MORE THAN A DIVERSITY STATEMENT

Epistemic Injustice and the Logic of Sacrifice Behind Academic Legitimacy

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Introduction

As Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs are dismantled in many parts of the United States (The White House 2025) and research funding for diversity is being cut (Associated Press 2025), European universities also struggle to develop inclusive cultures that provide equal opportunities regardless of background (Siri 2022). For instance, Finnish universities publish equality strategies while maintaining narrow recruitment practices and exploitative performance metrics (Lätti 2024). In this context, a crucial question emerges: does academia truly value knowledge – or only the bodies willing to suffer for it?

This is not merely a rhetorical question. Burnout, precarity and exhaustion are no longer marginal concerns in academia. They reflect a deeper systemic condition in which uncertainty is not an exception but a prerequisite for participation. Legitimacy is not granted, but constantly performed, especially by those whose bodies, knowledge practices, and epistemic orientations diverge from institutional norms such as able-bodiedness, whiteness, and normative professionalism (Ahmed 2012; Cui 2025). Academia celebrates critical thought in theory yet often resists it in practice, especially when critique is directed inward. This contradiction is most acute for those whose ways of knowing and being challenge the dominant imaginaries.

In this commentary, I argue that the logic of sacrifice and epistemic injustice are central to how academic legitimacy is produced. By sacrifice, I mean the exclusion, silencing, or marginalization of specific bodies, identities, or knowledge practices to preserve a system's normative balance or credibility (cf. Butler 2016). This logic operates across scales – from global geopolitics to institutional micro-dynamics. For example, the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza is a devastating example of this logic at work. Entire populations are 'sacrificed' for the supposed stability of geopolitical order, economic interests or colonial settler imperatives. In turn, epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) follows as institutions erase, undermine, or render illegible voices, histories, and epistemologies in dominant academic, political, and media discourses.

The same pattern of epistemic injustice and sacrifice can be found in the academic institutions themselves. In spaces that claim objectivity, the body still speaks. Gendered, racialized, disabled, neurodivergent and queer bodies are not only sites of knowledge but, too often, treated as barriers to its acceptance (e.g. Gonzales 2024; Stroupe 2025). Knowledge

production has become a bodily performance that demands endurance, self-regulation, and strategic invisibility (Albayrak-Aydemir and Gleibs 2023). These demands create multilayered vulnerability, for example, when marginalized researchers are expected to reframe their embodied and affective knowledge in terms that align with white, able-bodied, neurotypical, cisheteronormative expectations to be heard (Burlyuk and Rahbari 2023).

Passion, precarity and academic worth

Academic institutions and many other traditionally male-dominated fields often speak of passion as a virtue: an inner fire that fuels scholarly excellence and justifies long hours, low pay and personal compromise. Yet for many queer, neurodivergent, and otherwise marginalized or minority-representing researchers, passion is less a gift than a demand. It becomes a condition of entry into a system that offers little in return beyond exhaustion, instability, and the fragile illusion of legitimacy (Dolmage 2017, 42–49). When passion serves productivity, universities celebrate it, and when it complicates efficiency, it is criticized (Kim 2020).

For researchers whose very presence is seen as atypical, this logic takes on even more insidious forms. Their academic participation is often framed, not as rightful belonging but as a reward. *You should be grateful to be here* becomes the unspoken subtext, especially in spaces where diversity is more about appearance than redistribution of power (e.g. Ksenofontov 2020). This framing turns inclusion into a form of symbolic compensation – a weaponized performance of gratitude. Instead of recognizing marginalized researchers as epistemic agents whose knowledge reshapes the academic field, institutions too often treat them as anomalies and tokens of progress, not producers of it.

The price of being allowed *in* includes silence about the conditions of entry. Moreover, the burden of proving one's worth is unequally distributed. Marginalized researchers are often expected to do more with less: more emotional labor, more committee work, more representation, more mentoring – often with fewer resources, less recognition, and limited job security. Their presence remains conditional on performance, tireless devotion, and restraint from exposing the contradictions that underpin their inclusion (Dolmage 2017, 20–31).

