Engaged Solidaristic Research: Developing Methodological and Normative Principles for Political Philosophers

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Abstract

Reshaping our methodological research tools for adequately capturing injustice and domination has been a central aspiration of feminist philosophy and social epistemology in recent years. There has been an increasingly empirical turn in recent feminist and political theorization, engaging with case studies and the challenges arising from conducting research in solidarity with unequal partners. I argue that these challenges cannot be resolved by merely adopting a norm and stance of deference to those in the struggle for justice. To conduct philosophical research in an engaged and solidaristic manner, I suggest that deference be supplemented by three methodological and normative principles: (1) epistemic humility, (2) accountability, and (3) coproducing knowledge. I situate these principles within contemporary philosophical work on solidarity and show how they might help confront power imbalances and other methodological hazards that arise when conducting research in solidarity with others. I arrive at these principles in part by critically reflecting on my own attempt to conduct research in solidarity with women's rights activists in Senegal.

Keywords: political philosophy, solidarity, engaged philosophy, epistemic humility, accountability, coproducing knowledge, deference, power dynamics, research ethics, Senegal

Introduction

A growing number of feminist and political philosophers call for grounding normative arguments in empirical research and for developing methodologies to do so, respectfully and rigorously.[1] Pitfalls arising from conducting an engaged approach to normative theory have been consistently identified by scholars in development

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[1] For examples of such claims, see Tobin and Jaggar (2013), Wolff (2019), Green and Brandstedt (2021), Furman (2021), Grasswick and McHugh (2021), and Yap (2021). For examples of such research, see Rubenstein (2015), Herzog (2018), Morton (2019), and Reed-Sandoval (2020).

studies, Indigenous thought, decolonial studies, and feminist research, but they have not received significant attention by political philosophers. While there is rich work in engaged and empirically informed methodologies in social science, aspiring engaged philosophers have not yet delved into this work, nor have they developed tools for confronting certain research pitfalls, such as the power dynamics that are often created by engaged approaches to normative theory. Given the increasing recognition of this type of research, examining methodological hazards arising from the unequal power relations created through research is vital—otherwise, engaged research may lose its pertinence as a distinct research paradigm. Because there is a less robust methodological tradition in political philosophy, philosophers may be susceptible to the pitfalls I describe in this paper. If engaged philosophy is to become more prominent in the future, it is urgent for philosophers to confront these problems through a set of practices; failing to do so could derail aspirations for solidarity through research and have detrimental impacts on *those in the struggle for justice*.[2]

Grounding research on the insights of those who are in the struggle for justice is often motivated by the rationale that they have an epistemic privilege in knowing about their oppression or a justice movement in which they partake. Therefore, for engaged research in philosophy to effectively support the efforts of those in the struggle for justice, there needs to be an implicit norm and stance of deference: we defer our assessment of a social justice struggle to those who are intrinsically involved in it. However, as I argue in this paper, deference is not enough for guiding engaged research. Despite deference being an important and intuitive principle for conducting such research, deference alone is seldom enough as a guiding principle; deference must be used in tandem with additional norms.

This paper investigates solidaristic research in normative political philosophy, which involves conducting research alongside, or within, the populations engaged in the struggle for justice, struggles that are directly connected to the normative theorizing the researcher aims to develop. I use, as a case study and a cautionary tale, my own experience doing ethnographic fieldwork in political philosophy in Senegal in 2019. I partially draw from my research on Senegalese women's rights groups to explore the pitfalls that may arise from conducting research in an engaged solidaristic manner, without fully acknowledging the depth of power relations involved. Upon

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[2] I use the nomenclature of "those who are in the struggle for justice" or "those in struggles" interchangeably in this paper, borrowing the phrasing of political theorists using a grounded normative theory approach (Ackerly et al. 2021; Zacka et al. 2021). These terms refer to the groups researchers seek to be in solidarity with; depending on the context, they can be termed as the "least well-off," the "oppressed" groups, or the "exploited groups." While I do not identify as a "grounded normative theorist" myself, this phrasing helps to frame my analysis in the context of engaged philosophy.

reflecting on this research fieldwork, I found myself romanticizing—by which I mean a tendency to idealize the work I was doing and its effectiveness—my capacity to be in solidarity through research. While I expected that my research would reveal linkages between Senegalese women's rights groups and international organizations—thus informing theories of transnational solidarity—local and national struggles against gender-based violence were much more situated at the center of activists' concerns. I take this field research, and in particular, my relationship to it, to be a case study through which, in this paper, I develop methodological suggestions that may assist other political philosophers aiming to ground their normative claims in empirical fieldwork. Philosophers of gender, race, and disability have written from the standpoint of their community and lived experience, and these insights are certainly meaningful. However, my interest in this paper is situated on how to responsively conduct empirical research within an academic setting with the intention of advancing a social justice cause that we believe in. Even though I mostly focus on an ethnographic approach to political philosophy in this article, it is not the only way to conduct solidaristic research in philosophy.

Section 1 presents an overview of recent work from feminist and political philosophers who argue for developing methodologies in normative theory that are closer to empirical research in the social sciences. One of the motivations for grounding political philosophy in empirical research is that those in the struggle for justice are better able to apprehend the situation that concerns them than those remotely situated, and they are thus more adequately equipped to determine their needs and best tactics. Deference becomes, then, a research norm for developing normative theory based on the insights of those in the struggle for justice. In section 2, after exploring how deference would work in practice as a guiding research principle, I argue that deference is not sufficient for guiding such research in solidarity. I retrace Kolers's (2016) account of solidarity as deference and consider the practical limits of deference as a norm. In section 3, I offer three methodological and normative principles that may help to nurture a solidaristic approach to research: (1) epistemic humility, (2) accountability, and (3) coproducing knowledge. These principles better attend to the complexities and pitfalls that arise from conducting solidaristic research, in comparison to deference being the sole norm. In section 4, I use my own fieldwork in Senegal to illustrate the danger of applying deference uncritically, and I demonstrate how the early implementation of these three research principles would have been beneficial, potentially even mitigating some of the research difficulties I encountered. These three interrelated principles might help to design and guide research in solidarity, especially for research conducted in the context of significant power inequalities.

