanisms for understanding why men, whites, and other traditionally and systemically privileged groups resist the progressive stack. As seen through this lens, it is only incumbent upon educators to be mindful enough of this sort of fragility while generating epistemic friction not to *shame* or *alienate* privileged students, which will produce greater and entrenched resistance. At the same time, however, educators must also take considerable care not to validate privilege, sympathize with it, or reinforce it and in so doing, recenter the needs of privileged groups at the expense of marginalized ones (Applebaum 2017). The reactionary, verbal protestations of those who oppose the progressive stack are verbal behaviors and defensive mechanisms that mask the fragility inherent to those inculcated in privilege. That is, individuals from dominant groups do not complain because they actually think the progressive stack is unfair; rather,

they complain because they think it is unfair that they cannot continue to exercise their (speech) privileges from a place of epistemic dominance (Matias 2017).

Nevertheless, while the progressive stack's pedagogical architecture is already suited to avoid alienation and shame and to elude epistemic exploitation by making de/reprivileging the classroom its main mode of operation, further measures may be necessary to its implementation because privilege can be fragile. To minimize student alienation while maximizing educational engagement for privileged students in a progressively stacked classroom, two potential pragmatic and pedagogically applicable approaches are critically compassionate intellectualism (CCI) and articulating the method as a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler 1999).

Engaging Privileged Fragility

Educators implementing a progressive stack pedagogy are likely to find that de/reprivileging the classroom will trigger fragility-based resistance and epistemic pushback, as the generation of epistemic friction often does (Medina 2012, esp. 23–25). They thus bear responsibility to turn outrage-based responses and emotional fallout from "fragile" individuals (who are being asked to momentarily relinquish discursive speech privileges) into instructive opportunities without causing student alienation. This begins by acknowledging that the progressive stack pedagogy creates a de/reprivileged classroom architecture, which privileged students will often perceive at first as unfair. It also requires recognizing that every such moment of pushback produces an opportunity to instruct about privilege and oppression. Within this is the further recognition that the progressively stack classroom minimizes compelling marginalized students to become epistemic resources for the privileged. It does because it does not compel any marginalized student to explain oppression or lived experiences to more privileged ones (thus also avoiding that oft-trodden road to instances of privilege-preserving epistemic pushback and thus any of the three orders of epistemic oppression) and does not permit more privileged students to demand it of them. Consider again my black student who attempted to explain the racial components of rape culture to a class in which white women and men continually asked her to justify

her experiences and knowledge. In a progressively stacked classroom, she could have enjoyed the opportunity to volunteer that information so far as she wanted (as she did in the traditional classroom she was actually in), but the opportunity for more privileged students to challenge her view and demand more of her would be curtailed by deprioritizing their access to comment. That is, because it primarily de/reprivileges *voluntary* classroom engagements without calling upon marginalized students to explain oppression to the privileged ones—while preventing them from demanding such explanations in a classroom-structural way—the progressive stack pedagogy is able to avoid much epistemic exploitation of marginalized students (Berenstain 2016).

Further educational opportunities available within moments of pushback can be accessed by engaging criticism of past approaches to diverse and inclusive pedagogies, especially those of Megan Boler (1999, 2004, 2016) and Barbara Applebaum (2017). For Boler, a key concept to teach privileged students is "critical hope," which, in contrast to naïve hope (an optimism that things will naturally improve), is dependent upon reflexivity. Explaining, she writes,

> Critical hope requires seeing one's self within historical context, reevaluating the relationship of one's privilege to others in the world. It entails as well seeing how these relations of power shift and change over time and in one's lifetime. The pedagogical relation is a negotiation of the hegemonically constructed habits, internalized as attachments to particular beliefs and corresponding emotional reactions to change. (Boler 2004, 130)

It is in this sense that critical hope connects moral outrage to an impetus to relieve undeserved suffering, which makes it central within a broader *pedagogy of discomfort* (Boler 1999) that can ethically "shatter worldviews" (Boler 2004). Under Boler's pedagogy of discomfort, privileged students encountering social justice-oriented perturbations of experience and thus experiencing their own privileged fragility are motivated to sit with their discomfort and tolerate it in the hope of becoming more human. Because this discomfort is essential to the pedagogical goal, privileged

students will be encouraged to do so ideally without offering absolution or redemption, which risk allaying consciousness-changing guilt and introspection (Boler 1999, 2004).

