



Edmund Perry, the Distribution of Knowledge, and the Looking Glass of Race

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Scholarly studies on the education of black students in predominantly white secondary and postsecondary institutions in the United States run the risk of overlooking significant aspects of the question because of their methodological premises. Frequently such analyses focus on the statistical data about recruitment or retention rates, or they assess mathematically academic and social successes and sources of dissatisfaction which black students experience in predominantly white educational settings (Fleming, 1984; Katz, Atchison, Epps, & Roberts, 1972; Peterson et al., 1978). Although philosopher-sociologist Alfred Schutz valued such research, he felt that its generalizations and idealizations functioned as a kind of intellectual shorthand, abstracting from all that happens within the individual actor (Schutz, 1964, p. 85).

In order to describe what "happens in the mind of an individual actor," Schutz turned to phenomenology. This philosophical school developed its model of knowledge on the basis of a perceiver who builds up knowledge regarding the different aspects of an object as he or she circles around it and pauses to gaze on it from different spatiotemporal perspectives. How an object appears is always correlative to the acts of a spatiotemporally situated knower.

Schutz extended these insights to the social world. He noted that space and time affect the accumulation of knowledge we have with reference to others. We know more about our associates who share our space and time as we stand before them face-to-face than we know about our contemporaries, those of our own era who live at a distance from us and whom we must grasp through ideal types which are revised or confirmed on the basis of occasional letters, phone calls, or visits. We know even less about predecessors who share neither our space nor our time. For Schutz, a third determinant beyond space and time shapes our constellations of knowledge or "distributions of knowledge": social groups. The social groups to which we belong imbue us with regularized interpretive schemes, called

"typifications," and selective interests which determine how we will know and relate to objects, realms of culture, other persons from other social groups, or even ourselves.

The phenomenological paradigm which focuses not only on the object as it appears, but also on the acts of a subject to which these appearances present themselves, undergoes interesting modifications when the object toward which a subject turns is another subject whose acts are focused back on him. In the "looking-glass effect," a term Schutz borrows from American sociologist Charles Cooley, I, as a subject, see the other's seeing of me. I can even see his seeing me seeing him. In the simple posing of a question, for example, I am already paying attention to how my respondent is listening to me, and I try to phrase my question to fit his receptive capacities and evoke the response I am seeking. But this mutual interpretation of each other through mutual typifying of each other depends on our degrees of familiarity with the past of the other, the place he comes from, and the social groups with which he has been affiliated and their patterns of knowledge and action. In conformity with my distribution of knowledge regarding his distribution of knowledge, I more or less adequately perceive anticipatorily his perception of what I will say, and so I modify how I express myself and probably never mention some things at all in his presence. To illustrate this looking-glass effect, I would be quite reluctant to discuss with a militant Iranian the possible good effects of the reign of the Shah on Iran, but, if I am a religious believer, I might be willing to discuss with him the dangers of secularization. Remarkably enough, we live out unreflectively this interlocking of glances, this thousand-faceted mirroring of each other, and disentangle its links only subsequently, in after-thought (Schutz, 1967, pp. 159-162, 169-170).

These Schutzian concepts of the distribution of knowledge and the looking-glass effect illuminate the racial tensions black students feel in a predominantly white academic context, as the tragic experience of Edmund Perry indicates. Anson (1987), in his *Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry*, thoroughly described the difficulties which this young black man from Harlem encountered at Philip Exeter Academy. Anson was motivated to write that book after a New York police officer shot and killed Mr. Perry the summer after Perry graduated from Exeter and prior to his entrance into Stanford University under a full scholarship. I will illustrate how the distribution of knowledge functions in black-white relationships and show how it and the looking-glass effect explain the spectrum of relationships—with family, former teachers, school au-

thorities, and peers—in which Perry was involved during his stay at Exeter.

The Distribution of Knowledge

Black and white students bring widely varying distributions of knowledge, formed by history, geography, and society, to the interlocking of glances at an elite preparatory school like Exeter Academy. Both groups, generally segregated from each other for the 13 years prior to encountering each other face-to-face in integrated educational environments, have formed inferential and often uncriticized ideal types of each other. To know another through such types is characteristic of contemporaries who share the same time, but not the same space.