The concept of minority stress, developed in psychological and sociological research on LGBTQI+ and racialized communities (Meyer 2003), offers a useful framework for understanding how structural discrimination, microaggressions, and the constant need for self-justification can shape certain experiences in academia. Unlike general work-related stress which may stem from high expectations, deadlines, or competition – minority stress arises from systemic oppression, social stigma, and the pressures of navigating institutions not designed for diverse identities. Within academia, minority stress manifests in numerous ways: pressure to prove one's legitimacy, expectation of performing emotional labor, and daily exposure to microaggressions, institutional neglect, and weak structural support (e.g. Veldhuis 2022).

Precarity in the academic world does not occur incidentally. Fixed-term contracts, unpaid academic labor, hypercompetitive grant systems, and ever-increasing productivity demands form the scaffolding of today's academia. Yet these systemic pressures are frequently individualized. Struggles are reframed as personal failings and burnout becomes a rite of passage. This narrative obscures the structural nature of academic struggle and sustains the logic of sacrifice in everyday academic life. The expectation is not merely to perform with excellence but to endure to protect the institutional ideals of merit, commitment, and legitimacy.

In this context, passion turns into a trap. *Don't you love what you do* functions less as an invitation than as a command. It makes criticism and differing opinions seem untrustworthy, burnout shameful, and rest a luxury. For those already navigating systemic marginalization, this logic silences and enforces compliance. Its effects are epistemic, material, emotional, and symbolic. The logic of sacrifice intersects multiple forms of injustice, yet its operation as epistemic injustice is particularly insidious. It invalidates criticism, renders lived experiences incomprehensible within the framework of institutional norms and punishes differing knowledge. In academia, marginalized researchers therefore face exclusion and learn to question the value and validity of their own knowledge (Veldhuis 2022).

Whose experience is credible?

Academia continues to privilege certain voices, ways of knowing, and forms of expression over others. It is not merely what is said that determines whose knowledge is recognized, but who is speaking, in what manner, and from what position (Chapman 2022). Epistemic authority is not equally distributed because it is structured by social hierarchies and institutional norms. This uneven distribution is what philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) names *epistemic injustice*. In particular, *testimonial injustice* occurs when a speaker's credibility is unfairly deflated due to prejudice. Marginalized researchers encounter suspicion, conditional trust, and even outright dismissal. It is not because of the quality of their thought but because of how they are viewed.

This injustice is particularly acute when knowledge is grounded in lived experience. For many researchers, knowledge production is not abstract or disembodied. It is rooted in relational, affective, and embodied realities. Yet such forms of knowing are routinely treated as less legitimate unless translated into dominant academic idioms. The demand of "objectivity" can then become a mechanism of exclusion that narrows knowledge by creating conformity. Kristie Dotson (2012) extends Fricker's theory with the concept of *contributory injustice*, that captures the ways in which marginalized knowers are unable to contribute to collective understanding because their epistemic positions are not recognized or comprehended within dominant discourse. So not only are they questioned, but their way of knowing can be seen as illegible within the institutional grammar of academia.

The result is a double bind. When marginalized researchers speak from within their experience, they risk being perceived as biased or unprofessional (cf. Ahmed 2012, 179). When they conform to institutional expectations, they risk erasing the very insights their position affords. Either way, their epistemic contribution is compromised. This tension arises from structures, not just relationships. Academic institutions valorize knowledge that appears detached from the body, from emotion, from positionality. This supposed neutrality is itself a form of normativity. It privileges the white, cisgender, able-bodied, neurotypical subject as the default knower and treats all deviations from this norm as unusual, biased and lacking objectivity.