1. Toward Engaged Solidaristic Philosophy

Conducting fieldwork in philosophy may be an oxymoron, as these two terms are often perceived as being at opposite ends of the theoretical-empirical axis. Indeed, political theorist Flikschuh (2014, 1) uses the phrase "philosophical fieldwork" to describe "*conceptual* discovery—philosophical as *non-empirical* fieldwork." In contrast, I use the term *fieldwork* in keeping with the ethnographic tradition; that is to say, I refer to interpretative research one conducts in order to yield theoretical insights. Much work in political philosophy has been devoted to contending that abstracted and idealized theory is fundamentally ill-equipped for theorizing about injustice, yet there is comparably less work that describes an alternative methodology for nonideal theorizing about justice (Aragon 2021). This paper contributes to this latter strand of less explored scholarship.

The very act of theorizing requires a certain level of abstraction (O'Neill 1987). This should, however, be done without idealization (that is, the distortion of social facts) that is likely to overemphasize dominant viewpoints while diminishing marginal ones (Khader 2018; Mills 2005). We must interrogate *how* we theorize about social facts: "By ignoring the specifics of situations in attempts to engage in abstract theorizing, philosophy runs the danger of generating theories that have little to do with 'lives on the ground' and can be a distraction from the hard realities of those lives" (Grasswick and McHugh 2021, 4). The work I describe below as *engaged solidaristic philosophy* can be put into the broad tradition of nonideal theories of justice.

While a vast array of work in political philosophy could be described as "engaged" or "grounded,"[3] I specifically use these terms to describe the work political philosophers do when they engage with empirically based case studies. Instead of conducting research *on* a case study, philosophers enter into a dialogue *with* participants, and/or are themselves participants, in the struggle for justice. By incorporating the concerns of those in the struggle for justice along with philosophical and empirical research, I ultimately pursue work in "engaged philosophy," in terms first proposed by Wolff (2019) and further described by Green and Brandstedt (2021, 540), as follows:

> methods of doing political theory that involve substantial interaction
> between the theorist and an actual or potential agent of change, or
> participation by the theorist in such a group agent, where such

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[3] One could argue, for instance, that John Rawls is an "engaged theorist" because he wrote *Theory of Justice*, in part, in response to the civil rights movement. However, as I explain here, I understand the term "engaged" in a more restrictive way, as to mean concrete engagement within a struggle for justice.

interaction or participation influences the content of the theorist's normative constructs.

Green and Brandstedt (2021) helpfully distinguish between three types of engaged methods in political philosophy: (1) *ethnographic engaged methods*; (2) *activist engaged methods*; and (3) *committee-based engaged methods*. The research I describe as "engaged solidaristic philosophy" is similar to "activist engaged methods," to the extent that it describes "a conscious and explicit identification by the theorist with the cause of the movement with which they are interacting" (2021, 554). While the method I describe appeals to various strands of engaged research, I call this method "engaged solidaristic philosophy" for situating my research within political philosophy. This is to analyze the pitfalls of more explicit solidaristic variants of engaged philosophy, in order to better identify the required principles for guiding such a methodology.

At the heart of engaged solidaristic philosophy, there is an explicit commitment to solidarity, where the political philosopher is interacting with agents of social change. Similar to what Johnson and Porth (2023) and Ackerly et al. (2021) have recently proposed for political theorists, the normative commitment to solidarity inherent to engaged solidaristic philosophy requires philosophers to work alongside, or within, communities in struggle for social justice. Johnson and Porth (2023, 102) rightfully note that "sometimes, we may have responsibilities to theorize in solidarity with individuals and communities to support them in their endeavors to end the oppression they experience." Conducting research in a solidaristic mode requires taking sides with vulnerable populations; solidarity is, thus, decidedly political. Even though this paper discusses, and builds on, a case of conducting research alongside a group done within formal academic setting (e.g., going through research ethics board), we must bear in mind that solidaristic engaged research in philosophy is not restricted to an ethnographic model of research. Indeed, oftentimes (political) philosophy can be borne out of a community of activism rather than a deferential approach to knowledge. While engaging with empirically informed research is central to the approach I describe, I do not mean to restrict this form of empirical engagement to the ones that happened within a formal research setting.

Because academic philosophy is commonly seen as the "unencumbered explorations of ideas," and therefore seemingly does not need an "ethics of philosophical practice," (Basu 2023, 275) it may be more vulnerable to moral hazards. As shown by a recent white paper on the state of publication ethics in philosophy (Thiem et al. 2019), besides norms regarding plagiarism or authorship, philosophy publishers have not agreed on which ethical guidelines to adopt. Yet, as argued by Bettcher (2019) and Basu (2023), academic philosophy does not happen in a vacuum; inherent risks are associated with it: for instance, our ideas can get co-opted or

politicized in ways we did not intend. While the research I describe in this paper might be "riskier" than a practice of philosophy that relies strictly on text exegesis, we must keep in mind this broader discussion happening in our discipline about whether and, if so, which ethical guidelines are required.