It is, in fact, in this sense that Applebaum (2017) draws on the concept of critical hope in her assessment that angry responses to diversity initiatives are best understood as an expression of imagined *in*vulnerability, and instead students should be encouraged to embrace vulnerability. The importance of *critical* hope, she suggests, is that it enables educators to support privileged students *without* comforting them. Thus, for Applebaum, educators making use of diversity and inclusion-oriented pedagogical tools should do so without being complicit in alleviating discomfort, which would re-center the privileged students' needs. Instead, they should offer motivations to endure and learn from it, which centers the marginalized. By de/reprivileging the classroom environment, however, this is precisely the opportunity an educator applying the progressive stack creates.

In order to prevent shame and alienation in privileged students and instead induce critical hope, Boler's pedagogy of discomfort within the progressive stack pedagogy may be best received if tempered partially in light of "critically compassionate intellectualism" (CCI) (Rector-Aranda 2017; Romero, Arce, & Cammarota 2009). CCI was developed within social justice-oriented programs designed to counter racial injustices faced by Latinx and other minority students the United States' education system, but it provides a useful framework for counterbalancing the apparent "unfairness" many will perceive within a progressive stack pedagogy.

CCI is predicated on Freire's (1970) classic *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and more recent work in authentic caring (Valenzuela 1999), which must be judiciously balanced when working instead with privileged students by taking into account Boler's (2004, 2016) and Applebaum's (2017) concerns about giving absolution or comfort. Rector-Aranda, with a qualifying quotation from Mintz (n.b.: cf. Applebaum 2017), sums up the goals of CCI as follows,

> "The alleviation or eradication of suffering is a goal of social justice education while, simultaneously, students suffer in the process of learning about the suffering of others"

> (Mintz 2013, 215), which can be partially mediated by compassionate relationships in which instructors make conscious efforts to support their students through this process. (Rector-Aranda 2017, 20)

Supporting privileged students who suffer without re-centering their needs can be accomplished by forming compassionate, empathetic relationships that help privileged (especially cis, straight, white, and male) students “find comfort with discomfort” (Rector-Aranda 2017, 20) without alleviating it (Applebaum 2017; Boler 1999), while they remain silent. For example, this can be applied by identifying moments of pushback/fragility and calling upon it, such as by asking the student directly if he is uncomfortable. If he responds that he is, he can be compassionately reminded that this discomfort is, in fact, an educational tool and urging him to find comfort within it while he listens silently. “I understand. It’s hard. Acknowledge your discomfort as part of your privileged fragility and try to become comfortable with it while you listen to what she is saying about how white men are a problem in society,” I have urged many of my white, male students, many of whom have expressed appreciation for it later.

Listening and learning in discomfort are invaluable skills and active—not passive—means by which privileged students can learn to do the important work of learning empathy, expanding their epistemic resources to include those of marginalized students (cf. Dotson 2014), and thus desiring to engage in classroom exercises that undo systemic oppression (cf. Boler 1999). This reveals that, under a CCI implementation, the progressive stack allows educators to forestall privilege-evasive/preserving epistemic pushback (cf. Bailey 2015, 2017). By centering the testimony and modes of interpretation of marginalized/oppressed students, this also allows the progressive stack to overcome the problematic side of what Wolf (2017) terms the “reason/emotion divide” that “pervades current philosophical discourse,” this being the belief that philosophers (who are by extension educators) should adopt what Phyllis Rooney (2014, 35) refers to as “the default skeptical stance” with regard to the testimonies of marginalized people.

