

RECONCILING TENSIONS IN EQUITY DISCOURSE THROUGH AN ANTI-HIERARCHICAL (ANARCHIST) THEORY OF ACTION

CONCILIANDO LAS TENSIONES DEL DISCURSO DE EQUIDAD A TRAVÉS DE TEORÍA DE ACCIÓN ANTI-JERÁRQUICA (ANARQUISTA)

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In this text, we invite others into a different paradigm of thought and action than what has been historically represented at PME-NA. We surface anti-hierarchical theory of action as a macro-theory implicitly present across substantial discourse in equity in mathematics education, then explore some of the affordances and challenges to be considered in adopting anarchism as a theory of action for research and practice. Findings relate to (1) the (de)colonizing tension between focus/specificity and the reification of compartmentalization, (2) the concomitant tension of constructed (in)visibility, and (3) the pursuit of solidarity in the disruption of a violent status-quo. Implications for ongoing research and pedagogic praxis are shared.

Keywords: Equity and Justice, Systemic Change

The 42nd annual conference of the North American Chapter of Psychology in Mathematics Education invites us to “promote the exchange and enrichment of mathematics education research” by looking to its manifestation across “different cultures, places, and contexts” (PME-NA, 2020). The goal of this article is to outline and trace the value an anti-hierarchical (anarchist) theory might hold as a macro-theory undergirding and providing definition (and direction) to equity-oriented research. We aim, in short, to invite others into a different paradigm of thought and action than what has been historically represented at PME-NA. Our goal for each section of this text is not to be exhaustive, but to be illustrative of a different way of being and living. (Restivo, 1998)

What is Anarchism?

For the purposes of this paper, we place emphasis on anarchism as an articulation of ethics, as a mode of human organization with social self-determination, rooted in the experiencing of daily life (Suissa, 2010). Anarchism aims to maximize both individual autonomy and collectivist freedom, leading to the reduction of fixed hierarchies that systematically privilege some people over others. Individual autonomy is, perhaps, self-explanatory as a principle; it is a self-determination, the freedom of choice in one’s own acts, with no form of external compulsion. Collectivist freedom is one in which the individual finds their freedom through voluntary association with other members of society, not isolation from them. Bakunin (1971) argued that man is only truly free when among equally free men; “the freedom of each is therefore realizable in the equality of all” (p. 76). Concisely, to embrace any form of anarchism is to express profound skepticism toward skewed, coercive, and exploitative power relations, and to reject all forms of oppression, including those of class, race, gender identity, religion, etc. (Lawler, 2019).

In short, anarchism is the absence of hierarchy. It imagines a relationship among people that minimizes if not eliminates coercive structures and interactions, taking seriously the possibility of an equal and free society, organized on core values of *cooperation*, *mutual aid*, and *freedom from hierarchy*.

How is Anarchism Currently Alive and Well in Mathematics Education and How Might Anarchism Resolve or Inform Tensions in Mathematics Education and Equity?

The proliferation and diversity of ways anarchism manifests in equity discourse may, at first, seem surprising, given the small number of publications that explicitly draw connections between anarchism and mathematics education (e.g. Lawler, 2019; Restivo, 1998, 2011; Wolfmeyer, 2012, 2017a, 2017b). However, the undergirding tenets of anarchism (e.g. cooperation, mutual aid, and freedom from hierarchy) exist as a common thread within mathematics education equity discourse, conceptually stitching a wide array of professional and political efforts. Here we foreground this thread, offering a silhouette or sketch of anarchism as a potentially valuable macro-theory in mathematics education equity research and practice.

Relations between people – absence of hierarchy. Education as a social activity is a widely held stance; many scholars argue that the field now understands the perspective that mathematical activity and learning is fundamentally social (Lerman, 2000). But the social is necessarily political, and thus the social contexts of mathematical knowledge construction, identity development, and of our work as researchers is best understood through examination of power differentials or hierarchies of this sociopolitical context (Gutiérrez, 2010/2013). Freire (1970/2000) provided useful models to reimagine the hierarchical relationship between the teacher and student so as to disrupt the perpetuation of oppression. These models defined a heterarchical relationship between teachers and students.