While the existence of power dynamics in relation to research and research subjects have been extensively discussed in methodological reflections in social sciences, feminist studies, and Indigenous research (among other disciplines), political philosophers have not yet considered this issue with the same exhaustivity. Methodological hazards in engaged research not only risk causing fundamental research flaws for the researchers themselves but may cause epistemic harms by not meaningfully and respectfully engaging the communities involved. These methodological hazards entail that philosophers consider how their own research may in fact be exploitative for the actors of the social change they wish to meaningfully interact with. As I discussed above, there are materially higher stakes involved in conducting empirically informed research than there are when compared to theoretical or applied research in political philosophy.[4] For instance, solidaristic research may waste the community's precious time, give them false hope, or redirect their efforts in unfruitful ways. There is also a vast literature in social science that describes how good intentions when designing inclusive participatory research can be a burden for the research participants (e.g., Johnson and Porth 2023). Anticipating and confronting these problems that may arise in engaged philosophy is crucial because philosophers may be victims of their own arrogance and ignorance, which would obstruct solidaristic aspirations.[5]

We may see examples of this solidaristic and engaged way of doing philosophy by looking at the work of philosophers and theorists such as Amy Reed-Sandoval (2020) on borders and migration, Jennifer Morton (2019) on first-generation university "striver" students, or Deva Woodly (2021) on the Movement for Black Lives. Reed-Sandoval develops a philosophical account of the meaning of being, or being perceived to be, "undocumented" from her empirical research (participant observation and interviews) on the United States-Mexico border. Through

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[4] I use "applied philosophy" so as to mean "to address real-world problems by working out how to solve them by 'applying' a moral or political theory, thereby providing 'philosophical foundations' for social and public policy" (Wolff 2019, 14).

[5] Debates or discussions on what is solidaristic engaged philosophy or research have appeared elsewhere (Ackerly et al. 2021; Green and Brandstedt 2021; Herzog and Zacka 2019; Longo and Zacka 2019; Wolff 2019). In this paper, I am concerned about which methodological and normative principles should guide us if we wish to conduct this type of inquiry rather than analytically delineating the boundaries of this research inclination to solidarity.

interdisciplinary work between ethnography and philosophy of immigration, she develops an argument for the demilitarization of borders by foregrounding the materiality of the borders. While solidaristic engaged philosophy might not be restricted to ethnographic methodology, Reed-Sandoval's research is a good example of how philosophers can conduct empirical research in normative philosophy and how this interdisciplinary work might contribute to knowledge of a situation. In addition, two recent edited volumes (Brister and Frodeman 2020; Grasswick and McHugh 2021) bring together the work of philosophers grounding their research in empirical case studies, giving us concrete supplementary examples of what this line of inquiry might look like.

Given the commitment to advance the struggles of oppressed groups through research, solidaristic engaged philosophy has a close relationship with the normative ideal of political solidarity. Following the recent literature on solidarity,[6] political solidarity requires shared and concrete action in support of those in the struggle for justice: we choose to be in solidarity around "a common cause to end injustice or oppression" (Scholz 2015, 732). Solidarity thus goes beyond a sentiment or an abstract value: solidarity is a collective commitment to stand with the least well-off, the marginalized, the oppressed, or the exploited. This is not to say that conducting academic research in solidarity is, or ought to be, the central site of solidarity and resistance against oppressive structures. I acknowledge that the initiatives of social movements and groups play much more central roles in these struggles. The principles I develop in section 3 do not guarantee solidarity in and of themselves. However, these principles may help to reduce methodological hazards in engaged solidaristic philosophy.

Including solidarity as a core component of engaged research is not an obvious task. Solidarity is, by definition, tied to hopes and ideals, holding the promise of working across differences by making sacrifices for vulnerable populations. Normative accounts of solidarity are skewed toward a tension between descriptive and normative claims (Bayertz 1999, 3). In addition to being a hopeful rallying cry against injustices, solidarity can describe real and imperfect relationships between privileged and marginalized groups. Solidarity is thus not only a loaded and contested concept but also a hybrid one: it fulfills both a descriptive and normative role. Conceptual and methodological ambiguity related to this commitment to solidarity could direct researchers toward a cursory performance of solidarity with these groups—or, put differently, cause them to romanticize research conducted *in solidarity*—hence losing

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[6] For discussions of political solidarity, see Mohanty (2003), Shelby (2005), Scholz (2008), Prainsack and Buyx (2012), Weir (2013), Sangiovanni (2015), Kolers (2016), Einwohner et al. (2021), and DuFord (2022).

its critical or normative bite. Developing robust criteria for fostering meaningful solidarity is necessary in the context of engaged normative political research.

2. Solidarity as Deference

By conducting engaged solidaristic research, we, researchers, rely on an implicit norm of solidarity as deference. We engage with the voices and demands with those in the struggle for justice, because we begin with the assumption that they have an epistemic privilege in knowing about these struggles. I question whether the norm and stance of deference could provide any help for the development of a paradigm of solidaristic research and for preventing the type of methodological hazards I encountered in my own fieldwork. In recent philosophical accounts of solidarity, the concept of deference stands out as a key feature for conceptualizing solidarity amidst power differentials. While this is also theorized by Gould (2007) in her writing on transnational solidarity, Kolers (2012, 2014, 2016) provides the most systematic explanation of the role of deference in the theory and practice of solidarity. Although deference would be a natural ally when conducting engaged philosophical research, challenges arise when applying deference to these contexts. I argue that driving research based around deference could lead to a romanticization of solidarity. In what follows, after summarizing Kolers's account of solidarity as deference, I critically reflect on deference as a useful moral imperative for conducting research in solidarity.

Kolers conceptualizes solidarity and its deference principle in relation to social movements and political struggle; solidarity is not conceived as an individualized act (Kolers 2016, 86). Being in solidarity takes the form of "political action on others' terms" (Kolers 2016, 5). Solidarity is essentially based on deferring moral judgment to the "least well-off," even if we, the "most well-off," might disagree about the required political actions. Rather than becoming allied with the least well-off, one becomes somehow a moral surrogate for them. Solidarity is not only about fighting injustices; it is also "[to go] along with the chosen course of action" (Kolers 2016, 32). Solidarity is to work together; that is, to suspend our own judgment and personal autonomy in favor of a norm of deference (Kolers 2016, 78). More "well-off" people should then prioritize decisions of the marginalized groups over their own; solidarity is to "put aside . . . [our] own judgments about aims, methods, facts, or values, in favor of someone else's or a group's" (Kolers 2016, 39).

