Article

Teaching social policy as if students matter: Decolonizing the curriculum and perpetuating epistemic injustice

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Abstract
Calls for the decolonization of education at all levels of education in the UK have gained new momentum since the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis and the subsequent *Black Lives Matter* demonstrations throughout the US and the UK. In this article I focus on the reactions to demands for the decolonization of the curriculum in my own department, Social Policy, at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). I argue that understanding the reactions of academic staff to student demands is informative about the nature of the problem. The article provides a contribution to discussions on decolonization on two fronts: (a) it highlights the internal dynamics of engagement with student demands in the context of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) and (b) the academic responses to students' demands reveal an underlying mechanism that reproduces the status quo in the teaching of Social Policy.

Keywords

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Introduction

Calls for the decolonization of education at all levels in the UK have gained new momentum since the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis and the subsequent *Black Lives Matter* demonstrations throughout the US and the UK. These demonstrations challenged the police brutality and the socio-political system that perpetuates such brutality with impunity. In these, the education systems and the social and political imaginations framing education systems are seen as some of the structural components that maintain and reproduce the marginalization of Black and other racialized groups and contribute to brutality in their lives. The UK protests built on earlier student-led campus movements that had emerged in South Africa and in the UK around *#Rhodes Must Fall*. There has also been widespread student activism across many UK campuses which ask basic questions such as *why is my curriculum so white* and *why are my professors so white*? (LSESU, 2015). In these movements students from different backgrounds, based on their experiences, bear witness and resist overtly racist canons, to challenge silences and the omission of voices in the production of knowledge in various disciplines and to challenge how these come to frame their subjects (Azoulay 2019; Becker, 2021; Gopal, 2021; Hundle, 2019; Mbembe, 2021; Schiwy, 2007; Smith and Rasool, 2020; Winant, 2015).

This is often a direct challenge to the disciplinary canons, questioning their construction and relevance as these constitute and are constituted by racialized-heteronormative-patriarchal epistemologies (Grosfoguel, 2007; Moosavi, 2020). I argue that this reproduction process both hides the canon's own racialized majoritarian histories and contributes to the racialization of knowledge practices, by establishing the boundaries of what can be known. Thus, in this context I understand decolonization as 'an act, a practice, a form of thinking, an interrogation' process that deconstructs the epistemological grounds on which disciplines reproduce their canon (Vergès, 2019: 78; also see Mignolo, 2020; Quijano, 2007). Furthermore, the student demands question how disciplines have created and acted through limited analytical tools, methodologies, to frame work that produces, reproduces and affirms adverse incorporation, silences, marginalization and the exclusion of racialized groups (Moldanado-Torres, 2016). Thus, the majority positions frame how different groups learn about their own histories and lives. Education has become a self-referential system that establishes *normal* ways of understanding and talking on the basis of what is acceptable to the mainstream (Spivak, 1994). Arguably, this has been a colonization of generations of students' *life-worlds* within education processes whereby possibilities of knowing differently are delegitimized and subsumed under majoritarian canonical claims.

In this article I focus on the reactions to demands for the decolonization of the curriculum in my own department, Social Policy, at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The field of Social Policy is particularly interesting as it involves the study of social policies where policies inform the experiences of students and staff. In other words, most people studying social policies have experiences of being subjects of such policies, and of these policies framing their lives. I, together with a few colleagues who also come from marginalized communities, have been involved in different aspects of decolonization debates in the department for over fifteen years. For example, as the Deputy Head of Department for Teaching (2016–2018), I engaged with different student groups to review our curriculum. Some of the demands and the responses I discuss here have been produced in the broader context of the commodification of Higher Education in UK with its focus on managerial performance measures to address *student experience* and to evidence how HEIs are fulfilling their responsibilities in relation to students. However, while recognizing that this context certainly limits the impact of decolonization processes, for brevity, I do not focus on these interactions as a part of the main analytical trust of the analysis here.

The article also does not intend to provide an analysis of similar processes in different Social Policy Departments in the UK. However, the article still provides valuable insights for other researchers on the reactions of academic staff to student demands for decolonization. In sum, the article contributes to discussions on decolonization on two fronts: (a) it highlights internal dynamics of engagement with student demands in the context of a HEI and (b) the focus on academic responses to students' demands reveals an underlying mechanism that reproduces the status quo in the teaching of Social Policy. I use Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic justice to unpack this mechanism (2009). In terms of methodology, discussed in the following section, I take student demands for decolonization as the starting point. The demand to decolonize challenges a coloniality of thinking that creates categories and methodologies which instrumentalise exclusionary and silencing categories in knowledge production. This is also about addressing the absences and misrepresentations in how the colonial and imperialist past is narrated, or in our case, how these remain a part of policy teaching and thinking.

