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THINKING OUTSIDE-IN

Feminist Standpoint Theory as Epistemology, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science

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Sandra Harding's (1986, 1991) taxonomy of early developments in feminist philosophy of science groups together certain theories in the social sciences and political theory as "feminist standpoint theory." Known sometimes as "feminist standpoint epistemology" or simply "standpoint theory" (herein "FST"), it emerged while Western feminism moved out of its second wave and has since evolved in various directions. As an epistemology of science, FST explains how biased scientific claims, such as the view that human tool use was developed by early men (not women), depend on sexism and patriarchal social structures. It does so by scrutinizing the scientific norms and practices that determine what questions people recognize as scientific and what resources scientists consider.

A feminist standpoint addresses the ideals or norms and attendant practices involved in science and knowledge with a mind to lived experiences of oppression, accounting for sexism but also racism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism. That such matters of social context and awareness of that context influence the ability of individual people to know their worlds constitutes the Situated Knowledge Thesis (Intemann 2016; Wylie 2003), which the first section explains.

Situated knowledges provide the evidence and inspiration for the central *epistemological* tenet of feminist standpoint theory, laid out in the second section: the Epistemic Advantage Thesis. This thesis claims that understanding the world, especially in its social dimensions, benefits from critical reflection on the experiences and interests of marginalized people such as women. Cognitive advances from the history of feminism include the development of new concepts, such as the "glass ceiling" in business and "the male gaze" in art, as well as the concepts of "sexual harassment" and "marital rape." These conceptual tools led to the further development of new types of evidence and knowledge, for example the recognition that rape tends to be committed by acquaintances rather than strangers, and most recently taking the rape of men seriously as a social problem. In response to derogatory stereotypes aiming to control assertive Black women, a Black feminist perspective reveals the power in that assertiveness (Collins 1986, 2000). Currently, popular Western feminism has articulated experiences through concepts such as "mansplaining" (Solnit 2014), "toxic masculinity," and #metoo. LGBTQ2+ people express "pride." Anti-racist movements demand recognition that "Black lives matter" and indigenous peoples fighting oil and gas pipelines on their land proclaim that "water is life."

Individuals and liberatory communities obtain the epistemic advantage of a standpoint through an Outside-In Process of thinking, drawing into science and knowledge the "outside" values and experiences of marginalized people. Versions of this process also go by such names as "theorizing from margin to center" (hooks 1984), "talking back" (hooks 1989), "sciences from below" (Harding 1991, 2015), "oppositional consciousness" (Sandoval 2000), "the new mestiza consciousness" (Lugones 2003), and "oppositional knowledge" (Collins 2013).

The Outside-In Process allows FST to function as a methodology and distinguishes its operation as a philosophy of science. The process has its own logic of tensions between the different roles people occupy and communities that individuals belong to, addressed in section “Thinking Outside-In.” Women and other marginalized people may never be wholly outsiders to the dominant culture and often in various ways operate as “outsiders within” (Collins 1986), but individual “epistemic heroes” do not suffice to create the critical perspective of a standpoint (Medina 2013: 225). Developing situated knowledge depends on communities and coalition, as the section “A Standpoint Requires Community, Coalition, and Criticism” explains, and a standpoint becomes most explicit and deliberately involved in the generation of knowledge when it provides a research *methodology*, described in the section “Standpoint Methodology in the Sciences.” Finally, the section “Standpoint Philosophy of Science” explains how outside-in thinking manifests both as a theory and a methodology in *feminist philosophy of science*.

Standpoint Epistemology Begins with Situated Knowledge

A feminist standpoint is a social orientation politicized through feminism in which any person – not only women – may participate (Collins 2000; Harding 1991; hooks 1984; Hundleby 1998), but for which women’s perspectives provide a nominal starting point. FST’s appeal to women’s perspectives can essentialize or naturalize the category “woman” and so many philosophers have found it problematic. However, FST need not make any particular assumptions about who counts as a woman and so the category need not be understood as naturally defined or a natural kind. Moreover, as gender intersects with other forms of social identity and feminists engage other liberatory movements in fighting racism, classism, and homophobia, alleviating women’s oppression can take many forms, and regularly the lives of people who have been marginalized in those other ways provide the starting place for thinking from a standpoint (Sandoval 2000). Complex social dynamics affect people’s knowledge as does their understanding of their situation within those dynamics, according to the Situated Knowledge Thesis. The treatment of one’s own perspective as situated within a “matrix of domination” (Collins 2000) turns a perspective into a standpoint.