Given the challenges of solidaristic research, deference could help guide research that addresses activists' concerns and dynamics. In Kolers's account and in the engaged solidaristic philosophical framework, there is an inclination to foreground vulnerable populations suffering from injustices. This inclination has standpoint epistemology at the core; it assumes that these populations have knowledge of what creates and perpetuates oppression. In his critique of the politics of deference, Táíwò (2022, 71) recently writes that the politics of deference relies on

the "value of lived experience and the knowledge that comes from it"—that is, this tendency appeals to deference with the aim of centering marginalized viewpoints. Deferring, for Kolers, is necessary in order for the privileged to take a respectful and antipaternalistic stance toward a disadvantaged group. Similarly, an engaged philosopher would argue for granting epistemic authority to those in the struggle for justice, using this premise of the principle of epistemic inclusion. Kolers might succeed in his attempt to convince more well-off people to defer their judgments with respect to supporting the struggles of the least well-off. But how, then, does the concept of deference play out in the context of engaged research and, in particular, ethnographic research, such as the sort I conducted?

Deference is, in some ways, a step in the right direction for respectfully conducting engaged philosophy. However, listening to the perspectives of those in the struggle for justice is not enough, as researchers are already setting up the terms of the debate by assuming that research participants will be interested in these research preoccupations. On this line of reasoning, adopting such an understanding of deference is insufficiently critical. It assumes that those in the struggle are talking through one voice and that this voice is necessarily heard by those in a position of power. Surely deference is not, uncritically, always the correct response. In the context of engaged solidaristic philosophy, researchers may not always be in a position to *know* in which circumstances they should defer and when they should instead withhold action in favor of critical examination. Not only can there be several internal divisions within the groups we seek to be in solidarity with, but our very position as researchers may lead to certain biases in choosing the interlocutors. This position can thus lead to a certain type of epistemic arrogance, assuming that the least-well-off are united, which could silence attempts in "identifying, and seeking to remedy, patterns of domination of exclusion" (Einwohner et al. 2021, 707).

Disagreements and intragroup divisions complexify the process of deferring to the judgment of vulnerable populations. Divisions and conflicts are inherent to social group dynamics and, as DuFord (2022, 35) argues, Kolers's account "cannot account for the oppressed in solidarity with each other, or for true conflict in solidarity." The lived character of solidarity can hardly be seized through a politics of deference. Principles for guaranteeing the involvement of vulnerable voices in research design must be at the forefront. Because the aim of this paper is to ultimately sketch out a principle of solidarity that can be of use for political philosophers conducting engaged research, my engagement with Kolers's account of deference is not by itself a criticism, as I recognize that he conceptualizes deference as "multilayered" (Kolers 2016, 86). Yet, using deference as a research principle implies that we should refine its meaning. Not only are the attempts *to speak for* or *to speak about* vulnerable populations potentially problematic, but so are the attempts to listen to them (Alcoff 1991–92; Rajan 2018). For instance, before travelling to Dakar, I learned about the

Senegalese MeToo movement from voices situated in privileged spaces—from mainstream media, or from Senegalese activists from the diaspora—and these voices did not have the same preoccupations as did the rural, or more marginalized, populations.

As we will see in the discussion of my fieldwork, deference would not lead us very far in the context of academics conducting research alongside those in struggles. With regards to conflicting interests, *listening to* is not enough to comprehend a struggle or a situation of injustice. Integrating knowledge from the ground up ought to be done while avoiding a "romantic, naïve vision of . . . knowledge" (Mihai 2020, 592). This is the assumption that no conflict or disagreement will arise among the group in struggle while trying to conduct this type of research.[7] While more clear-cut examples of solidarity that ask for unilateral deference may exist, I argue *against* an idealistic vision of solidarity. As I discuss, it is necessary to recognize the deeply uneven relationships between funding partners, activist groups, and researchers. The cautionary tale I sketch about deference and its potential for romanticization of solidarity is about recognizing one's limits in order to discern which voices should be heard in solidaristic contexts. Adopting a careful, more critical approach to deference thus contributes to a principle of epistemic humility, which I sketch in section 3.

While deference is an important approach to solidarity in normative political philosophy, it is necessary to further refine this concept and examine what is actually required of us, as researchers, in the commitment to being in solidarity with those in the struggle for justice. Refining our conceptualization of deference in the context of researching solidarity does not suggest that one become a moral authority who will dissect which normative intuitions are worthwhile or not (Jaggar 2006). Deferring is crucial in several steps of the research process, but this should not lead to eschewing a self-reflective edge on this process. By reconfiguring the principle of deference alongside other principles—namely, epistemic humility, accountability, and coproducing knowledge, we might help the researcher avoid projecting their research focus onto research participants, thus romanticizing their struggles, and recognizing the power relations inherently created through research.

3. Three Methodological and Normative Principles for Nurturing Solidarity

I propose three methodological and normative principles that aim to correct the pitfalls I identify above: (1) epistemic humility, (2) accountability, and (3) coproducing knowledge. These three interrelated principles are intended to help guide research in solidarity. Versions of these principles have been used in a myriad of disciplines—for instance, bioethics, research ethics, anthropology, migrant studies,

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[7] Similarly, as recently argued by Pollock (2021) in the context of felon's voting rights in Florida, political agents can sometimes fail to speak on behalf on their group.

Indigenous studies, and community-based research. I am laying out these principles in such a way here because political philosophy specifically does *not* have a methodological apparatus for conducting such research. I am synthesizing important literature in social science and research ethics that could be of help for developing robust guidelines for engaged and solidaristic political philosophy.