As one black student remarked about his first coming to Exeter, “You build up these perceptions of whites, that whites are mean and vile, never trust a white person and all that, so in the back of my mind I was sort of afraid” (Anson, 1987, p. 127; see Gibbs, 1974, p. 738; Sowell, 1972, p. 132). Edmund Perry revealed a similar typification of whites in a haunting question addressed to pseudonymous “Carolyn Jones,” who filmed a documentary on him and other talented students about to attend elite prep schools. Perry asked her, “Am I going to be all right up there? Are those white kids going to be picking on me? Are they gonna call me nigger?”¹ (pp. 89-90).

White students, historically, geographically, and socially isolated from blacks, come equipped with a similarly impoverished distribution of knowledge regarding their counterparts, black students. Edouard Plummer, director of the Special Program which placed 230 Harlem students, including Perry, in 72 elite prep schools, warned his students about this problem. Plummer informed them that few white students at places like Exeter had ever had a black friend, “especially one from so exotic a locale as Harlem” (p. 192), and many “have never seen blacks before except on TV” (p. 53). As Plummer continued, whites often assume “everyone from Harlem carries a knife and has a mother on welfare” (pp. 53, 91). As a result of their limited stock of knowledge, it is not surprising that white students at Exeter were “stunned” that Perry was offended by Mark Twain’s portrayal of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* (p. 121). It comes as no shock that these white students embraced Social Darwinism with ease and spurned government social programs and black enterprise which Perry defended (pp. 121, 149). A black friend of Anson’s, a Yale-graduated businessman also acquainted with Perry, summed up these discrepancies in distributions of knowledge by pointing out how the historical distance from

the heyday of the civil rights movement handicaps present white students:

They weren't like the white kids I had gone to school with. They had never heard of a Martin Luther King or seen a Bull Conner with dogs and firehoses. There's no way for them to understand the justness of the struggle. As far as they're concerned, there's no reason for struggle. So when Eddie talked to them about racism, they thought he was crazy. (pp. 203-204)

Several black students in elite prep schools frequently experience offensive and intrusive questions by white students, thus revealing whites' lack of acquaintance with black culture: questions about blacks' hair, body smells, sexual activity (pp. 93, 153, 157). Lamont O'Neil recounts how one white student asked him if all black people wore undershirts because he had noticed Lamont and two other black students wearing them (p. 129). This inability to sense that another person might find one's question offensive, this incapacity to perceive (in the non-technical, epistemological sense of "perceive") how the other might perceive a question, reveals the vast cultural abyss present in the looking glass between the races.²

Schutz (1964) notes in his essay "The Stranger" that the stranger to a foreign culture is always in danger of taking typical functions as individual and individual traits as typical (p. 103). Such errors occur because the stranger, fitted out with a distribution of knowledge appropriate to his own culture, has not yet acquired a stock of knowledge sufficient for coping with the foreign culture. The white student who suspected that the individual trait of wearing an undershirt was typical of all black students betrayed how much he was a stranger to black culture by that very question. But because the white student posed that question in a predominantly white setting, the question had the effect of assigning to the black student the role of being something of an oddity, the one with whom everyone else was unfamiliar. In a white context, even when white students are vulnerable strangers to black culture, it is the black student who ends up appearing as the stranger.

This confusing predicament, that strangers to black culture can convert blacks themselves into strangers and take individual traits as typical and transfer traits typically assigned to blacks to any individual, leaves black students constantly vulnerable to misinterpretation by whites. Thus Carolyn Jones remarked that during her time in such a prep school, if she even closed the door to her room people interpreted her as being angry or militant (p. 92). Jones reflected on these occurrences: "You finally realize

that you personally have nothing to do with it, that you are being treated in a certain way simply because you are black" (p. 92). In conflict situations, Lamont O'Neil always wondered whether whites did not like him personally or did not like blacks in general (p. 128). Edmund Perry at one point admonished O'Neil, "You not only have to be good, you have to be perfect. If you do something bad, it's not only a mark against yourself, but a mark against the entire black race" (p. 130). Perry's typified suspicion about how his actions would have been perceived by whites, with individual actions being immediately generalized, was certainly not unfounded.