FST observes how social situations impact the cognitive and material resources of women and others with marginalized social identities. All reasoners live and know through bodies that may be labeled and restricted as part of belonging to a social category, but the systematic restraint of marginalized peoples’ social roles benefits people with privilege (Frye 1983). Influences on how people experience the world and the values they develop include social and linguistic practices, but also material economic and political situations (Hennessy 1993). Such ideological conditions affect direct experience when a person experiences sexual harassment, for instance, and that can reveal the need to interrogate social categories such as gender, race, and class. Individual experience from the margins aids the recognition of systematic social problems.

Differently situated experiences of oppression give rise to different movements and differently situated knowledges. What constitutes a standpoint varies according to relevant axes of social privilege and marginalization, such as race, class, and sexuality, plus the sociopolitical basis for a standpoint may change over time and place. A standpoint may also be relevant in different ways to different fields of knowledge. Should there be no gender oppression, then there would be no need for a specifically feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock 1997; Hundleby 1997; Wylie 2003), though other forms of oppression provide a basis for analogous epistemologies.

A Standpoint Provides Epistemic Advantage¹

The Epistemic Advantage identified by FST emerges from attention to perspectives and experiences that tend to be ignored and even denied, as in “testimonial quieting” that neglects to

recognize people as knowers (Dotson 2011) or as in “testimonial injustice” that denies speakers credibility because of social prejudice (Fricker 1998, 2007). Accounting for a range of people’s understandings, experiences, and values aids democratic goals of equal representation and it helps to raise fundamental questions about current social norms, practices, and institutions in ways that suggest creative solutions, both of which can be epistemically advantageous. The way cultures and individuals think about such things as sex, assertiveness, employment opportunity, aesthetics, and even death can be transformed by feminism that uncovers gross insufficiencies and deep falsehoods, identifying these ways of thinking, in Nancy Hartsock’s words, as “partial and perverse” (1983).

To show epistemic advantage, early theorists drew on Marxist accounts of the working-class standpoint (Hartsock 1983; Rose 1983 Smith 1974), and contemporary standpoint theorists recognize socioeconomic class as one axis of oppression intersecting with others, but they demand no loyalty to that theoretical heritage. In a capitalist economic system, unpaid work receives little credit, but a Marxist feminist analysis demonstrates the value of women’s traditional unpaid labor in the home. In many cultures, women’s labor caring for children, the elderly, and also able-bodied adults includes meal planning and preparation, gathering resources (including “shopping”), accounting, house cleaning, lay counseling, education, and training. This work facilitates the paid labor performed by members of the household, and so it reproduces the conditions of employment. Also, because this caring labor tends to be performed by the same people, women, who do the work of bearing and nursing children, it can be grouped together as “reproductive labor.” A Marxist feminist standpoint reveals further that many women work a “double shift” or “double day” involving both paid labor of various sorts and unpaid reproductive labor. Like the early Marxist feminist views, feminists of color (Collins 2000; hooks 1984, 1989; Lugones 2003) argue for the epistemological significance of women’s work in the home, but alongside other standpoint theorists they abandon the problematic universal psychological claims of some early formulations of FST (e.g. Harding 1986; Hartsock 1983), and they also point to a history of women of color caring for other people’s children.

The epistemic resources of FST invigorate democratic ideals and validate democratic practices (Harding 2015). In the context of patriarchy, feminist attention to marginalized perspectives compensates for various forms of exclusion. From the dominant perspective, a call for input from marginalized groups may appear to be an inappropriately political “special interest” but FST sees this as a counterbalance to an unrepresentative homogeneity (Harding 1992a; Wieseler 2016). Facilitating marginalized people’s contributions to policies and practices that affect their own lives (Mahowald 2005; TallBear 2014) encourages mutual accountability by providing avenues for feedback and makes consensus meaningful by distributing authority (Medina 2013).

Accounting for the value and significance of women’s labor and of the labor performed by other marginalized groups also draws attention to the social processes that hide that value. When the neglect of women’s knowledge is systematic, addressing it can reveal inconsistencies and even contradictions in social organizations and structures, which provides a distinctive epistemic advantage (Rolin 2009). For instance, thinking from women’s lives reveals that schooling does not stop at the boundaries of the institutional property, and that student success depends a great deal on adults in the home providing prior and supplementary education. Adults at home build children’s literacy and critical thinking skills, provide nutrition, enforce sleep schedules, and help with homework, all contributions that vary with class and regularly depend on women’s work as mothers (Griffith and Smith 1986).

Standpoint criticism of society draws in various ways on personal experiences of subordination and people’s efforts to resist it. Self-conscious feminist identity also can spur the self-reflection that provides epistemic advantage, but it is not necessary. Women operating in patriarchal environments may not conceive of themselves as feminist and yet their perspectives foster social

criticism from a standpoint insofar as feminist social transformation made their situations possible, for instance the opening up avenues into the sciences for women (Wylie 2003). Such beneficiaries of feminism enjoy a form of epistemic luck (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013). Further, some sorts of community organization, such as block parties, may not even seem political to the organizers and yet may have liberatory significance and affect people's understanding of their social environments. Also, sometimes oppression can be so severe that merely surviving constitutes a form of resistance (Collins 2000).