Methodology of *being-there*

An analytical approach that relies on my own experiences in the Department of Social Policy, LSE requires further explanation. A central ethical and methodological question is about my own positionality – given that I have been institutionalized both early on as an international research student coming from Turkey at the LSE, albeit in a different department, and subsequently as a

research-active Turkish gay academic in the Department of Social Policy. The issue is whether being so located in this institutional setting, being able to pass as a member of a group, compromises my analysis of both the nature of the student demands and of the responses to them. My answer here is inspired by Niklas Luhmann's second-order observations approach (1993). I argue that the interplay between my positionality and the institutional setting, where I am encultured as a non-white and non-native-English-speaking insider from another place, allows me to observe how rules and distinctions are made by *our* system to facilitate its observation (inclusion or exclusion) of difference and how these monitor its internal functioning (Luhmann, 1993: 769). I argue that these processes of rulemaking also create the boundary conditions for legitimating some knowledge claims and delegitimating others. As a result, I consider my positionality as an important entry point to analyse our responses to student demands on decolonization (see Intemann, 2010). These, *our*, responses claim me as a part of the system, I inhabit a position of an academic *vis-a-vis* students. Yet, while I inhabit this position, I also inhabit a position of otherness in relation to my academic position. The system still maintains, observes, distinctions around my belonging to *us* which is conditional on the observance of certain rules. To underline this, I use *us/our* to talk about the system's responses to student's demands.

My position in this analysis can be described as that of an 'intimate insider', a methodological position, an ethnographic orientation, whereby a researcher studies groups to whom she might belong (Taylor, 2011). I follow this approach as there is a clear relationship between the student demands for decolonization and the positions differently racialized academics can occupy in *our* system. As Elspeth Probyn explains, '[C]onceived of as an element of an enunciative practice, experience may, under certain conditions, make a unity of two different elements … Instead of representing a truth, a unity or a belongingness, a critical use of the self may come to emphasize the historical conditions involved in its speaking' (Probyn, 1993: 24). Both my positionality in the system and the demands from differently marginalized students demarcate the conditions and the limits of change within a Social Policy Department where 'the subject was first taught in 1921' (Craig et al., 2019: 29).

The approach I take turns the institutional context of education in this department, into the field where I observe and analyse the policy thinking that responds to demands for decolonization (Ahmed, 2012; Strathern, 2000). This field, as Taylor argues, 'is not only my site of work and learning, but it is my place of personal belonging, comfort, trust, friendship and love' (2011: 19). The field is a part of my everyday life. By being-there I experience and observe racialization as a part of learning to pass and navigate the boundaries of belonging, to inhabit a way of being and being othered, as an academic. Thus, the field I am analysing is the world I am involved in, where

I encounter others and where I am towards others, in a phenomenological sense, in everyday interaction. It is also where I observe the making of silences, and of the other(s), and the ways in which we take part in, or resist, these processes at a cost to our own belonging in the system (see Ahmed, 2012: 174–175). It is in analysing *our* responses from within this field to the decolonization demands that I encounter 'how institutions become instituted over time' and what allows them to reproduce their positions, so making them resistant to change (Ahmed, 2012: 20–21). Some of *our* responses to student demands to decolonize is part of such resistance.

The next ethical question I address is about how to analyse *our* responses that are clearly and explicitly located and at the same time need to remain anonymized? Being an intimate insider means that 'the shift from friend [and colleague in my case] to researcher and back again can be challenging' (Taylor, 2011: 18). I manage this by using views that emerged from student focus groups, from student responses to various formal surveys and in their demands that were communicated publicly up to December 2020. In a similar manner and time frame I consider public responses from *us* to these demands. In order to maintain anonymity, I do not use interviews or views expressed in private conversations or in any of the one-to-one discussions with students or colleagues on these issues. I also do not comment on specific courses. And, to further the anonymity of the responses, I develop a generalized typology to engage with the content of the different responses that have developed over time. Here I use a procedure inspired by the Chatham House Rules, that one can report the content of statements without attributing them to individuals. This helps building the generalized typology as I focus only on the statements. I also develop the typology of student demands using the frequency with which specific demands were voiced over the last decade. The earlier version of this work and typologies were sense checked in number of ways. It was presented at an international workshop at LSE. I also asked number of colleagues in the department to read an earlier draft for comments.