3.1. Epistemic Humility

By epistemic humility, I refer to the education and work that should be done in order to avoid epistemic arrogance pervading the research process; my invitation to be epistemically humble is addressed to researchers and not to the research subject. The reality of the researcher's positionality requires one to be more self-reflexive, more epistemically humble, throughout the research process. Epistemic arrogance and epistemic humility have been extensively conceptualized in the recent wave of literature on epistemic injustice and resistance. Epistemic humility is not only about declaring one's own privilege and positionality (Ahmed 2004); it also requires one to develop one's epistemic sensibility and awareness through education and training (Fricker 2003; Medina 2013). Following Medina's influential work, epistemic humility could be defined as an "attentiveness to one's own cognitive limitations and deficits" (Medina 2013, 43); it is an awareness of the limits of one's situated knowledge. While I recognize the growing attention epistemic humility has received in philosophy (e.g., Alfano, Lynch, and Tanesini 2021), I take this concept further and understand it in the context of engaged research in political philosophy.

My account of epistemic humility, used in the context of solidaristic engaged research, is relational, where it is not about building the virtue of humility for oneself—a self-centered account—but about building humility toward others, in order to allow ourselves to be impacted by others (Spezio, Peterson, and Roberts 2019; Moon and Tobin 2019).[8] Humility should thus be developed not only as an individual disposition or personal virtue but as an active practice and an openness to be transformed through relations. On this account, humility is not about a static understanding of positionality but about a careful consideration of how our positionality is cocreated through relationships and contexts.

Our capacity to be skeptical of our own intuitions is crucial for recognizing the limitations and the situatedness of our perspective, but it must be accompanied by an openness and attentiveness to the voices and demands that appear to be counterintuitive. As feminist theorists and methodologists have argued, being attentive to these voices requires considering their silences or examining unspoken fieldwork dynamics (Ackerly 2008). An illustration of this requirement to be skeptical

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[8] I am grateful to Theresa Tobin for directing me toward an account of relational humility.

of our intuitions can be found in the critical literature in feminist political philosophy that engaged with Nussbaum's influential work on the capabilities approach.[9] In this rich and critical dialogue, certain feminist scholars have accused Nussbaum of being selective about the voices of women from the Global South to whom she chose to listen and, thereby, being insufficiently critical of her own moral intuitions. Yet these criticisms ought not to lead political philosophers to retreat from ethnographic and normative fieldwork. Instead, they should prompt us to reflect critically, and humbly, on our methodology and methods for amplifying the voices of those in the struggle for justice.

The positionality of the researcher has long been problematized in development studies and in studies of race and gender but has only more recently garnered the attention of political philosophers. Scrutinizing the ways in which the researchers' home countries have potentially contributed to structural injustices that impact the lives of those they seek to study is morally imperative. Considering one's positionality when conducting research requires paying deeper attention to power imbalances. By engaging in self-reflection, one first step is to engage with academic and activist literatures, in order to assess whether a prospective study is necessary.[10] This is not only a passive engagement with the existing knowledge about a case; it is acknowledging the harms that could be perpetuated if one decides to proceed with the research. Completing this first step may very likely help to reduce the inadvertent romanticization of the resistance of those in the struggle that may occur during the research process (Abu-Lughod 1990).

Adopting a critical approach to deference—a principle of solidarity that refers to the process of deferring judgment to the least well-off in a struggle—contributes to cultivating epistemic humility. This should be done while working against romanticizing processes—casting research participants into predefined roles—appearing in research while choosing with whom to interact. It is a question of not only for whom the researcher is speaking but also to whom the researcher is listening, and for what reasons. Deference itself does not prevent us from an overconfidence bias or a misperception of one's positionality, which is why the two other methodological and normative principles I offer directly tackle the nature of research itself: through accountability and coproducing knowledge.

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[9] For a useful overview of this debate centered on Nussbaum's (1999, 2000) work, see Abbey (2011, 167–86).

[10] Reflections from Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies on the issue of conducting research that is sourcing marginalized people's pain and trauma is especially insightful for this question (Tuck and Yang 2014).

3.2. Accountability

In the context of conducting solidaristic research, accountability requires us to answer the following question: "Who are we writing for, how, and why?" (Nagar 2002, 179). Accountability entails giving power to those in the struggle by offering them some degree of agency within the shaping of the research. This ought to be done by providing enough information about the research and the prospective outcomes. Hence, I understand accountability as being more robust than mere compliance with or liability to institutional review boards; it demands the giving of tangible power and control to those involved in the research process. Accountability tackles the pitfalls of positionality by fostering egalitarian relations and by including the concerns of those in the struggle at the center of the research process. It thus goes without saying that accountability is by itself relational, meaning it is rooted in an acknowledgment of power dynamics.

With epistemic privilege comes epistemic responsibility. A major difference in the practice of accountability between writing normative political theory from fictitious cases versus authentic cases, or excavating moral claims from actual testimonies and insights from those in the struggle, is that one *must* be accountable to the research participants. For this reason, I turn to the readings in feminist ethics and action-research about the meaning and ethical questions arising from theorizations alongside those in the struggle. I cannot write about the normative ideal of solidarity in the same manner as if I was basing my research on hypothetical cases. Accountability matters in order to respectfully tell the narratives of *those in the struggle*. I cannot share all insights or stories that I gathered in my empirical research due to their sensitive content unless I secured consent in advance. The academic labor does not stop when the normative theory is written about this struggle. Accountability opens the possibility for a more holistic approach to knowledge, ensuring that the research is better integrated back to the community involved. As such, political philosophers cannot abstract themselves from the reality of the fieldwork, and it requires them to be accountable to those in the struggle, in relation to the theory that is being written.

In a situation of dire power inequalities, informing the population of research scope and possible implications is not enough for guaranteeing accountability. As Drydyk (2019) stresses, it has to be supplemented by a mechanism of "countervailing power" (150), which would make it possible to "trigger investigations" (148) if promises to the community were left unfulfilled by the research. It asks, as I argue in the next principle, to deepen ethical requirements, which do not stop as soon as the research ethics board application is completed. Rather, in order to trigger investigations, there must be a mechanism in place that ensures that accountability involves more than sending published academic papers to the communities that participated in the research; the research should be communicated and translated in

order to be made relevant for the communities. Accountability requires sharing the results in a transparent manner. And if the agent conducting investigations on the researcher and the marginalized community is the state (as it is often the case), we must keep a certain skepticism as these investigations could be politically instrumentalized by the state.