Knowledge benefits from a reconfigured identity and new ways of reading experience (Haraway 1985; Hennessy 1993). Standpoints initially offer negative insights – they reveal error, personal limitations, and structural social barriers, and it can be easier to offer criticism than to imagine possible improvement (hooks 1984). However, being treated poorly by the current system motivates people to consider alternatives because change suggests improvement to their lives. Thinking creatively about power relationships is vital for keeping feminist consciousness from being coopted (Ludwig 2016).

Some alternatives emerge from the ways people currently live on the margins, from reclaiming or revaluing existing practices. The lived experiences of women provide an understanding of human struggle and flourishing often at odds with popular understanding – this is part of life under patriarchy, and they also exhibit a different set of values – the importance of care, trust, and community. Some standpoint theorists argue that women have a special investment in the politics of peace grounded in their work of bearing and sustaining others' lives, and in the training of girls to complete this work (Hartsock 1983; Rose 1983; Ruddick 1989). Others find sexuality a potent site for resistance and learning (Collins 2000). Another marginalized perspective, that of disability, reveals a higher quality of life experience than people with typical abilities tend to recognize (Scully 2018; Wieseler 2016).

Experiencing one type of oppression provides no guarantee of sensitivity to other forms, but it provides groundwork that creative thinking builds on (Medina 2013). A person's experience of frustration in the development, articulation, and expression of knowledge, which José Medina (2013) calls "epistemic friction," when recognized as part of systematic social oppression, can help familiar social roles come to "seem strange" (Harding 1991; Pohlhaus 2002). Knowers who learn to recognize their own situatedness and their insensitive tendencies, Medina argues, develop "meta-sensitivity" or "meta-lucidity" (2013). This skill allows individuals to recognize how forms of oppression beyond their direct experience may operate.

The epistemic advantage of a standpoint runs counter to the larger systems of sociopolitical privilege, which Alison Wylie (2012) calls FST's "inversion thesis." Social privilege obscures the limits of one's own perspective, making it seem larger and less bounded, a difficulty in understanding one's own situation as a knower that Medina calls "meta-insensitivity" or "meta-numbness," using the example of white people who are "colour-blind" or claim to be. Not seeing or not wanting to see race involves neglecting the realities of racism and the way it harms people, and the myopia comes from the social accommodations that constitute general social privilege: "not ever having the experience of running into cultural limitations that render their experience, problems, and even their lives unintelligible, as a result of not ever feeling severely constrained as speakers and subjects of knowledge" (2013: 75).

Thinking Outside-In

Obtaining epistemic advantage depends logically on a process of thinking from the outside-in, viewing one's own situation in ways that challenge the dominant ideology (Hennessy 1993; hooks 1984; Hundleby 1997; Sandoval 2000), whether coming out as lesbian, proclaiming Black girl magic, or doing feminist research in science or philosophy of science. As Donna Haraway

observes, “to see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if ‘we’ ‘naturally’ inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges” (1988: 584), a point so often repeated that Sharon Crasnow (2013) dubs it “the achievement thesis.” The complex logic of a standpoint includes operating as an insider in some occasions and in some ways but as an outsider in others, and the strain of juggling multiple perspectives may impede the ability to situate knowledge.

Subordination has greater complexity than simple exclusion because subordinated people must also operate within privileged domains and must understand the basic interests and needs of privileged people. Prototypical “outsiders within” are Black feminist sociologists, being both rooted in the experience of Black women and holding the professional authority of sociologists (Collins 1986). Also, women as caregivers often tend to people of higher social status based on gender, race, or class, whether at home or in paid employment. Analogous insider-outsider orientations have been described and theorized by African American men as “double conscious” (DuBois 1897), by Latinas as “world travelling” (Lugones 2003), by white women academics as “bifurcated consciousness” (Smith 1974), and by others (hooks 1984, 1989; Medina 2013; Narayan 1988).