To provide context for the following analysis, here I first briefly introduce the LSE Department of Social Policy. The teaching of Social Policy/Administration at the LSE dates back to the 1920's (Exley, 2019; Oakley, 2020). The department's research orientation follows from a tradition that Ann Oakley identifies, emerging from 1920s onwards in establishing 'a broad corpus of policy-relevant evidence supporting the growth of the welfare state' (2020: 293). As part of this, both academic staff and students graduating from the department have historically taken part at various levels of social policy process across governmental and non-governmental structures both in the UK and elsewhere. At its core, the teaching, following this tradition, has focused on the emergence of welfare policies in high income, broadly Western contexts. In this, the emergence, development and changes in the UK welfare state model have, for many years, been central for thinking

about and teaching Social Policy for students coming from outside the UK. Arguably, in this one can also observe complex colonial legacies of thinking, i.e. improving other people's lives using the lens of the centre of the empire, with its paternalistic attitudes. Therefore, the general outlook at the department appears to fit the observation in the Social Policy Association's (SPA) 2019 report that 'Social Policy is 'a white subject with a white colonial history and taught mainly by white people' (Craig et al., 2019: 15). Indeed, up until 2019 undergraduate degrees in our department were taught from within this framing of Social Policy. The department has also focused on *international development* and *developing countries* since the 1980s through two specialist masters' degrees. In terms of the overall teaching the postgraduate focus on international development has been self-contained, delivered by a small number of staff to a largely international student body, broadly coming from the global south. Given this focus, the theoretical and empirical knowledge relevant for these were as arguably not considered very relevant to the department's mainstream. Again, similar to some of the views in the SPA report, new courses emerged over the years, as option courses, in a number of critical areas (on race, sexuality, international child rights, social movements and others). However, this was not systematic but was due rather to individuals' specific research interests. Also, the possibility of such initiatives was and continues to be constrained by our ability to appoint staff who can bring forward different racial, ethnic, regional experiences and epistemologies. As a result, while the courses came to signify diversity in the department's teaching for external evaluations, their more diverse epistemologies were not mainstreamed. The longstanding focus on UK social policy limited the internationalization of the teaching. And while there have been some gradual changes, international examples and cases are now more mainstreamed, this has not led to an epistemological shift away from the conventional frameworks that are being challenged by the decolonization demands. The article is also problematising the way in which the internationalisation is used to stall decolonization (particularly demonstrated in our case in the analyses of some of our responses).

In the following, I begin the analysis by looking first at student demands and then I introduce a typology of our responses to these before analysing these responses more broadly and identifying what these indicate in terms of decolonization.

What do students tell us?

From my experience, the demands to decolonize emerged initially as demands for the inclusion of wider contextual considerations into the social policy curriculum, from outside the UK and Western Europe at both undergraduate and

postgraduate levels. Over many years, both through the National Student Surveys at undergraduate level and the school-wide annual Teaching Quality Assessment Surveys (undergraduate and postgraduate), many students have observed the absence of interest in social policy beyond a mainstream defined by a focus on welfare state models in broadly industrialised high-income countries centred on the UK. Also, many students over the years have observed that while the topics they were studying were interesting, they did not discern any interest in different Global South contexts. Another observation was that the teaching is paternalistic and colonial in assuming that the knowledge obtained during their studies would necessarily be applicable in global contexts different from the western mainstream. Students also observed that some of the diverse critical perspectives and approaches taught in their studies remained limited to specific courses and were not reflected in the department's general orientation or teaching.

We have heard these kinds of observations year-in-year-out, for at least two decades while I have been teaching. Their persistence over the years, independent of the changes initiated, significantly questions the intellectual orientation that underpins the teaching programmes. Furthermore, they unpick how these assume an ideal student type which does not take account of the diversity of experiences and interests.

In developing the following typology of demands, I have considered the extent to which student views and demands were repeated. The typology highlights the characteristics of decolonization demands as we have experienced them. The aim is to set the general contours of what is meant by the decolonization of the curriculum for our students. And while many of these issues are interrelated, they are often expressed as separate issues by different student groups with different life experiences. To preserve this, I have kept different demands in the typology, even where they overlap or are similar:

1) Intellectual focus: Social Policy is UK centric and based broadly on Western European and the US comparisons. There is limited, or no interest, in how social policy might have developed anywhere outside the welfare state focus; there is a lack of interest in other places, other histories and other trajectories to wellbeing.

2) Theoretical narrowness (I): There is a restricted and restrictive understanding of how to think about wellbeing. There is a resistance to think beyond welfare states.