In terms of concrete actions for ensuring the accountability of research conducted in engaged solidaristic philosophy, the implementation should go beyond the level of responsibility and benevolence of individual researchers: structural change is needed. For example, accountability mechanisms could be implemented under the form of local ethics oversight, wherein the researched community would be integrated in designing the project and mechanisms for ensuring that the research will go back to the community (Cochrane et al. 2018). While an imperfect solution, local oversight must be prioritized by research institutions and national research agencies, so that the researchers must justify to the community at stake their own actions and research, even when there is indeed the risk that these local ethics-oversight processes would reproduce power structures.[11]

Sharing power with those in the struggle also entails their epistemic inclusion in the design, implementation, and dissemination of the research. In this regard, accountability is generated through the coproduction of knowledge, which could nurture mutual trust through long-term research collaboration. Nevertheless, in the context where building mutual trust through research relationships is a long-term and often complicated process, "the slow pace of collaboration fits uneasily into the accelerated temporality of neoliberal academia" (Arribas Lozano 2018, 457). Not acknowledging this reality would give a rather optimistic and incomplete portrait of the limits to conducting this type of research: we must keep in mind that current metrics of academic excellence do not incentivize research that is built over several years, especially for nontenured and precarious academic workers (Zheng 2018). Meaningful research collaborations wherein the researcher is held fully accountable are hindered by institutional obstacles to multiyear engaged and participatory research.

While deference directs us to pay attention to the demands of those who are involved in the struggle for justice, putting forward an accountability principle requires that the researcher considers the impact of their research on these movements. As Johnson and Porth (2023) write, some communities have been

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[11] For instance, in Missouri after the overturn of the *Roe v. Wade* case that protected access to safe abortion, we could imagine a situation wherein researchers would design a study on illegal and unsafe abortions along with local women's rights groups; this research team could be blocked from doing so by a local ethics oversight structure.

overresearched, and sometimes the right approach, if research needs to be done at all, is to engage with methods that do not explicitly overburden these communities. Accountability, as a research principle, further recognizes the harm research can do on communities, thus acknowledging a right of refusal for the communities working with researchers. As a result, if the pursuit of research is accepted, arriving with a principle of coproducing knowledge may be the right next step.

3.3. Coproducing Knowledge

Debates and discussions about the coproduction of knowledge have occurred for decades in a variety of literatures, action-research scholarship, and participatory research in development studies, feminist ethics, postcolonial and decolonial studies, among others. This scholarship has repeatedly questioned the meaning of coproducing knowledge across different spaces (e.g., Cahill 2007; Fawcett and Hearn 2004; Kara 2017; Nagar 2002; Rajan 2018; Rajan and Thornhill 2019). Critically thinking about coproducing knowledge demands considering the following: What does it mean to meaningfully coproduce knowledge? Who should design the research objectives and the research itself? What degree, or what type, of involvement should the community being researched by a scholar have? Discussions stemming from these critical dialogues generally stress the need to go beyond a mere passive integration of voices from those in the struggle. These voices should become an integral part of the research itself by contributing to the elaboration of the research process at all stages. This research posture requires an exit from a romantic vision of knowledge, an exit that goes beyond the previously critiqued listening of marginal perspectives.

Adopting from the outset a coproductive approach to knowledge would have helped me to mitigate the shallowness of my research design, permitting me more explicitly to hear voices that went outside of the planned narrative. Coproducing knowledge cannot be reduced to an uncritical principle of listening, which may assume "that an unproblematically nonhierarchical or emancipatory ethos will always be found when collaborating transnationally" (Rajan 2018, 276). Coproducing knowledge involves a substantial dialogue between the researcher and the participants, where the boundaries between these two poles are brought closer: this dialogue is a much more extensive process than mere listening. As I argued, in section 2, conducting research in solidarity cannot be reduced to a "listening" process—a mere deference because of an uncritical integration of standpoint epistemology— which would risk romanticizing the coproduction of knowledge. For example, it could create harms to the prospective participants if we were assuming that they would, each of them, equally be safe to participate in the research process, given the diversity of particular contexts they may come from.

Reflections about participatory research in the international development industry direct us to be attentive to which voices we listen to and which voices we

may silence in our research process. Cornwall and Fujita (2012) stress the need to take into account the risk of "ventriloquizing" vulnerable voices in the process of conducting research, which could generate an interpretative bias in analyzing them. Researchers risk imposing their voices upon research participants, which may perpetuate othering. Postcolonial theorists have emphasized the fact that the intention to learn from marginalized perspectives may reproduce colonial dynamics of subordination by essentializing their roles (Mihai 2020). Efforts should be made to include these perspectives while avoiding a romanticization of these voices, granting them an uncritical status of "authentic insider" (Narayan 1997; see also Smith 2012). Not only must we include their insights in all steps of the research design, but we must also allow local preoccupations to guide the course of the project—while also acknowledging that these local preoccupations may stand in tension with each other and that it may not always be possible to reconcile them. Integrating ethical and political concerns from marginalized communities in the research design should thus not be limited to the step of going through the formal requirements of the research ethics board process (Gillan and Pickerill 2012). It is in this sense that I defend the principle of coproducing knowledge.