As feminism and other liberatory movements, such as anti-racist and queer rights movements, advanced over the decades, women and other marginalized people made significant inroads in many fields, becoming increasingly “insiders” with good positions to “work the cracks” within the systems of authority and expertise to transform dominant knowledge structures (Collins 2013: xiii). Yet, these gains remain partial and inconsistent, accompanied by new forms of marginalization that rearticulate oppression, adapting it to the changed environment (Hennessy 1993). For women and visible minorities, the fields in which they find the most success tend to be both associated with stereotypes attached to their social identities and lower in prestige and pay than other fields (England 2010; Ridgeway 2011).² For instance, both femininity and low status regularly attach to nursing, food service, education, and secretarial work, fields where women commonly find employment; women also may work more in areas of law and medicine related to the family and community and that have lower status than, say, corporate law; and in science they are more likely to be lab assistants than principal investigators. People in the West often associate ideals of masculinity, such as aggression, leadership, and even certain forms of rationality, with fields of prestigious employment including science and philosophy (Keller 1996; Le Doueff 1990; Lloyd 1984; Moulton 1983). So, participation in science and academic philosophy may conflict with the social norms that partly constitute the identities of women and other similarly marginalized people, making those fields unattractive and difficult to navigate.

The barriers separating people and roles inside from those outside are permeable and shifting (Naples 1996, 1999), and multiple roles yield information that is contradictory or “kaleidoscopic” in Medina’s words (2013). So, what lies inside and what outside can be hard to track. Is a white lesbian an outsider to white culture? Often the answer is “yes” because white culture privileges masculinity and heterosexuality. However, she may have cisgender as well as white privilege and that will affect her feminine and sexual identities. Systems of privilege interlock, Collins argues (1986), and women’s gendered oppression takes many different shapes. Conscious and unconscious biases, which include sexism against other women, racism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and so on, also divide women from each other (hooks 1984). In Audre Lorde’s words, there is a “piece of the oppressor . . . planted deep within each of us” (1984: 123; Collins 2013; Collins and Bilge 2016).

Thinking from the margins tends to be exhausting. The tension of being both inside and outside can mean feeling unrooted, having nowhere to relax, and may give way to greater uncertainty and despair rather than to critical consciousness. Uma Narayan (1988) explains that “the individual subject is seldom in a position to carry out a perfect ‘dialectical synthesis’ that preserves all the advantages of both contexts and transcends all their limitations.” Similar

problems arise for people who speak multiple languages who may as a result lack fluency in any and have significant gaps in vocabulary. Negotiating both environments does not unite them, even under ideal conditions, and they tend to separate and resist full blending, such that María Lugones argues (2003) the various identities a person has are partly mixed together in a way she calls “curdled.” Narayan suggests that the difficulties may lead a person either to keep identities separate or to assimilate as much as possible to the dominant norms in the hopes of achieving better access to resources.

A Standpoint Requires Community, Coalition, and Criticism

Developing individual outsider experience and information into a standpoint depends crucially on social connections, including two relationships between individuals and communities: (1) communities foster individuals’ understanding of how knowledge is situated; and (2) individual activity provides coordination within particular communities and among communities in flexible coalitions as they pursue social justice (Collins 2000). Coalitions “ebb and flow based on the perceived saliency of issues to group members” (Collins 2000: 248), and the inadequacies of the language produced by cultures of domination, which Fricker describes as “hermeneutical injustice” (2007), make liberatory coalitions inherently unstable (Ruíz and Dotson 2017). Also, people will disagree, challenge, and criticize each other, whether they share fleeting purposes or stable identities, but that friction fosters knowledge from a standpoint (Medina 2013), heightening a standpoint’s critical resources.

Communities develop language and practices to show their members’ social marginalization and foster situated knowledge. Interacting with other people who have similar identities allows individuals to observe common experiences which helps them to empathize with each other and “become sensitive to those aspects of their experience that have been marginalized, suppressed, and rendered unintelligible” (Medina 2013: 204). Mutual support helps individuals to develop critical politics (Narayan 1988). Even Rosa Parks, heralded civil rights hero, did not act on her own but as part of an orchestrated plan drawing on a history of Black activism (Medina 2013).

A standpoint can also benefit from a degree of separatism: safe and nurturing spaces for marginalized people allow them to reimagine their identities (Medina 2013) and to develop practical skills for resisting oppressive forces. For instance, although recent mainstreaming helps disabled people receive education and employment and participate otherwise in society alongside typically abled people, which provides them with greater opportunities and autonomy, it also can eliminate sources for liberatory knowledge. Jackie Leach Scully observes, “it also means it is harder for disabled people to find the kind of network that holds minority knowledge about living with a particular impairment” (2018: 114).

Although most standpoint theorists retain a traditional Western view that knowledge belongs to individuals, a communal view of epistemic agency has a history in FST as part of Dorothy Smith’s (1987) sociology. Communities are so vital to the development of a standpoint that Kristen Intemann (2010) argues they act as the real knowers, as many feminist empiricists hold. FST may be unique in providing a rich empirically based philosophical account of how individuals and communities work together to produce knowledge.