3) Theoretical narrowness (II): Social Policy uses a universalizing, ahistorical, theoretical lens. It is observed that this lacks engagement with colonialism, coloniality, race, religion and other issues, including sexuality. Students from different backgrounds, both from the UK and outside it, observe that histories and contexts of their experiences are not part of their studies.

4) Policy relevance: Its prescriptive in its engagement with policy discussions from other places.
5) Lack of representation: there is a lack of different and varied discourses that are based on different experiences and contexts, and a lack of diversity among the staff.

The student demands to decolonize present a major challenge to the normalized ways of thinking about and acting through social policy. These demands are also methodological: asking us why the experiences of other people in other places are not used to reflect on what is presented as the core of welfare discussions. Some students also observe that the internationalization of social policy remains part of the racialized colonial attitudes as the theoretical gaze still emanates from UK and European experiences of welfare. This lens projects itself as the measure against which other societies are to be studied, taught and evaluated. Student demands highlight that our attitudes towards teaching are underwritten by assumptions of universality, relevance, applicability, and importance of our knowledge, against all other knowledge claims. Thus, they identify a colonizing mechanism that is operational in our teaching. The questioning of this colonizing mechanism also points out the gap between such universalized claims and the silences on racialized attitudes. In these demands students are recognizing racialised mechanisms that reproduce colonized intersubjectivities that regulate exclusionary social relations.

The issues raised above have not only been brought out by international students but also by UK students. In fact, this categorical differentiation has become difficult to maintain when thinking about to whom the decolonization matters most. Students have a range of different socio-political, historical, cultural and economic backgrounds. For example, the Social Policy canon that is taught appears to silence Black students' experiences because they cannot really see their experiences of being racialized, and the implications of these for their wellbeing, in what is taught. Similarly, some white working class students, from different parts of the UK point out that the discussions of the UK welfare system often did not allow them to make sense of their or their family's experiences. Time and again, 3rd year undergraduate students questioned how far reading the same texts on 'welfare models all through their studies' was enabling them to engage with the different challenges that they observe every day. Students often feel that they are expected to be guided by ideal types that are taught independently from their backgrounds and interests. More specifically many also feel that they are expected to follow such guidance when thinking about their own experiences and contexts as if these ideal types have general relevance. Students raising these questions (over many years) are resisting being incorporated into programmes that attempt to colonize their *lifeworlds* and that 'there is a resolute indifference and disregard for their *lifeworlds*' (I thank Coretta Phillips for this last point).

In these views we observe demands for a recognition of difference, differentiated race, ethnic histories and histories of racialization, through which some students identify themselves as part of the society in their everyday lives. Their personal histories are affected by colonial pasts, particularly students from recent migrant communities linked to Asia or Africa, which make their interests international. Similarly, Black students whose grandparents arrived in the UK as part of the Windrush generation were questioning the silences about their histories and experiences in how Social Policy is taught. As these discussions are taking place in a Social Policy department, the concerns expressed were not limited to absences and silences of different experiences in teaching. Students also identified how these absences and silences impact people's lives, through the policies they underwrite. They were highlighting a severe disconnect between how they come to know themselves, how they experience their lives, and how they are asked to study their own lives through a Social Policy lens.

In their contribution to the *Social Policy & Society* Special Issue on teaching race in Social Policy Coretta Phillips and Fiona Williams observe that 'When it comes to concepts, ideas and values, the core of Social Policy also tends to reflect a whitened logic. That is to say, whiteness is the plumbline against which all other (non-white, non-middle-class) communities are measured' (2021: 4; also see Williams, 2016). In light of these considerations, I consider the demands to decolonize the curriculum as a challenge to rethink not only the history of Social Policy, but also as a demand to theorize Social Policy differently by deconstructing its colonial and colonizing mindset which is imbued with racialized assumptions. Here one of the central mechanisms to theorize is to consider whether the education system, and as a part of that system, *we*, 'accord' to students 'normative worth' that recognizes 'their needs, beliefs and abilities in order to take part in social life' (Honneth, 2014: 46–47). While I hear my colleagues rightly argue that *we do* (as we have been trying to address some of these demands), one also needs to focus on the nature of the 'normative worth' that informs our responses to unpack how this limits the extent to which these demands can be addressed. To do this I now consider *our* responses to the demands.

How do *we* respond?

In this section I present a typology that is based on *our* responses to student demands. These responses have been observed, heard, as direct responses to students in various meetings. They were also observed as responses in discussions among the staff in meetings including teaching committees, general departmental meetings and meetings set up to focus on various changes in our teaching portfolio.