However, a fine line exists between shaping one's action so as to procure a favorable reception for the black race, as Perry recommended, and assimilating or conforming to what others typically expect and suppressing one's individuality and one's difference from others. Hence, while living under the strain of trying to avoid embarrassing the black race, Perry also constantly struggled against being assimilated. To that end, he counseled one black woman at Exeter against gradually coming to believe and accept "Reagan-type ideas" which were detrimental to the black community³ (p. 175). In a highly confrontational speech, he denounced assimilation at a schoolwide assembly marking the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King⁴ (pp. 161-162). The meager distribution of knowledge whites have built up with reference to blacks underlies this tension between adaptation and assimilation with which the black student must contend.

Ironically, while black students often resist assimilation because of their desire to return and improve the communities they came from, their very attendance at preparatory schools complicates their return to those communities. Unlike Schutz's stranger, who toils only to adapt, the black student must resist assimilation because he knows that will be like the homecomer portrayed in Schutz's essay on the difficult adjustment required by the World War II soldier returning from the front. The black prep student acquires a new distribution of knowledge while he is away and so never finds an easy readjustment to his former environs where people lack the distribution of knowledge to fathom what he has been through. Carolyn Jones, Lamont O'Neil, friends of the Perry family, and Anson's anonymous businessman-commentator at the end of the book—all discuss in detail the painfulness of Perry's homecoming (pp. 39, 42, 93, 130-131, 202-203). Anson's final summarizer itemizes poignantly Perry's perceptions of some of the typified perceptions of him which his neighbors employed whenever he came home:

And how in the hell is he supposed to talk to them? He wasn't a part of that block anymore. Shit, this kid couldn't even play basketball. They ridiculed him for that, they ridiculed him for going away to school, they ridiculed him for turning white. I know they did because he told me they did.⁵ (p. 205)

Although James Snead, black professor of German literature from Yale, recommended to Perry that blacks need to learn "to be able to shuttle between cultures, while being critical of each" (p. 159), Edmund Perry, because of distributions of knowledge so discrepant from his own and the uncomprehending typifications others imposed on him, ended up more and more without "anyone to talk to about his weaknesses or vulnerabilities" (p. 159; see Gibbs, 1974, pp. 733-734)—a stranger in a white world and a homecomer without a home.

The Looking-Glass Effect

This disparity in distributions of knowledge, which makes blacks and whites strangers to each other and isolates the homecomer even from his own racial community, becomes a central ingredient in the looking-glass effect. What we know of the other determines our expectations of how he will react, and these expectations, in turn, determine how much of ourselves we will reveal or conceal before him. Correlatively, what we reveal or conceal before the other determines how much he will know of us and we of him. The participants' distributions of knowledge determine the course of the looking-glass effect which itself acts back on their distributions of knowledge.

Anson's book, after the fashion of a novel, provides the reader with an omniscient viewpoint, an all-knowing distribution of knowledge, from which to watch Edmund Perry as he enters various relationships with his family, his teachers in Harlem, authorities at Exeter, and his different classmates at Exeter—with black people and white people in varying degrees of intimacy and anonymity. The reader sees Edmund revealing and concealing himself in a way that Edmund's interactor at any one time cannot see because the interactor lacks access to the gamut of Perry's relationships. In addition, the reader perceives the perceiving of those differently constituted interactors, each of whom, through his or her unique perspective, often illuminates aspects of Edmund which no one else grasps. The structure of the book, then, displays clearly the varied distributions of knowledge, both intersecting and overlapping, and the pervasiveness of the looking-glass effect in which Edmund and his conversation partners shape their interactions according to their perceptions of how they are being perceived by the other.

Phenomenological method, which concentrates not on the brute object but on the object as it is given to interpretive activity, provides an apt instrument for coming to terms with such a complex labyrinth of intersubjective interpretations.