While communities and coalitions can develop in response to a common enemy (Collins 1993; Crasnow 2013; Pohlhaus 2002), Gaile Pohlhaus argues that the active forging of standpoint knowledge requires relationships with other people characterized by “trust, credibility and responsiveness” (2002: 290). Building trust can be difficult for members of subordinate groups whose trust has been frequently violated (Collins 1993), and it requires granting marginalized people credibility and listening to experiences of oppression. Such trust does not mean accepting all reports at face value, and listening can involve questions and challenges. An openness

to differences and contestation aids racial solidarity, according to Medina (2013), and the practice has a history in second-wave feminist consciousness-raising. Discussions of experience in consciousness-raising, Alison Wylie (1992) explains, involved critical analysis and so, for instance, internal coherence or consistency could be used to challenge the testimony of someone in a marginalized position. For bell hooks (1984: 62), solidarity involves more than the “shallow sisterhood” of unqualified approval and especially requires criticizing the violence that women perpetrate.

Coalition across different social positions and identities provides extra epistemic friction for developing situated knowledge. For instance, others learn from lesbian lives the complexity of who and what count as lesbian and the importance of identifying oneself. Affectionate behaviors and both emotional and physical intimacies are quite commonplace between heterosexual people of the same sex in many cultures and times while the most frequent representation of lesbians in popular culture may be by actors in pornography playing at sexuality. Such paradoxes encourage Harding (1991) among others to adopt self-identification as the measure of social identity. Admittedly, no method of defining a social category may suffice for all purposes and, notably, religious, ethnic, and racial identities may require shared histories or more formal mechanisms for community membership. However, lesbian experience teaches that self-identification often serves an important liberatory function, providing “an autonomy. . . to name themselves and their world as they wish, an autonomy that women – and especially marginalized women – are all too often denied” (1991: 252).

Learning to understand and trust people despite one’s own prejudices and in the absence of shared circumstance requires empathy that may not come easily (Collins 2013; Medina 2013). A lack of emotional experience with particular problems and an inability to transfer what one learns from previous experience, even an experience of oppression, to another context derails many attempts to think from other marginalized people’s perspectives (Narayan 1989).

For instance, men who share household and childrearing responsibilities with women are mistaken if they think that this act of choice, often buttressed by the gratitude and admiration of others, is anything like woman’s experience of being forcibly socialized into these tasks and having others perceive them as her natural function in the scheme of things.

(1989: 265)

To build empathy, Narayan counsels humility regarding one’s understanding of others’ experiences.

Standpoint Methodology in the Sciences

As a research methodology, FST looks to perspectives and practices outside the bounds of a discipline, making outside-in thinking especially explicit and deliberate. A methodology is an orientation for selecting research methods and yields different results in different research fields, but FST prioritizes direct community service and leans otherwise toward intersectional analysis. Social justice does not require intersectionality, which can be part of oppressive thinking and action, for instance in targeting Black men (Collins and Bilge 2016), and indeed any method of research may serve oppressive purposes (Harding 1986; Wylie 1992). However, intersectionality tests ideas within practical political contexts in a way that regularly addresses social justice (Collins and Bilge 2016). Intersectional criticism challenges general claims about women that have been basic to certain formulations of FST and counteracts the problematic naturalizing and essentializing tendencies. Also, it multiplies the avenues for outside-in thinking on any topic, increasing by orders of magnitude the potential for valuable epistemic friction and situated knowledge, and strengthening epistemic advantage.

Standpoint methodology gives priority to the personal experiences and concerns of people who tend to be excluded from a discipline and from access to material and cognitive resources of education, training, and technology. That helps to situate the inquirer within social power dynamics, in methodological terms providing “strong reflexivity” (Harding 1992b; Naples 1996). Those who participate in an “outsider” community may be especially able to observe the social dynamics surrounding research institutions and disciplines (Collins 1986).

Researchers must look beyond their institutional walls fortified by private, corporate, and government funding to develop more democratic and oppositional representations of problems to explore and sources for data (Collins 1986; Collins and Bilge 2016). Earnest concern does not suffice, and research will not benefit from outsider experiences without a specific effort to choose methods and modes of inquiry tailored to those experiences and interests. Often open-ended goals work best, Kim TallBear (2014) advises, even if greater certainty must be expressed to funding bodies, and Collins observes too that researchers may have to sacrifice personal income or status (2013, 2016).

Reimagining research problems can start with studying up on the relevant social justice literature or working out ideas and speculating about lines of inquiry in blogs or community-based participatory research (TallBear 2014). Narayan (1988) recommends that when understandings conflict insiders should practice a “methodological humility” by assuming that the insider perspective lacks context, and that in providing criticism a “methodological caution” be employed to avoid denigrating or dismissing the outsider perspective – even seeming to do so. Academic ideas need translation into accessible language (hooks 1984, 1989) and guessting on Black radio call-in shows allowed Collins (2013) to develop a grassroots vocabulary to describe her research.