The department's responsiveness to student demands has changed over time in a positive direction as evidenced by the many changes that have

been implemented in our teaching portfolio. For instance, the internationalization of teaching materials has more or less been normalized, albeit in a limited manner. Nonetheless, despite such changes one cannot argue that students are always heard. The audibility of their demands is conditioned by our ability to hear. The limits of audibility and its impact on the changes above are evidenced by the persistence of student demands on certain issues.

One caveat in the typology used here is that it does not include responses from colleagues who have shared students' views and supported their demands by bringing them to the attention of the department over the years. This is not to ignore the importance of these, *our*, voices. Rather it is partially due to the limitedness of these voices within the department and partially because these voices have also been countered by the responses captured in the typology. I now present the typology of our responses

1) Incoherence: there are too many voices asking for different things, incoherent- diversity of demand
2) Domestic/international student divide: it is some students – more international students than the UK students – we cannot deal with UK and international students in the same way, they don't have similar experiences.
3) Canon: it is important to teach the canon if the students want to have a chance/ or to succeed in the marketplace and/or they are coming to the UK to learn about the UK;
4) Generalizability: we teach social policy in established welfare states so that students can learn how to improve wellbeing in their contexts (policy transfer, 'what works' etc);
5) Diversification: we can add some diversity (internationalization) by adding readings as alternative views, but surely the canon is the centre of our approach;
6) Methodology: Methodology cannot be part of decolonization (not everything can be decolonized).
7) Further investigation needed: We don't know what creates this demand, we need to understand (yes we know what students are saying but we have to explain it looking at the data, or the numbers are too small to make inferences/conclusions).

Responses in this typology are not mutually exclusive. While it, on the one hand, highlights clear engagement with students, on the other hand it shows an implicit resistance to change. The order in which I present the typology above indicates an increasing resistance in hearing the student demands.

The methodology response (6) is particularly critical and it is important to clarify what I mean by *methodology* in the typology here. There is an assumption that the methodologies *we* use warranting *our* social policy knowledge cannot

be decolonized or deconstructed. This argument is, of course, not limited to evaluating the appropriateness of research material to include for teaching diversification purposes. Often one hears a lament in relation to research from the Global South: there is really no data one can trust, statistics are not systematically collected or developed in so many countries from the Global South. This is often followed by the question: can one do policy relevant research in these contexts? These questions are asserting that only a few methods are the proper way of knowing for the purposes of policy research in and for teaching for all contexts. This is an epistemological claim that conflates an observed lack of a data, that *we* think is most relevant, with an absence of knowledge.

The *undecolonizable methodology* in the typology refers to a specific case of claiming knowledge developed as a 'view from nowhere' broadly based on specific universality-objectivity claims, often procedural objectivity claims, hiding colonial, race and gender based assumptions grounding their claims (see Daston and Galison, 2007; De Sousa Santos, 2018; Smith, 2012). This way of knowing, as a test to evaluate the integrity of research, sets the limits for relevant knowledge and the relevance of research for Social Policy. Our self-referential methodologies claimed as the basis of social policy research become the only grounds to validate student voices or discount them.

The gradual entrenchment of our responses acts to challenge student claims by both invalidating their claims, due to a fragmentation of voices or a lack of significant numbers, and by establishing this lack of data as a barrier for knowledge by limiting what can be considered as valid data. The responses act also as part of our social interactions in public, to shift the burden of proof on to students.

What do these responses do?

How do we understand students' demands for decolonization? The demands are reactions informed by students' experiences of *our* teaching provision. Here I argue that the repetition of students' demands reveal that our responses have led to the ignoring of their demands and to maintaining an unjust legitimation of the coloniality of our teaching. This situation is produced through a mechanism of epistemological claims that underwrite our interactions. Therefore, I argue that in each silenced claim to decolonize is an instance that reveals a *hermeneutic injustice*, a part of *epistemological injustice,* as the underlying mechanism.

Miranda Fricker considers a *hermeneutic injustice* as a situation whereby 'the powerful have an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understandings' (2009: 147). This can be further unpacked as a situation in which 'our shared understandings, as reflecting the perspectives of different social groups,

and to entertain the idea of that relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources' benefitting the powerful while the less powerful are left with 'ill-fitting meanings' with which to make sense of their own experiences (Fricker, 2009: 148). In this sense students' demands reveal that the teaching of social policy in a Social Policy Department is not allowing them to make sense of their racialized experiences and histories. Whether we are able to address this epistemic injustice depends on the nature of *our* responses and the actions they inform. Considering that student demands over the years are tracking silences and absences in our teaching, *our* responses act as *a performance* of hearing or of a willingness to listen. However, over time I have come to think about these responses as a resistance to change.