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 80)

Steffe and Thompson (2000) identified the problematic nature of the researcher-student relationship in any effort to make a claim about what the other knows. Steffe's Radical Constructivism took seriously the notion that knowledge is constructed, and thus ways of knowing are unique to each knower, viable in their experiential reality. It follows that the researcher must acknowledge their role as observer and work to create second-order models of the child's knowing—fully realizing this second-order model is merely one's own knowing, not a claim of truth about the child. Gutiérrez (2017) similarly disrupts hierarchies of knowing by demonstrating how indigenous ontologies see mathematics as a quality of all living beings. We have methodologies in mathematics education that have potential to disrupt the violence of uninterrogated hierarchies of knowing in our relationships with others (Lawler, 2012).

Disruption of (M)athematics. In the course of engaging in research or praxis in the area of mathematics education, one inevitably encounters a certain narrative of worship around the discipline, a mythology Lakoff and Núñez (2000) refer to as the *Romance of Mathematics*. In broad terms, the *Romance of Mathematics* is a mythology that perceives mathematics as objective, acultural, and beyond the vagaries of the human. The *Romance of Mathematics* constructs and propagates "...the mystique of the Mathematician with a capital M as someone who is more than mere mortal—more intelligent, more rational, more probing, deeper, visionary" (p. 340).

This mythology presents an immediate barrier to equity work. "If mathematics is objective, it makes no sense to be concerned with learners' cultures and lived experiences. If mathematical achievement can be accurately and fairly measured with standardized tests of routinized items, it makes no sense to develop more "subjective" assessments of mathematical understanding. And if mathematics is inherently too difficult for many to master, it makes no sense to try to teach all students rigorous aspects of the discipline" (Ellis & Berry III, 2005, p. 13). In response to this barrier, substantial research has sought, either directly or indirectly, to reveal the illusory nature of the myth (e.g.

Bowers, 2018, pp. 290–291). Some (e.g. Burton, 1999; Sinclair, 2009; Wells, 1990) have observed the powerful and subjective role aesthetic plays throughout the discipline, some (e.g. D’Ambrosio, 1985; Lipka et al., 2012; Meaney et al., 2013; Thomas, 1996) have observed the ways mathematical meaning-making have varied from culture to culture, and some (Burton, 1999; Joseph, 1987; Lakatos, 1976) have observed the ways (culturally localized) human interdiscursivity acts as the force by which mathematics is constructed, to name but a few directions researchers have taken in this vein.

Thus, we see again in this context that equity work is anarchic at its foundation—it opposes the socially constructed hierarchy of discipline. In foregrounding this anarchic thread, we see a means of tying these superficially disparate efforts together. Several of the above cited works (e.g. Lakatos, 1976; Wells, 1990) would not even typically be identified as works of equity, but in their valuing of the human and cooperative aspects of mathematics they nonetheless find a place in the greater social project of social justice. Through the paradigm of anarchism, we highlight a broad array of work that stands in opposition to the hierarchy of discipline.

Disruption of white supremacy. Public education within and beyond North America, in both theory and practice, is grounded in whiteness, (re)producing hegemonic social norms such as cultural deficit perspectives, colorblind racism, race neutrality, and meritocracy (Nicholson, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Sleeter, 2001). The problems here are not so superficial as simply having teacher education programs or rosters of practicing teachers that are predominantly white (though in some places this is a keenly felt tension); rather, the crux of the problem lies in the ways whiteness is normalized across these spaces. Subscribing to whiteness inherently supports institutionalized white supremacy because it tacitly (or overtly) reifies a system that has historically disadvantaged minoritized groups (Matias et al., 2016).

Equity work in mathematics education has tackled this ever-looming problem from a number of directions. Some work has focused on how positioning and identity manifest in the context of small-group interactions (Bishop, 2012; Langer-Osuna, 2011; Wager, 2014), while other work has focused on broader macro-narratives and bias (LópezLeiva & Khisty, 2014; Martin, 2011; Shah, 2017; Tiedemann, 2002). Some work has tackled the topic of power and domination (Battey & Leyva, 2016; Martin, 2009; Setati, 2008), while other work has interrogated cultural practices and pedagogy in mathematics education (Dominguez, 2011; Gutstein, 2012; Leonard, 2008; Lipka et al., 2005). Some work has considered the insular nature of mathematical language (Halliday, 1978; Herbel-Eisenmann, 2002; Pimm, 1987; Schleppegrell, 2007), while other work has broken tackled white supremacy from an intersectional lens (Bullock, 2017; Civil, 2002; Esmonde et al., 2009; Gholson & Martin, 2014). All this is to say that disrupting white supremacy has been one of the core social projects of equity in mathematics education, and though it has been tackled from many perspectives, they share at their foundation an anarchic valuing of the human’s right to self determination and opposition to hierarchy.