The issue goes beyond the questioning of some researchers´ credibility because of identity. Their very presence challenges the architecture of who counts as a credible knower and producer of information. The marginalization of researchers is rarely the result of overt malice. More often it stems from institutional habits, implicit biases and a lack of epistemic awareness (Vitikainen 2023). Recognizing this doesn´t lessen the harm, but it clarifies where responsibility lies. For that reason, adding diverse researchers isn´t enough if the terms of epistemic recognition stay the same. Inclusion without transformation reproduces the injustice it claims to address.

The burden of legitimacy

Academic institutions increasingly adopt the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion, yet this rhetorical shift rarely leads to meaningful redistribution of power. Marginalized researchers are often welcomed as symbols of institutional progress, while the structures that marginalize them remain intact. Inclusion is conditional, and visibility comes with the obligation to represent. Rather than being recognized as full epistemic agents, these researchers are positioned as evidence of change. For example, this can be seen when their presence is used to deflect criticism of institutional bias.

This dynamic creates a burden of legitimacy. Marginalized researchers must not only meet formal academic demands but also continually justify their presence through productivity, strategic visibility and acceptable forms of difference (Ahmed 2012, 60–72). By *acceptable,* I refer to what Ahmed (2012) calls *happy* diversity: differences the institution can audit, count, and showcase without unsettling norms. It is diversity that reads as legible and *safe*. When institutions license only this managed difference, visibility shifts from opportunity to obligation, and inclusion turns into a representational duty. Representation then becomes a paradox. While visibility can amplify voice and critique, it also subjects researchers to heightened scrutiny and symbolic overdetermination. Seen less as individuals and more as representatives for entire communities, they are expected to offer labor and insight without adequate recognition or support – which loops back to the original burden of legitimacy.

The costs of this symbolic inclusion are significant. The labor of representation is not just epistemic: it's emotional, political, and includes absorbing microaggressions, translating experiences across epistemic gaps and constantly managing expectations about what one's presence means.

When institutions highlight the inclusion of marginalized researchers in public-facing materials without addressing the systemic barriers to their participation, diversity functions as a branding strategy rather than a catalyst for transformation (Dolmage 2017, 44–56).

Moreover, the burden of representation often silences constructive critique. Researchers may hesitate to speak openly about institutional failures for fear of jeopardizing precarious positions or because they are already overburdened by the invisible labor of *being the only one*. Gratitude is expected, even when support is minimal. Dissent can be perceived as ingratitude, noncompliance, or a threat to the institution's progressive image (cf. Martinez 2017, 704–706).

Conclusion

Many academic institutions have become increasingly fluent in the language of diversity and inclusion. Strategic plans, equity statements, and anti-discrimination policies signal commitment to justice, yet for many marginalized researchers these gestures ring hollow. The gap between institutional rhetoric and lived experience remains wide and often painful when performative inclusion is symbolic. Representation may increase, but power remains centralized. Academic diversity is celebrated in newsletters and panel events, while academia itself is still navigating the same systemic barriers that made their inclusion exceptional to begin with. This type of representation without redistribution of power is not equity, and inclusion without transformation is not justice. Meaningful change requires more than access. It demands a reimagining of academic spaces, norms and values on whose comfort is prioritized, whose knowledge is centered, and who holds decisive power.

True transformation demands more than surface-level diversification (Ahmed 2012). It requires rethinking the epistemic foundations of academia and questioning hierarchies that favor abstraction over embodiment, detachment over relationality, and universality over specificity. Alternative epistemologies must not only be tolerated but centered. Structural change to diversity as a norm means redistributing power in shaping curricula, governance, evaluation, and funding. It also requires shifting care from individual labor to institutional responsibility. A justice-oriented academic culture would embed care into workload models, recognition systems, and decision-making.

Because exclusion is not always the result of conscious intent, the marginalization of non-normative researchers often stems from institutional habits, implicit biases, and a lack of epistemic awareness. These exclusions are structural, but they are not immutable. Moving beyond them requires more than critique. It demands collective accountability, the willingness to listen without defensiveness, and the courage to reimagine what knowledge, excellence and care could mean. Thriving in academia should not be the privilege of the few who conform, but a shared condition made possible by reflexivity rather than sacrifice.

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