The first response type, incoherence, reflects a clear inability to see a common thread in student demands. As a result, it implicitly sets out a criterion for audibility that requires coherence of demands supported by significant numbers of students. The second response type is interesting as it hears the demands from students on the basis of our own understanding about what can reasonably be a problem for both international and domestic students. These two response types are evident in questions one often hears in discussions: *How many students are asking for X or Y? Are they international students? Are they MSc or Undergraduate students*? I think what is particularly interesting here is the way in which the categories we use inherently lead to a breaking down of the coherence of students' demands. Furthermore, if there are too few voices in a category, it supports a view of *not having significant numbers* to take these demands seriously. Both of these response types create a kind of overall response that can take the following general form: *let us think and come up with what we think is appropriate for everyone in your cohort, as we also need to balance others'{majority} views*. This often sounds reasonable but contributes to inaction in most cases.

These two common responses have also been increasingly questioned by students. For instance, it is important to note their questioning of the disjuncture between the assumed socio-political and historical location of UG students and MSc students, and their intensified calls for further decolonisation, and that these are not being entirely satisfied by our attempts to internationalize our curriculum. The demands have immediately challenged two central stereotypes: one is about the characteristics of undergraduate students and the second about what is assumed to be the right content to teach for a particular group of students homogenized as UK domestic students or as international students. On a number of occasions, the importance of basing the undergraduate teaching on the UK welfare system was taken to be non-negotiable. The UK welfare system centred teaching was also justified for international students by pointing out that *they were, in the end, studying at a UK HEI*, taken to signify we were told *their interest in our system*. However, the homogenization is fractured by the demands of the undergraduates

which revealed the student interest in decolonization of the curriculum is also about disrupting the homogenization of student subjectivities by explicitly highlighting the centrality of intersecting race, ethnicity, religion, gender sexualities, histories and class experiences and identities.

Our responses are based both on the discussions of the Social Policy canon (response type 3) and the general relevance of our disciplinary expertise in arguing for the centrality of the canon. While, for instance, it is recognized that the canon has limitations as race and decolonization 'could not be done from the current base of social policy teaching in higher education' (Cole et al., 2021: 2), we still aim to provide reasonable arguments for the relevance of the canon to convince students to conform. In this, the general explanatory utility of the canon is asserted for everyone (response type 4). This approach is appealing to an understanding of science, that is, to the epistemic authority of our knowledge, to counter student demands in establishing the centrality of what is taught. Furthermore, when questioned this response is also justified by an appeal to the Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education (QAA)'s subject benchmark for Social Policy as it reiterates a clear UK and advanced welfare state focus for graduate single honours programmes (QAA, 2019). Thus, this response sidelines decolonization demands by obscuring the historicity of the canon and its adverse incorporation of people coming from racialized backgrounds and communities. In this selective approach there is also little historicization of the colonial and imperialist resources that underpinned the possibility of welfare provision in the UK. In each deployment of this approach the canon is further canonized. As a result, the possibility of experiencing and knowing differently about social policy is discounted. This also means that our attempts in diversifying our teaching carried out on this basis have gradually become less convincing.

We often talk about how we are diversifying our reading lists (response type 5). By diversifying we demonstrate to students that in teaching different empirical cases and examples of policy from outside the UK (typically high-income country experiences) we are addressing their demands. But this is a bounded diversification as we still use the latter to evaluate the relevance of cases and examples from other places we would like to include. In other words, by diversifying in this way we implicitly reassert the centrality of the canon. We still evaluate the functioning of social policies from other contexts, and knowledge about them, against the policy thinking and aspirations emanating from the canon (Sigle, 2021). It is assumed that experiences from the UK, or from other high-income welfare states, have general policy relevance to others, while experiences from the Global South have limited, or no, theoretical or policy relevance to contexts from outside Global South contexts. And while through this approach our teaching undoubtedly provides different views on experiences and examples of Social Policy, our teaching in its performance of diversity maintains the epistemological centrality of the canon (Ahmed, 2011).