The above equity projects share, at their core, opposition to racial hierarchy. In foregrounding the anarchic thread connecting these and other seemingly disparate spaces, we see opportunity. For, though we speak here of race in particular, it is difficult nigh impossible to extricate racial power structures from those power structures that are expressed in terms of gender, sexuality, ability, or socioeconomic status. As Roibeard (2015) said of feminism, “Feminism and anarchism are kissing cousins; feminism aims to abolish patriarchy, yet patriarchy does not stand alone and its abolition is intertwined with the abolition of all oppression. We cannot pick and choose which power structures we like and which ones we don’t like; they are all connected, for patriarchy to truly be dismantled they all must be.” In foregrounding the anarchic thread undergirding equity work, we see the potential to push back against compartmentalization and the interrelated hierarchies imposed thereon.

In foregrounding the anarchic thread, we see the opportunity to make visible the multiply marginalized (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991; Gholson, 2016), and to proceed in solidarity.

What Dangers and Limitations Must We Consider?

It is important at this juncture that we acknowledge and draw attention to potential dangers and limitations in operationalizing anarchism as a macro-theory. The vision of anarchism expressed throughout this text is a broad one, and there are many interpretations of anarchism which entail different assumptions and values, each having very real consequences in their adoption and use. An exhaustive overview of all of the potential risks of particular instantiations of anarchism would lead us far astray from our central goal of introducing and inviting others into a new paradigm of thought that has not seen explicit representation at PME-NA, so here we must satisfy ourselves with something smaller but more intentional—a scalpel rather than a sledgehammer. We draw particular attention to two substantial and complex areas of risk: Recolonization (e.g. Patel, 2016) and constructed (in)visibility (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991; Gholson, 2016). We do not select these risks for further conversation because they are more important than other risks, but simply because their risk is substantial and because they serve the purpose of suggesting the ways these dangers are deeply and complexly interwoven with the very affordances we spoke about above. Indeed, these two risks are complexly interwoven with each other and will consequently be treated in concert below. After all, one of the tools of colonization is compartmentalization (Patel, 2016), and it is precisely compartmentalization that gives rise to constructed invisibility, that trick of (social) cognition wherein the multiply minoritized are only “seen” in terms of one minoritized identity at a time.

We begin with the perennial tug-of-war between the inertias of *colonization and white supremacy* and conscious efforts of *decolonization and antiracism*. The ways humans continuously come into being, the ways we carry and perform ourselves, are living and breathing mixtures of affordances shaped and informed by the echoes of long-standing yet not sealed histories (Baldwin, 1963; Gordon, 1997). Phrased differently, subjectivities are inextricably entangled with material conditions, and social becomings enact and exact material consequences (Barad, 2007). Given these deep trajectories and the role of educational research in perpetuating settler-slave-Indigenous relationships, educational researchers are answerable to working to dismantle those structures (Patel, 2016).

Like all things, the common image of anarchism summoned by the public imagination is a Eurocentric and white image, commonly conjuring white (cis-male, heterosexual, ...) European visages such as Max Stirner, Peter Kropotkin, or Henry David Thoreau. Restricting oneself to these visions of anarchism recolonizes, and (re)constructs many voices and bodies as invisible, hypocritically reifying hierarchy while nominally standing in opposition to it. A decolonizing and antiracist vision of anarchism must think outside these frameworks that mask white Western parochialism as universal and eternal verity (Grovoqui, 2006). A decolonizing and antiracist vision of anarchism must expand beyond perspectives that recognize and respond to only one hierarchy—the hierarchy of class and capital. Thus, whatsoever vision of anarchism we might choose in any given moment or context should be grounded in visions constructed and expressed by diverse groups of thinkers and activists (Alston, 2003; Grovoqui, 2006; Roibeaird, 2015).

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