Edmund's mother cherished her son deeply. She kept pictures of him, always smiling, throughout the house. She described him as the shining star of her life—a son who talked with her about everything from school to homosexuality (pp. 9, 62, 67-68). Edmund, according to a black faculty member at Exeter, "had a real affection for her, like a lot of black students do for their mothers," and Edmund had acquainted her with some of the alienation he experienced in his last year at Exeter (pp. 71, 117). But Edmund concealed from his mother his involvement with the drug culture and the selling of drugs—documented in chapter 15 of *Best Intentions*—as the anonymous friend of Anson and Edmund recounted:

It wasn't as if she was his best friend. As far as what was going on at Exeter was concerned, she was totally out of it. Eddie felt like she didn't have the slightest glimmer of what Exeter was like. (p. 205)

In this case—in which the reader is given a perception of Anson's perception of his friend's perception of Eddie's perception of Eddie's mother's perception of Eddie⁶—we can see clearly that Edmund's anticipation that his mother lacked a distribution of knowledge sufficient for coping with his Exeter experience leads him to conceal information from her despite their history of sharing on a variety of topics. The homecomer simply cannot help his own family to know what life was like on the front. Through experience, he comes to typify them as being incapable of understanding whatever he might narrate and so withdraws in silence. The anonymous commentator adds that Edmund could not have talked to his brother Jonah because of their mutual competition and his premonition that his family would deprive him of his status as star of the family if they knew (p. 205).

Similarly, Edmund kept hidden from his former grade school teachers in Harlem what he was going through. In the past, they had built up a sum of knowledge of him as responsible, well-mannered, respectful, alert, active, honest, and when he had returned for visits, they found him more poised and dignified, sure of himself, and confident in his abilities (pp. 9-10, 49). Edouard Plummer recalled Edmund saying on vacations home that everything he had put up with in his grade school training had been worth it and that he was getting along beautifully with

everybody (p. 55). As a result, Plummer had no idea that anything was wrong (p. 55). Edmund, no doubt, had typified these teachers on the basis of how he had known them at an earlier time in his life, that is, as people who had invested much in him, who were intensely proud of him, and who might have been severely disappointed in him had he let on what was really happening—in brief, they were revered authorities whom he still had to please. On the basis of typifications such as these, perceptions of how he might be perceived if he divulged painful truths, Edmund withheld information from the very people who most might have been able to come to his aid. How much knowledge people possess or lack regarding each other is contingent on the typifications they employ in the looking-glass effect.

Nowhere are the gaps in communication more glaring than in Edmund's relationship with authorities at Exeter.⁷ Neither Principal Kurtz, nor the houseparents, nor the admissions officer who recruited him had any notion of his distress (pp. 10, 112, 180-181, 195). Nor could teachers or chaplains elicit his trust (pp. 119, 150). Although Edmund did not conceive these diverse *white* authorities as sympathetic to his plight, he came closer to confiding in a *black* ex-faculty member, David Daniels, who detected great agitation in him without any clue, though, to his underlying problems (pp. 195-197). Black students' belief that black authority figures will empathize, because of their comparable knowledge-distribution, can but does not necessarily encourage openness. In addition, Edmund did mention to his freshman math teacher that he was confused about his status in between Exeter and Harlem, but he claimed that he could not talk to anyone on campus except blacks because the feelings of whites were always hurt whenever he talked honestly with them (p. 151). Black students at Exeter usually do not typify faculty and counselors as being responsive to the problems of "being black and being at Exeter" (p. 175), as one Exeter counselor put it.⁸ Carolyn Jones suggests that black students fear losing their scholarships or that apprehensiveness on the part of black students corresponds to the prep school authorities' own typified expectations that blacks be problem-free, grateful, and compliant with the stoical norm of the Exeter *man*⁹ (pp. 94-95). Ironically, Michael Forrestal, chairman of the board of trustees of Exeter, quipped to Anson in reaction to Edmund's shooting for allegedly attacking a New York policeman, "This is not the sort of thing that is supposed to happen to an Exeter man" (p. 103).