The earlier response types give the impression of a lack of understanding, or knowledge, but types 6 (and 7), the methodological type, are a critical reaction that reveals that all of these responses are articulated within a hierarchy of epistemological assertions about whose knowledge matters. This specific response reveals the mechanism of control that insists on using an already established epistemic verification system as the grounds from which to consider and filter student demands as worthy or not. Therefore, the power to accord 'normative worth' (Honneth, 2014: 46–47) to students' (and to some staff's) demands to consider change remains within the existing epistemological conventions for assessing the veracity of such demands. The existing racialized and colonized positions are hidden by these epistemological claims, with its assumed value independence and claims to a universal validity of the methodologies used.

In the end it is hard not to see in our responses a continued reproduction of the colonial outlook legitimated by *hermeneutic injustice* rather than a tackling of its sources. The objection to the decolonization of methodology preserves the grounds on which we warrant our knowledge claims (see Mbembe, 2021: 67–77). Our claims discount students' claims to have knowledge as social actors. In each enactment this mechanism is arguably an act of *testimonial injustice*, the other part of the epistemological injustice according to Fricker (2009). For the responses, across all types, implicitly or explicitly, evaluate student demands according to our *a priori* assumptions about the capacity of speakers to know and often to be dismissed as a result. As put by Fricker in such a situation 'someone is *wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower*' (2009: 20 italics in original). It is an injustice because those who evaluate a claim to know do so from a position of social, political and institutional power, with the power to judge and ignore the claim. Embedded in this is the hearer's perception of a claimant's capacity on the basis of always already given categories (including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, secularity, nationality, accent, class) that inform the prejudiced cognitive repertoires of the hearer/addressee.

Fricker further discusses the situation above as a testimonial process. She argues that the outcome of this process leads to injustice. She points out that in the testimonial process '[E]ither the prejudice results in the speaker's receiving more credibility than she otherwise would have – *a credibility excess* or it results in her receiving less credibility than she otherwise would have – *a credibility deficit*' (2009: 17). She further argues that '[T]he primary characterization of testimonial injustice … remains such that it is a matter of *credibility deficit* and not *credibility excess*' (2009: 21). In her view while the latter might have 'injustice' implications for individuals, it does not usually 'undermine, insult, or otherwise withhold a proper respect for the speaker *qua* subject of knowledge' (2009: 20). Following this, I argue that the former, the *credibility deficit*, undermines, insults, and withholds a proper respect for the person as a knower. This informs why the focus is on a *credibility deficit* as the situation is

created due to the prejudices that ground 'the judgment of the hearers' (Fricker, 2009: 22). At each instance our responses to a demand locate the interaction created by the demand into a hierarchy of ability to know dictated by the student-academic/expert binary. This hierarchy immediately implies a credibility position that locates the speaker/students and hearer/us into a hierarchy of knowledge. Our methodological responses create a systematic *credibility excess* for hearer/academics/us while it leads to an immediate *credibility deficit* for speakers/ students, or at least, until their claims can be warranted by *our* methodologies.

In our educational space the credibility binary acts on the basis of our prejudices about what students can know and about the usefulness of what they can know for us. This constitutes students as actors with credibility deficit in their capacity to know including to know about themselves, so their lived experiences are undervalued and silenced. This leads to a discounting of their knowledge of us, what we teach and how we teach, developed through being in a HEI. Both the silencing and discounting become part of our thinking. These prejudices are manifest in our responses on methodology as we only hear students if their knowledge claims can be verified according to *our* categories and analytical tools. According to Fricker, testimonial injustice becomes 'severe' when it systematically tracks people across social relations and to frequently repeated that it becomes 'persistent' (2009: 27–29). I argue that our responses demonstrate such a systematic outlook in their juxtaposition of the canon against the decolonization claims. In our responses students encounter testimonial injustice: they are told in order to be convincing there has to be a significant number of them complaining about similar things, their experiences can inform alternative ways to think but the relevance of these need to be evaluated by the mainstream; they are told that they are talking about limited experiences and that these may not be relevant for everyone; they are told that we hear them but in order to be successful they need to learn what they are being taught. In all of these forms of responses a student's credibility as knower is not only questioned but also undermined and ignored. Moreover, by dismissing a claim of a speaker the hearer not only asserts their authority in an institutionalized power structure but they also reproduce their own prejudices as the grounds for future judgments.

I am observing a mechanism, the *credibility deficit,* that prevents students from being heard as knowers. This leads to further silencing and limiting of what can be known by students ignoring their observations about our teaching: miss-classifications, absent histories and silenced experiences. I suggest that *our* responses in this way lead to severe cases of testimonial injustice. For instance, in each deployment a methodology response affirms a justification for *our* scepticism about the veracity of hermeneutical injustices observed by students and ultimately allows us to ignore them. By attributing a general authority to a particular set of methodological tools their complicity in perpetuating majoritarian, broadly colonial, views on societies is obscured.