Because fully engaged community research often proves unworkable (Wylie 1992), intersectionality provides a valuable heuristic for outside-in thinking, a guideline for addressing who informs and benefits from different research topics and questions. Thinking intersectionally about women’s lives hedges against the historical feminist tendency to think one set of problems characterizes the lives of all women or other group of people, and to naturalize or essentialize that perspective. Intersectionality can risk fragmenting how feminists understand women, making the concept of “woman” lose meaning, and leaving only very small-scale alliances possible. However, intersectional thinking provides a wealth of details about people’s lives that allows feminists to recognize otherwise obscure commonalities, as the commonality in experiences of Mexican and Puerto Rican women created “Latina” identity (Collins and Bilge 2016).

Collins and Bilge (2016) argue that intersectionality functions as a critical praxis when it provides a heuristic for *both* inquiry and social justice. Consider how studies of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education and employment use the logic of “pipelines” that attends separately to girls and women or to people of color and so obscures the specific problems for girls and women of color and allows them to “leak out.” Better accounting for girls and women of color in STEM comes from the intersectional logic of structural barriers regarding access to education.

Intersectionality need not even begin with or focus on gender, although “women’s studies faculty have been standard bearers for advancing intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry and praxis in the academy” (Collins and Bilge 2016: 103). It may begin thought from a disabled perspective, an indigenous perspective, or a sex workers’ perspective. In reasoning about some cultures, where gender is not a central social identity, such as the Yorùbá, imposing gender categories creates deep misunderstanding (Oyěwùmí 1997).

Recent success in mainstreaming outside-in thinking, for instance in Women’s and Gender Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Disability Studies, indicates new resources for oppositional knowledge and fresh opportunities for coalition (Collins 2016) and epistemic friction. However,

it can also lead to a “testimonial smothering” described by Kristie Dotson (2011), as when Black feminists truncate their discussions to avoid risky exchanges with academics who lack meta-sensitivity about the subject matter’s complexity. Also, research on outsider problems can overlook or deny outsider perspectives on those problems:

For those Black women who confront racial and sexual discrimination and know that their mothers and grandmothers certainly did, explanations of Black women's poverty that stress low achievement motivation and the lack of Black female "human capital" are less likely to ring true.

(Collins 1986: 528)

One strategy lies in recruiting actual outsiders into the research community except that tends to involve the expectation that the insider-outsiders perform what Carla Fehr (2011) describes as “epistemic diversity work,” which adds to their job burden. Fehr suggests that researchers can avoid being “epistemic free-riders” who simply accept the benefits of a diverse research community by supporting and mentoring socially marginalized colleagues.

Responsibility to a community of people entails that the intellectual products of a standpoint must serve the purposes of the marginalized community from which it draws. As Nancy Naples and Carolyn Sachs put it, “we must recognize our power over those who share their lives, struggles, and visions with us” (2000: 210). For Collins, every project of Black feminist thought, “whether a special issue, a scholarly essay, song, film, or blog,” must consider how it benefits Black women and girls (Collins 2016: 141). The outside-in vector must turn back outside to the community in order to evaluate the knowledge generated, especially when standpoint theory operates as a methodology inside powerful academic institutions.

Simply “giving back” to marginalized communities may address symptoms but not the underlying problems (TallBear 2014). FST challenges how some social science methods treat people merely as objects and not as agents who can direct their own futures and decide what they need (Griffith and Smith 1986; hooks 1989). Feminists must fight their own tendencies to treat women and other marginalized people as mere objects (hooks 1984) or even as half-subjects who need to be given a voice (Ortega 2006). For example, to move beyond a form of exchange defined by the settler society in its own terms, researchers must learn to question the cultural context in which they work and their status as researchers in that culture. Kyle Whyte (2017) identifies that in addition to the “supplemental value” scientists gain from adding the content of indigenous knowledge to Western science,³ they can learn from the knowledge’s “governance value.” Indigenous knowledge systems account for their own cultivation, transmission, remembrance, and exercise. Understanding and respecting that knowledge sovereignty help scientists as privileged members of the settler society to situate themselves in regard to indigenous cultures.