Experiential Reparations

Because of its inherently palliative impacts and orientation against shaming or alienating students, CCI enables pedagogies to provide progressive educators with an opportunity to extend and enhance the pedagogical (of discomfort) potential of the progressively stacked classroom without inducing the sort of epistemic entrenchment and resistance that accompanies shame. Particularly, privileged students may benefit from experiencing a simulacrum of immersion into the roots of those systemic oppressions that the progressive stack attempts to reverse. These could take the form of what might be called *experiential reparations*, in which privileged students are encouraged to experience simulated injustices in the classroom that provide additional opportunity to sit with their discomfort and learn from it. The goal of incorporating experiential reparations into a progressive stack pedagogy aligns perfectly with creating opportunities for students to reflexively (Boler 2004) engage with pedagogical discomfort in an experiential way while the progressively stacked learning environment provides further insights into the limitations of their epistemic paradigm (Dotson 2014). Specifically, where the prioritization heuristic intrinsic to any progressive stack architecture elevates the opportunities and epistemic resources of marginalized students, experiential reparations seek to partially open privileged students to those resources by giving them simulated experience of relative oppression through a safe and voluntary learning experience.

In this way, an opportunity arises to maximize the set of shared epistemic resources and induce a third-order change in organizational schemata within the classroom. Further, though it often inspires resistance initially, it can take this opportunity without inducing shame or alienation by approaching these measures with CCI. In practice, many students report this approach as “uncomfortable at first” but later express gratitude for it effecting a “worldview shattering” pedagogy of discomfort, as detailed by Boler (1999, 2004) and Applebaum (2017). Of particular value, because experiential reparations do their instruction *experientially*, they can teach privileged students about oppression *without* epistemically exploiting marginalized students by making them into epistemic resources for privileged

ones (Berenstain 2016). As one student remarked in my end-of-course evaluations, this practice was the one that "changed everything" (cf. Boler 2004) about her/his view about "how marginalized groups have been subtely [sic] and intentionally excluded from discussions and opportunities."

Specifically, then, experiential reparations added into a progressive stack pedagogy can be applied to better clarify the historical injustices faced by Students of Color, women, and other marginalized groups within the student body while providing a condition of solidarity with marginalized students (cf. Applebaum 2017). For example, white students are unlikely to be epistemically qualified to understand the historical injustices of slavery, which presents a unique educational opportunity within a broader pedagogy of the progressive stack. On this point, experiential reparations in the classroom environment could be effected, for example, by inviting *in an educational context* white students to sit on the floor, or, to engage even more profoundly, to wear (light) chains around their shoulders, wrists, or ankles, for the duration of the course. My own students have found this initially awkward but highly instructive after explaining its pedagogical role and inviting them to find comfort in the discomfort of it. Similarly, male students could be instructively spoken over and skeptically questioned about their qualifications to speak authoritatively on academic subjects in order to provide insight into problems commonly and historically faced by women, *inter alia*, in professional and educational settings. In my experience, privileged students are slower to warm to this experience and need its educational purpose made explicit in terms of the pedagogy of discomfort and de/reprivileging architecture of the progressive stack, including that the intent is not to shame or embarrass them. In this sense, to effect these goals in accordance with CCI and a pedagogy of discomfort, my experience has been that gentle reminders from the instructor (and other students) that they are voluntary and that it is a part of the justice-oriented educational process to be made to feel uncomfortable tend to suffice.

Here, it is essential to make clear that these educational experiences could never replicate the injustices about which they seek to educate, nor must they be understood as a path to redemption or