Learning from actual projects of knowledge coproduction would be insightful for engaged philosophers—and this would avoid an unreflective enthusiasm for research collaboration that could obfuscate power dynamics arising in these cases (Arribas Lozano 2018; Kara 2017; Mitlin et al. 2020). In order to mitigate power asymmetries between the researchers and the communities involved, long-term relationships could help to cultivate trust and meaningful inclusion. Moreover, removing the structural and epistemic barriers for including local stakeholders in the research process is necessary; as Byskov (2020) argues, the onus of communities' integration in the research process should be placed on the researchers. In other words, the researchers ought to adjust their projects to the communities' needs and resources—which may diverge—in order to ensure that they will benefit from participating in the research. Fostering meaningful inclusion can be incentivized by structural changes in higher education and government research agencies.

While I argue that coproducing knowledge may help researchers avoid romanticizing their research, I acknowledge that it may inadvertently reproduce other forms of idealization, such as assuming that research participants will share practical and strategic interests. The research program ought to acknowledge possible inequities between educated researchers and advocates, and members of oppressed marginalized communities: the researchers will not be able to compensate for these inequities in an inclusive research design if the researchers are not attentive to them in the first place. Epistemic capabilities are varied and can be hindered by inequalities in opportunities. Not all members of a community will be able to participate equally in the research process. And if they do, we should not assume that it is always safe to

participate in these processes for all members of a community. Less privileged members of a community may be silenced by more privileged members; in this case, work in deliberative democracy on "strategic exclusion" may help to design inclusive participation in research projects (Deveaux 2016; Dovi 2009). Researchers must be attentive to whose voices are deemed to represent the "community," and by whom.

Shifting to a knowledge coproduction format would help researchers with solidaristic intentions avoid performing "epistemical extractivism" (Grosfoguel 2016), in which knowledge is pursued for its own sake and for career advancement. A principle of mutuality should then be put at the forefront of research for ensuring that the community will benefit from this collaboration. Nevertheless, one may raise legitimate concerns against this collaborative and mutual approach to knowledge production, in so far as it may be tantamount to a form of "epistemic exploitation" (Berenstain 2016) to expect activists to be involved in the academic labor; local stakeholders may not have the time to participate in such research. This issue can be first addressed through a question of epistemic humility, where the researcher ought to consider whether their research is directly contributing to the community they study. While valid and practical preoccupations related to time and funding issues, among others, should be taken seriously, it appears that long-term and immersive research, ideally spread out over several years, may be a part of the answer, wherein the communities concerned would define (and refine) the research objectives.

Coproducing knowledge is the most radical principle I propose, and perhaps the most foreign to the philosophical discipline. It is a more robust and demanding principle than a mere commitment to deference, because coproducing knowledge entails not only that we must consider the voices of those who know better about a struggle for justice but also that they must become active participants—if they wish—*in* knowledge production. Thus, it goes drastically beyond what we may expect from deference as a guiding research principle.[12] While I propose these three principles to supplement deference in guiding engaged solidaristic philosophy, I illustrate the need for norms of epistemic humility and accountability while fostering knowledge coproduction by reflecting on my research fieldwork in the next section.

4. Researching in and on Solidarity: Observations from My Empirical Fieldwork

The methodological and normative principles I develop in section 3 arose, in part, from my own attempt to conduct my research. Intending—and in my case partially failing—to conduct research in a solidaristic vein must raise concerns for political theorists and philosophers aiming to do so. As part of my doctoral degree in philosophy with an applied component for which conducting empirical research was

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[12] However, again, I acknowledge that deference was not thought to answer the difficulties associated with designing such research.

a formal requirement,[13] I undertook qualitative research fieldwork in Senegal in fall 2019.[14] In total, I conducted twenty semistructured interviews with twenty-two people working in six feminist and women's rights nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and in one international grantmaking network (that is, a private organization that is allocating funding to NGOs for leading their projects) in Dakar and in a rural region of Senegal. Initially, I was interested in researching how solidarity was concretely used or theorized in local and global struggles for women's rights. My aim was to fill a gap between normative work on solidarity and the empirical transnational-feminist solidarity literature. However, upon arriving, I realized that my questions were somehow too opaque and detached from the realities of my interviewees, and that I had arrived at a point in Senegalese feminist activism where struggles against gender-based violence were reaching a historic climax. Although I had read extensively about the women's rights movement in Senegal, the fact that my fieldwork was relatively short-lived contributed to an impression of being parachuted in. This impression appears, however, to be somewhat typical of doctoral students undertaking fieldwork for the first time, who often do not have the ability to ease their way into the field, burdened with time-sensitive, financial, and institutional constraints (see, e.g., Butcher 2021; Vanner 2015). Owing to the relationship of power involved in carrying this type of research, I do not wish to absolve myself of responsibility for the missteps and poor research design I describe here.

I arrived in Senegal in a time of important social mobilization related to the launch of a national campaign on gender-based violence[15]—it was a truly a unique

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[13] It is certainly unusual for a paper in political philosophy to state so bluntly one's positionality as a junior scholar. However, I do so for two reasons. First, an awareness of my positionality as a graduate student helps to understand how this research was conducted under constraints in funding and time that a tenured professor at a research institution may not have. I have addressed this issue when discussing the methodological and normative principle of coproducing knowledge. Second, in various academic disciplines that deal with qualitative research, it is common to state one's positionality in the academic hierarchy and to offer insights and reflections stemming from a fieldwork.

[14] Because the terms of my research ethics clearance prevent me from naming the organizations that partook in my research, I can only offer nonidentifying information in this paper.

[15] The turning point of this mobilization against sexual violence was certainly the murder of Bineta Camara in May 2019, which sparked national outrage, leading to the creation of the collective Dafadoy ("it's enough" in Wolof). Women's rights activists asked for a national legislative change that would transform the recognition of a rape from a misdemeanor (*délit* in French) to a *felony* (crime), which would make the

time in Senegalese feminism. This historic moment significantly shaped my field research: almost all my interviewees referred to gender-based violence in our discussions. The fact that I introduced myself in person and by email as a researcher working on transnational feminist solidarity helped me gain access to certain NGOs due to the momentum related to sexual violence, as a coordinator of an organization surveyed confirmed to me. From this context, in several interviews, my philosophical questions about transnational solidarity received a lukewarm welcome; I was told that my questions were *interesting*, but I did not get the enthusiasm I naïvely expected. Upon my first visit to an important women's rights organization in Senegal, my position as a political philosopher interested in researching solidarity was met with great suspicion and skepticism. It is not that my interviewees had never thought about solidarity per se. Rather, it is that my theoretical questions about transnational feminist solidarity were not aligned with the key focus: gender-based violence. A more engaged way of conducting research would have allowed me to establish a dialogue that corresponded more to the demands of the populations.