Our responses, grounded in a kind of methodological scepticism, are using an appeal to science, objectivity, to claim the agency to question the veracity of *hermeneutic injustices* from an assumed distance created by methodological procedure. With this logic *we* ignore both the injustice questions raised by students' on the methodological complicity of social sciences in coloniality and also our own roles in the reproduction of such injustices observed by students. While this situation creates a *credibility excess* for us, in the process exacerbated *testimonial injustice* is ignored by an appeal to scientific procedure implied in the methodological claim. In the end we not only sidestep the epistemic injustice in its entirety but *we* also create an assumption/a belief about *our* neutrality to judge injustices in future evaluations of these claims.

By dismissing claims of *epistemological injustice* with an appeal to a scientific objectivity of method in Social Policy, this process perpetuates a *methodological colonialism* (see Smith, 2012). Even if *we* hear the claims and are perhaps happy to consider diversification of teaching approaches, these acts are all bounded by our privileged methodological position as the unquestionable grounds for evaluating all these claims. This methodological practice, independent of its appeal to science, acts as a colonial enterprise that authorises and legitimates interventions by those powerful (*us*) in the existing hierarchies into other people's lives (students in this case) to maintain existing discriminations for the benefit of those who are intervening. Here the stakes are high because epistemic injustice is the mechanism that produces and reproduces colonialism while rendering our position beyond questioning, under some appeal to science. In this way it not only silences other ways of knowing but also establishes *a priori* grounds for denying the possibility of other ways of knowing.

Conclusion

In this article I looked at the dynamics of social interactions created by student demands to decolonize higher education. This was done by focusing on our experiences in my own department. The aim was to reflect on our experiences of addressing these demands to analyse the mechanism that mediates these interactions. I created a typology of our responses as I reflected on our standard responses to student demands over the years. In our responses, I noted, we constantly give an account of a set of activities to demonstrate *our* responses to these demands. This practice acts as a strategy to tell students that *we* hear you and here is the evidence, in a set of activities that we are undertaking. But this strategy limits our own understanding of both what decolonization is supposed to achieve in relation to its broader anti-racist aims and what we are decolonizing, if we are decolonizing at all.

The discussions on decolonization in HEI are about epistemologies that inform the nature of relevant knowledge for social relations and how that

knowledge is produced. Our responses independent of their attempts to respond to student demands, did not move us further. Therefore, I considered these responses to be unhelpful (and potentially in their repetition leading to an epistemological violence). I have argued that our responses not only reproduce epistemological injustice but they also created epistemological boundaries for future thinking through the restrictions created by what I called 'methodological colonialism'. Even though we appear to be addressing students' demands, the way in which we address these deploy a set of methodological constraints within the existing power dynamics, as if decolonization were simply a technical question. This leads to a silencing of other knowledge claims and a dismissal of other possibilities of knowing while at the same time appearing to be engaging with student demands. The overall evidence for this situation is in part the ongoing student demands over the years, that have continued, independent of the changes we have initiated.

Perhaps one of the more challenging aspects of the analysis is the consideration of our responses as intentional actions that indicate resistance rather than a lack of knowledge. Responses considered as a whole show that *we* are responding to something *we* claimed to have heard. Thus, there is a question of responsibility, our responsibility, for our responses and for what these do. The analysis demonstrates that our responses are often self-regarding, defensive, and self-referential, resistant, as they aim to maintain a disciplinary outlook. The conditions of this resistance are in the way *we* use the canon, including methodological positions, to set unquestionable epistemological boundaries. In other words, *we* turn the canon into a kind of ontological entity. As a result, everything becomes unquestionably measured against it for these to be assessed in their relevance. The unquestionable authority *we* attribute to this ontological entity means that we as individuals become free of responsibility in relation to our responses, because they are authorized by the canon.

It is clear that silence in the face of these student demands since May 2020 is not an option, particularly in departments such as Social Policy. However, in engaging with students through these responses, we act to limit the scope of change. This then leads to a clearly ethical question of how far we are 'taking responsibility', for *our* responses, for our students as people attempting to break down the structural dynamics of racialization (see Bonhoeffer, 2009: 221).

Acknowledgements

asked a number of colleagues in the department to read the final draft to provide feedback particularly on the typologies. In particular I thank Vanessa Hughes, David Lewis, Robtel Neajay Pailey, Coretta Phillips for their extensive comments. I also thank Akile Ahmet and Armine Ishkanian for their comments. I am grateful to generations of students.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

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