Edmund's relationships with his peers represent a spectrum of looking-glass interchanges wherein he masks and exposes him-

self according to his presentiments of their reaction. His distance from Lamont O'Neil reflects O'Neil's reading of him as "not the type to get close to anyone—not the type to even need anyone" (p. 131). He fraternizes with his white friend, Kennet Marshall, perhaps because Marshall idealized Perry. For instance, Marshall stated to Anson that all the people on 114th Street were friendly, that Edmund was well received there, and that Edmund was "not hung up on race at all"—views which led Anson to discount Marshall's testimony as unreal (p. 167). In Edmund's tender relationship with Arielle Natelson, a white Jewish girl from Los Angeles, race was never an important subject in their long idyllic talks (pp. 142-144), but friends of Edmund's in New York contend that he was emotionally, racially, and sexually confused and tormented about her (p. 144). Although Edmund apparently sensed no need to be defensive about race before this intimate counterpart, her affection for him did not promote the kind of unrestricted openness that might have threatened their relationship. The intimate looking glass can either foster disclosure or curtail self-revelations which might jeopardize a relationship that makes revelations in other areas possible. White students described Edmund as "trying to be as tough as the place he came from" or "so proud of his race that he expected you to dislike him for it, to look down on him because of it"¹⁰ (pp. 138, 182). One white student typified Edmund as liable to respond in the following way: "If you so much as said hello to him, he might jump you. If you did say hello, he would make a comment to one of his black friends about how insincere it was" (p. 194). Of course, the cold omission of such amenities would have only exacerbated Edmund's sense of alienation. Unfortunately, most white students simply lacked the constellation of knowledge and experience to interpret Edmund's stylized, typified self-presentations as symptomatic of his wrestling with the dilemma of the stranger/homecomer, namely, how to belong without assimilating. Edmund also concocted false stories about his own behavior in reaction to the perceived typifications others had formed of him. He pretended that he had received a leg injury in a fight in Harlem during vacation, that he attacked two white baseball players with a bat, and that he had struck a teacher at Wadleigh in Harlem (pp. 119, 187, 190).

It is not so much that Perry deceived deliberately, as Anson at times implies (p. 137), as that through the crucible of the looking glass of race he had mastered the art of dramaturgy, playing to or against his assessment of the expectations of whoever his audience might be. Perhaps in the end, Edmund Perry became so astute at assuming roles that he began "living a fantasy life,"

in the words of Anson's friend-commentator (p. 204). Jamie Snead from Yale summed up Edmund Perry best in this regard:

He was almost kind of bargaining with you about the levels on which you would take him, as if he was trying to see how much he could get away with in convincing you he was this or that person. It was like a negotiation, like bargaining in a store over the price of an article. If you didn't like one personality, he would give you another, and if you didn't like that one, he'd give you still another, and if you didn't like that one, he'd give you still another. He'd play any role you wanted him to play. He had a whole repertoire of personalities, five or six of them, and you had the feeling that he could put one on to fit any person or situation.

There was something very endearing about that, something very charming, but also something very unsettling. (pp. 159-160)

Reflections

Simmel (1971) in his famous essay "How is Society Possible?" realized that we label each other and ourselves according to types which never coincide with our pure individual being, with the result that "All of us are fragments, not only of general man, but also of ourselves" (p. 10). To the omniscient reader of Anson's book, it is evident that only partial aspects of Edmund Perry come forth in any of the relationships he enters, and by the end of the book, one wonders about the Edmund Perry that even Anson's exhaustive assemblage of perspectives has left untouched.

Schutz (1964), too, was cognizant of the fragmentation which our different self-typified roles impose on us and the limited, partial access to each other which they permit (p. 125). Furthermore, he claimed that the spatial-geographical positions which we have occupied, the social groups in which we have participated, and the temporal order and intensity of all these experiences constitute a distribution of knowledge unique to every individual beyond the diverse public roles he or she takes up. No one else can share in each person's distribution of knowledge in the same way (Schutz, 1967, pp. 98-99; see Barber, 1988, p. 61). Hence, although we can understand each other through commonly shared, socially transmitted typifications, the meaning I give to my experiences cannot be precisely the same as the meaning you give to them when you proceed to interpret them (Schutz, 1967, p. 99). There is always a horizon of otherness about the other, a residue of unknowability in my comprehension of the other, which could only be superseded if I were the other.

It is these dissonances in meaning and knowledge distributions at play in the looking glass between black and white interactors which come to the fore when we recall that in the human sciences we are not describing inert objects, but interpreting active interpreters who interpret those interpreting them and express themselves or withdraw according to their interpretations of their interpreters.