Harding (2006) recommends the diversifying scientific standards and practice by drawing on science studies and political studies of science. Harding’s guidelines for doing so can be vague and unconvincing (Wylie 2008) and her recommendation depends on the diversity of interests and values addressed by different disciplines rather than a diversity of sociopolitical locations, arguments associated with feminist empiricism rather than FST (Intemann 2010). Nevertheless, using the social sciences for self-scrutiny can be justified using FST if one’s own discipline has made relatively weak progress, providing little opportunity for liberatory coalition, such that one needs to find like-minded liberatory colleagues and materials wherever one can. Resources for transforming disciplinary standards can come from feminist scholarship in other disciplines and from feminist empiricist reasoning, and that helps FST provide a methodology for feminist philosophy, including in philosophy of science.

Standpoint Philosophy of Science

Philosophers tend to eschew methodology and, as Dotson (2012) argues, Western philosophy tends like Western culture generally to be exceptionalist, only counting its own activities as valuable. Generating questions and theories with input from feminist and other liberatory sources outside of philosophy provides a distinctive epistemology of science and challenges traditional practices in philosophy of science.

Harding (1986, 1991) contrasts FST with other trends in feminist theorizing about scientific knowledge from the late 1970s and early 1980s: “feminist empiricism” and “feminist postmodernism.” Ultimately (1991), she makes standpoint theory her own with a socially situated feminist postmodernist view of embodied rationality that rejects the abstract rationality associated with modernism, which helps her to accommodate the ways that gender intersects with sexuality and race. Harding’s intersectional FST recognizes multiple feminist standpoints that attend to specific women’s experiences of oppression.

Harding (1991, 2015) develops the epistemological norm of “strong objectivity” based on the methodological value of strong reflexivity. Objectivity in its twentieth-century form (Daston 1992; Daston and Galison 2007) requires a situated accounting for the “social values, interests, and assumptions that researchers bring to the research process” (Harding 2015: 33), which strong objectivity detects by starting thought outside the given science. The lives of people in marginalized groups, such as women, give thought starting points that lie outside the dominant frameworks of the sciences, and they involve values and interests that challenge accepted priorities and the values of people with privileged social identities, who are heavily represented among scientists.

Harding argues that the norm of impartiality provides only weak objectivity because it only excludes values of people already on the social margins, failing to include the values of people with privileged status. The attractiveness of weak objectivity, she (1991) argues, lies in the promise to provide research that will apply universally regardless of situation. The generality that such science can offer depends on a highly contingent context. It depends on the work of many others, such as subordinates in labs, carers in the home, and service workers in institutions, roles disproportionately filled by women and minorities, and yet those people’s interests tend not to drive the theorizing. General applicability can even come at a cost of lives and ecosystems, as Vandana Shiva (2016) exposes in India, and the world must change in painful and sometimes irreversibly destructive ways to conform to serving the priorities of people with social privilege.

The epistemic advantage of thinking from the outside-in applies directly to understanding “the nature of society” (Fricker 1999) and FST makes a clear case that the independence from observers for which traditional objectivity strives provides an inadequate analysis, for instance, of women’s underemployment (Rolin 2006) or the absence of Latinas among managers (Pompper 2017). However, critics claim that FST has little relevance to the physical sciences. The worlds of particles or magnetic fields cannot be shared by researchers in the same way as the worlds of women, cultures, or even plants (Keller 1983), and so Kristina Rolin (2006) argues that standpoint theorists must be able to show that the context of patriarchy and forms of oppression that intersect with it are relevant to the subject matter of a particular type of inquiry, that situated knowledge provides epistemic advantage in a specific domain.

Nevertheless, Harding (1991) argues that a feminist social account provides valuable ways for questioning how consensus develops in the physical sciences. Views in physics might possibly, for instance, be affected by patterns in women’s unemployment or the causes of that unemployment, regarding which Rolin argues feminists offer significant insights. Different questions than usual might come out of a lab that accommodates women workers or those who come from poor backgrounds. Physicist Barbara Whitten observes how feminism raises questions for her discipline:

We can ask about the relationship between physics and the rest of society. The strong connection between physics and the military, for example, and the relegation of "applied" physics to second-class status, are certainly questions that are amenable to feminist analysis. We can ask about the internal structure of the physics community, how we organize our research groups, educate our students, and allocate our resources.

(1996: 13)

Perhaps in a feminist physics less research would be done that feeds the arms industry. More might address the needs of women, children, and poor people around the world for clean water. Questions about scientific processes and purposes can be scientific questions, and concerns with who science serves were once alien too in the life sciences (Okruhlik 1994) and the social sciences (Collins 2013).

While the Western academy now has models for feminist biology and sociology, Harding (1991) acknowledges the difficulty imagining a feminist physics and it certainly remains distant. Currently, only the most socially privileged people receive the luxury of being able to follow their own curiosity in "pure" or "basic" research.⁴ Yet, Whitten argues that "scientists cannot foresee all the applications of their work, and it is not uncommon for apparently esoteric work to have important social consequences" (1996: 9).