4.1. Reflections on My Own Research Pitfalls

My initial attempt to conduct research on transnational feminist solidarity directed me to consider the implications of solidaristic research with those in the struggle for justice, therefore leading me to develop the principles (epistemic humility, accountability, and coproducing knowledge) I outline in this article. When I realized that the solidarity framework I imported into my research design was not exactly aligned with the priority of the groups I wished to conduct research with, this led me to turn a critical lens on the problematic power dynamics created through my research. Intending to conduct research in a solidaristic manner, researching in solidarity, must raise concerns for any other political philosophers also aiming to do so.

Lack of parity between the researchers and the "subjects" risks undermining ideals of solidarity at the core of an engaged philosophy approach. My academic and national positionality allowed me to access the Senegalese women's rights' NGO community and shape the conversation. My attempts to address the challenges of working toward gender justice within the constraints of institutional feminism did not have the critical edge I was hoping for. In my interviews with NGO staff members, when institutional transnational feminism was criticized or evoked, it was done in a concealed way, hinting at a critique rather than expressing it directly. It was therefore difficult to gather critical insights on the dynamics of transnational solidarity in my

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punishment more severe. This law was effectively voted in December 2019 and promulgated in January 2020 by the Senegalese National Assembly (ONU Femmes 2020).

interviews. In order to conduct research in solidarity, we must clarify local and global interests that may appear in empirical fieldwork. My research was embedded in a political context that colored how my research subjects perceived me.

Failure to effectively grapple with one's positionality when entering the field could have been mitigated by more actively cultivating relational and epistemic humility. While I knew that my positionality would affect my fieldwork, the depth of power relations made it challenging to fully apprehend how this transformed all my relationships. Conducting engaged and solidaristic research has to be negotiated through recognizing the researcher's positionality vis-à-vis those in the struggle. From the perspective of feminist, development, and critical race theorists, this may seem to be an obvious point. However, political philosophy has a well-established tradition of pretending to speak from a neutral and objective position whether it is explicit or implicit (Goodhart 2018). Consequently, I urge theorists tempted to design research in a solidaristic vein to carefully evaluate issues of positionality, power, and privilege— that is, not to suppose that research developed in the spirit of solidarity is done *ex nihilo*—that is, outside of global colonial and racial dynamics. This poses not only the problem of speaking for others (Alcoff 1991–92; Fawcett and Hearn 2004; Vanner 2015) but also the problem of choosing to whom we should listen, and of assuming that vulnerable groups have the same concerns (Rajan 2018). This methodological hazard illustrates the methodological and normative principles of epistemic humility, accountability, and coproducing knowledge that I address above. Addressing methodological hazards arising from solidaristic research greatly matters for engaged philosophers. Not doing so could undermine attempts to support social change and epistemic inclusion through solidaristic research, which explains why I propose principles that may help to prevent these missteps.

In my fieldwork, deference as a guiding principle would have been of little help to know how to lead this research respectfully. Indeed, as I am writing this article, more than a year after the completion of my fieldwork, I would not know precisely to whom I should defer my judgment if I wanted to tackle issues of gender justice in Senegal, given the presence of conflicting interests and different strategical approaches. The issue of deference becomes even more complex when I consider the involvement of my home country in Senegalese local politics and nongovernmental organizations. Beyond this issue, deferring in unequal research contexts often means deferring to the most powerful members of the organized community of the "least well-off." As influential writings in development studies have stressed (e.g., Guijt and Shah 1998), researched communities are not homogeneous. Because of the complexity of the terrain we may be engaging with, we need research principles that allow us to go beyond superficial readings of the situation. In these circumstances, there is no clear pathway to accountability. However, cultivating the research principles I propose can make us aware that knowledge is being produced recursively.

Although I have focused on one way to conduct engaged solidaristic research in philosophy, it is important to reaffirm that adopting an ethnographic model to research is not the only way to do this type of research. Further, the research principles I have developed could be refined or used in other contexts where political philosophers are grounding their claims in empirical research, including cases wherein philosophers are part of the community they research. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that the romanticization of our work as researchers or an inability to seize power dynamics is not unique to an ethnographic model of research and could appear in empirical cases closer to home.

While I recognize that the research-guiding principles I propose would not have fixed the perhaps more fundamental issues regarding the research design of my fieldwork, foregrounding these may have helped to prevent certain methodological hazards that occurred. Deference alone would not have allowed me to grapple with the ongoing power relations that structured this research. As researchers, we often idealize the work we do and tend to be oblivious to the underlying power dynamics. However, to truly research in solidarity, we must use robust guidelines that require us to pause and consider the underlying power dynamics. Moreover, given that philosophy is a discipline central to the foundation of many other disciplines, philosophers may be even more likely to ignore the problematic power relations created through research.

Rather than discourage political theorists and philosophers from carrying out solidaristic research, I urge my fellow philosophers to consider the research principles I sketch if they intend to carry a philosophical reflection in an engaged and solidaristic vein. By not laying out clear guidelines for this type of philosophy, we risk repeating mistakes that have been extensively discussed in adjacent disciplines. By offering insights about the ethical and methodological guidelines for this research, I hope we are better able to design meaningful and respectful research in the context of significant power inequalities. In contributing to the strand of political philosophy that brings theoretical frameworks closer to empirical concerns, I have suggested an understanding of political philosophy as being fundamentally political.

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