Furthermore, this descriptive methodology which avails itself of a number of perspectives circling a single agent who divulges or cloaks himself, depending on his perception of his perceivers, gives us a glimpse of "negative action," that intentional refraining from acting, which occurs, for instance, when an actor refuses to disclose to some interactors what he willingly shows to others.¹¹ Paradoxically the active nature of the agent to be interpreted becomes evident in his deliberate refusal to act. Questionnaires elicit information and can indicate where responses are omitted, but this accumulation of knowledge from a variety of distributions of knowledge highlights exactly what it is that an actor omits in one context because he un.masks it in another. In the looking glass between the races, it may be that what is unsaid and hidden is of the greatest significance. As far as Edmund Perry was concerned, it was the unrecognized differences in background shrouded in silence and the unshared confusions and pains carried secretly which resulted in tragedy.

It is typical of the method of phenomenology not to rest content with an object taken for granted but to uncover the subjective activities of consciousness through which that object is given and to explore the unknown horizons of what is given at face value. In the intersubjective domain, phenomenology can reveal the subjective activities of self-revelation or dissimulation behind the observable behavior of the other before us. Social phenomenology also seeks to understand the actor on the basis of the diverse subjective viewpoints of others to whom the actor presents himself. And finally, it seeks to penetrate those horizons of the actor which facile judgments leave unexamined.

At the same time, by reverting to general phenomenological concepts such as the distribution of knowledge and the looking glass, we can see that interpretations between *any* two human interactors inevitably fail to coincide, regardless of their race. Interpretive fissures isolated Edmund Perry from black authorities at Exeter, black teachers in Harlem, and his black friends and family, as much as from white authorities and white peers at Exeter. This is not to deny, though, how profoundly the factor of race can disconcert the already precarious process of intersubjective understanding.

Notes

1. References without author's name are from Anson's *Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry* (1987).
2. According to research by Minatoya and Sedlacek (1984), white students generally respond more negatively to situations that involve blacks than to situations where race is not specified. See Peterson et al. (1978, pp. 197-198, 206-208) on the tensions between blacks and whites in university settings.
3. Gibbs (1974, p. 735) describes the case of a black student who grew in bitterness as she discovered the economic and political sources of oppression of blacks and so came to blame whites for her family's low status. As a black student's distribution of knowledge increases through academic study and as he or she comes to understand intellectually the historical causes of the present, tensions between the races are likely to grow.
4. Gibbs (1974, pp. 731-732) detects four patterns of black students' adaptation to predominantly white campuses: affirmation (with dominant culture), assimilation, separation, and withdrawal. See also Gibbs, 1975, p. 435.
5. See Gibbs, 1974, pp. 736-738. Sometimes black students who spend too much time with white groups on campus undergo a "homecomer" experience when they attempt to return to black groups.
6. This consciousness of another's consciousness of another's consciousness replicates on the social plane what Husserl described as "intentional implication" in which there can be memories of perceptions or memories of memories of perceptions, and so forth. See Husserl, 1959, p. 133; 1962, pp. 197-200, 268-271; 1964, p. 159.
7. Gibbs (1973, pp. 463-469) presents the different expectations which black students and administrators had of the education of black students on a predominantly white campus.
8. On the awkwardness of white faculty with black students and the perceptions black students have of such faculty, consult Keller, Piotrowski, and Sherz, 1982, p. 130. Gibbs (1975, pp. 431, 441, 443) argues that black students were reluctant to describe themselves as emotionally disturbed and so underused clinics, that lower class students dropped out of therapy because of misperceptions about the process, and that nondirectiveness in counseling can be perceived by black students as condescension, disinterest, or an inability to recognize distress.
9. Gibbs (1973, p. 464) and Peterson et al. (1978, p. 311) mention the gratitude which black students feel is expected of them.
10. Gibbs (1973, p. 466) catalogues roles which black males are likely to take in the face of pressure to assimilate: "street corner

dude," "playboy stud," "cool cat," "black jock," or "black militant."

11. Schutz (1962, p. 54) claims that the method of intersubjective understanding is superior to a method limiting itself to what is sensorily observable because it takes account of such "negative actions."

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