Standpoint theorists maintain that ways to devise problems and dream up theories can be better and worse epistemologically, which Miriam Solomon (2009) argues provides an account of creativity that philosophy of science needs. Philosophers tend to invoke a romantic notion of imagination in which "anything goes," treating creative questions of problem choice and theory development as tangential to their work in defining norms with prescriptive force for the testing of theories. Even empirical studies tend to see creativity only as a quality of the isolated individual person.

The standard view of philosophy of science's normative force focuses on testing rather than problem choice and theory development, which goes back to a distinction in twentieth-century philosophy of science between the context of justification where scientists test ideas and the context of discovery that provides inspiration and research questions (Schickore 2018). While many feminists challenge that distinction of justification from discovery (Longino 1990), standpoint theorists especially insist on seeking out descriptions of the norms governing how scientists develop research topics, questions, and theories. Prescriptions for the context of discovery challenge how philosophy of science operates and suggest a new methodology.

The outside-in thinking of FST thus provides theoretical tools for philosophy of science, including situated knowledge, epistemic advantage, strong objectivity, and a methodology for the sub-discipline that reimagines its scope and practices. Starting thought in philosophy of science from the margins involves taking up the results and best practices of feminist and other liberatory scholars, which currently include intersectionality as a research method. Outside-in philosophizing can also involve a commitment to particularism, prioritizing attention to the details of a specific situation over the development of abstract ideals. Setting aside exclusively theoretical debates provides resources for addressing concrete problems, injustices, and systematic disadvantages (Medina 2013) and it creates fresh theoretical challenges for philosophy of science such as developing adequate theories of trust (Whyte and Crease 2010).

Janet Kourany (2009) argues FST provides a methodology needed to complement other feminist philosophies of science. It can motivate the enforcement and reworking of traditional scientific methodologies, as done by "spontaneous" feminist empiricists (Harding 1991). FST also accounts for how social diversity provides the transformative criticism prioritized in Helen Longino's (1990) social empiricism, and it explains how feminist values improve science as feminist naturalists claim.

Treating knowledge as active rather than representational marks FST as a form of pragmatism (Wylie 2008), albeit in a “cynical form” (Dayton 1997). Kristina Rolin (2009) argues that FST reveals how social conditions suppress evidence, which provides an epistemic advantage in understanding how relations of power work. Asking philosophy to, in the same way, equip people in resisting oppression (Collins 2013) demands it provide a “non-ideal theory,” perhaps even a naturalist epistemology (Hundleby 2001; Kukla 2006; Mills 2005; Rouse 2009).

FST justifies certain obligations for the practical future in epistemological terms that otherwise might appear to be exclusively ethical or political. Epistemological values also meld with ethical and political values in the way that both pragmatism and FST (Collins 2013; Hundleby 2005) stress the importance of education to democracy. Further, Shannon Sullivan argues that pragmatism provides an appropriate view of knowledge and truth for FST: “putting facts and events to use in the transformation of the world” to provide for human flourishing (2001: 141).

Conclusion: Philosophy of Science from the Outside-in

From a feminist standpoint the questions and answers familiar to philosophers of science – about demarcation, testing, creativity, and so on – seem strange because they fail to inform about the power, promise, and threat of science. Attending to these concerns about human flourishing creates new ways to understand the potential value of scientific knowledge and academic research in general. Science, philosophy, and philosophy of science all can be situated as forms of knowledge, employ the methodology of strong reflexivity, and address the epistemic norm of strong objectivity, each a more specific articulation of the previous.

Reaching outside philosophy to feminist methods in other disciplines and the broad input provided by feminist and other liberatory critiques of science and, in turn, to non-academic liberatory communities distinguishes FST as a philosophy of science. The outward touchstones affect what questions and methods of inquiry count as scientific and philosophical.

Related chapters: 8, 9, 15, 16, 18, 28.

Notes

- 1 From the standard language, I prefer “advantage” because it seems to admit of degrees, as a feminist standpoint does, whereas “privilege” seems to suggest modularity and uniformity.
- 2 In some of the discussions, especially by Narayan, the use of the terms “insider” and “outsider” is reversed so that members of a marginalized social group are insiders to that social identity who may also play roles outside their marginalized group.
- 3 Because the West-East distinction refers to a somewhat dated division of the world between capitalist or democratic and communist, sometimes it is better to distinguish sciences of the industrialized and colonial global North from that of global South. Both distinctions obscure indigenous cultures and sciences, but the alignment of the “Western” characterization with democracy often proves illuminating and it is Whyte’s language choice.
- 4 Harding responded this way to a question from Carla Fehr at the meeting of the International Society for the History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Biology at the Université du Québec à Montréal in 2015.

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