absolution (Boler 2016, 26–29), and further that steps must be taken to avoid the opportunity for performativity and recentering the privileged individual and their experience (Applebaum 2017). Rather, a progressive stack pedagogy equipped with experiential reparations should be understood as a way to generate Medina's (2012) epistemic friction and initiate Dotson's (2014) third-order changes in organizational schemata. This occurs by expanding marginalized students' access to determine classroom epistemologies without exploiting them for those while simultaneously preventing privileged students from automatically taking a dominant position. The experience of literally sitting with discomfort (Boler 1999, 2004) in a classroom that de/reprivileges the learning environment offers an accessible means to open a first door to communicating oppression in a compassionate yet poignant way. This can provide unique avenues toward overcoming epistemic exclusion within classroom discussions by increasing the totality of shared epistemic resources available to students. Obviously, to prevent student alienation, such measures demand only to be entered into *willingly* in a safe environment by students who wish to begin work on dismantling their own internalized white supremacist and patriarchal assumptions and must be applied *as pedagogical tools* by trained facilitators, with clear explanations to their educational worth and purposes. Under such circumstances, experiential reparations offer a way to multiply the impact of the progressive stack within classroom spaces as it operates through a pedagogy of discomfort.

Confirming Pedagogical Commitments

As outlined, and in my experience, the progressive stack is a pedagogical tool that can improve educational environments and outcomes according to metrics of social justice, inclusion, diversity, and equity by: offering a temporary reprieve from epistemic injustice (both testimonial and hermeneutical), increasing access to shared epistemic resources and self-censorship in oppressed students (thus challenging epistemic oppression), reversing dominant power dynamics, countering systemic privilege by offering a pedagogy of discomfort, amplifying (the most) disadvantaged voices, and promoting greater opportunities for fairness in the classroom. Speaking broadly, in my experience students are

often resistive at first to its application (even marginalized students) but rapidly come with instruction to appreciate the definite remediative structure, novel learning opportunities, and epistemic insights it provides.

As a learning tool, the progressive stack pedagogical approach can be effectively used to follow in Paulo Freire's wake and reinforce and preserve the integrity of intersectional feminist and critical race education, safe and inclusive spaces, and the dignity of the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. This, more than anything else, most students seem to appreciate immediately, especially as the change from the expected "egalitarian" norm and utility of the pedagogy of discomfort become familiar. In particular, it can be enhanced by the application of experiential reparations as classroom learning exercise, though not all eligible students tend to make use of these. (The number often increases after more eager volunteers have embraced them for a few weeks.) Drawing upon theory to explain this effect, it may achieve this by offering both educational experiences and an inversion of traditional power dynamics embedded in communicative milieus, even when participants lack an awareness of their own biases. In such, it concurrently provides a natural means for challenging privileged fragility (cf. DiAngelo 2011) by balancing Rector-Aranda's (2017) CCI with Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort and Applebaum's (2017) recognition that our impulses toward compassion not recenter the needs of the privileged over those of the oppressed.

As a pedagogy, the progressive stack has the power to address structural and individual elements within Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice and Dotson's (2014) generalization to epistemic oppression. It does so specifically by palpably de/reprivileging the classroom environment, which many students report tending to favor, even if grudgingly and only in retrospect, in comparison to classrooms that, by virtue of doing nothing in particular, reproduce the extant matrices of power ubiquitous throughout society. Because progressive stacking is a heuristic for prioritizing voluntary classroom engagement, it also does so without converting marginalized students into epistemic resources for privileged ones, thus avoiding the epistemic exploitation inadvertently attendant to many

diversity and inclusion pedagogies. This is evidenced by the fact that, rather than becoming exasperated by their interchanges with privileged students, marginalized students report feeling more empowered to volunteer their experiences and share their epistemic resources on their own terms without concerns that students from dominant groups will be able to dominate the discussion in return.

Thus, rather than framing the progressive stack in the garb of privilege-preserving accusations such as “reverse racism,” it should be characterized as an opportunity to modify prioritization within the classroom to de/reprivilege its environment. Its use should be viewed as an educational opportunity for listening, reflecting, relinquishing privilege, and gaining some limited insights into the lived experiences of those individuals—and their ancestors—who have been systemically disenfranchised and victimized. As educators, we need to police our own epistemological and moral commitments by wedding theory to praxis. The progressive stack and experiential reparations are two such interrelated tools that allow epistemic ideals to manifest in real time, and because they can be used in conjunction with other pedagogical techniques and are independent of course content, they make ideal adjunct modalities for educators.

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