Standpoint Epistemology and the Epistemology of Deference

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Abstract:
Standpoint epistemology has been linked with increasing calls for deference to the socially marginalized. As we understand it, deference involves recognizing someone else as better positioned than we are, either to investigate or to answer some question, and then accepting their judgment as our own. We connect contemporary calls for deference to old objections that standpoint epistemology wrongly reifies differences between groups. We also argue that while deferential epistemic norms present themselves as a solution to longstanding injustices, habitual deference prevents the socially dominant from developing for themselves the skills necessary to expand their capacity for empathy, to deftly probe for evidence, and to ask critical questions. Consequently, we argue that standpoint epistemology must be understood as calling for inclusion, not deference.

Section 1: Introduction

Marginalization isn't always so overt as the denial of suffrage or legal second-class status. Absent formal barriers to inclusion, marginalized people are often still deemed less credible (Fricker 2007); consequently, they often refrain from speaking at all (Dotson 2011), if they are even invited to speak in the first place (Táíwò 2022). One response to this injustice has been increased calls not just to listen to and include marginalized people, but to *defer* to them. Calls for deference to the socially marginalized are essentially calls that non-marginalized people accept marginalized people's judgments as their own. Thus, as Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò notes, "deference epistemology marks itself as a solution to an epistemic and political problem".

Calls for deference claim support from insights from standpoint epistemology. Standpoint epistemology is distinguished by two central theses: the *situated knowledge thesis* and the *epistemic privilege thesis*. The *situated knowledge thesis* holds that social location systematically shapes and limits what we know as well as what we take knowledge to be (Wylie 2003: 31); the *epistemic privilege thesis* asserts that some epistemic advantage can be drawn from positions of powerlessness or marginalization (Hartsock 1983; Collins 1986; Kukla 2006; Ivy 2015). Jointly, these two theses imply that *knowers are not on equal epistemic ground*—your location within a social hierarchy makes a difference to what you know. In particular, marginalization may place one in a position to gather better, more accurate knowledge.

Though deference epistemology marks itself as a solution, it is one that Taiwo resists because it may reinforce the forms of power it seeks to combat (2022). In the course of surveying how standpoint epistemology and deference epistemology have been conflated, we will further argue

that calls for deference are inconsistent with the aims of feminist epistemologies. Worries about deference are closely related to an objection that has long plagued standpoint epistemologists: the charge that standpoint epistemology wrongfully reifies differences between social groups. The thought is that, in order to account for group-based epistemic advantage, standpoint theorists must identify some feature that all and only members of a marginalized group share (Hekman 1997; Haack 1998). We argue that standpoint epistemology can and should do without the appeal to such features, partly on the grounds that they are incompatible with key feminist commitments. We worry, moreover, that calls for deference presuppose what we call the *strong epistemic disadvantage thesis (SEDT),* the view that dominant social positions impose strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know. This thesis, we argue, paves the way for a worrying sort of epistemic laziness that inhibits, rather than promotes, feminist aims.

In what follows, we recount a brief history of standpoint epistemology in order to see whether the theory requires essentialist or constructivist claims in order to be plausible. We then turn to a consideration of the problems inherent both in SEDT and in deference epistemologies. We close by clarifying gaps in the standpoint literature that leave open these possibilities, before showing that, when properly understood, standpoint epistemology should be understood not as a deference epistemology, but as an *inclusive* epistemology.

Section 2: Standpoint Theory – A brief history

Imagine that you are considering joining an organization and you want to know whether that organization is racist. How could you find out? Presumably you could simply ask members of that club. But is every member equally well positioned to know whether these issues affect the organization? Presumably not: you're better off asking people of color. After all, the people who are most likely to experience racism are the best positioned to recognize it. And the same goes for sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.

This thought experiment is representative of an intuition, expressed by standpoint epistemology, that there is a relationship between how one is positioned in the world and what one knows. Standpoint theory is often traced back to Karl Marx. Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Georg Lukacs claimed that a person's relationship to the means of production shapes their knowledge and, as such, the proletariat are in a better position to know that (and how) they are being exploited than is the capitalist class who exploits them (Marx 1867/1976; Lukacs 1923/1971; Marx and Engels 1932/2001). Marx and Engels focused on how one's relationship to labor structured knowledge, but as later scholars observed, their analysis wholly overlooked the gendered labor (otherwise known as the 'double shift' of caregiving, cleaning, and reproducing labor through childbirth) that makes other forms of labor possible. As such, feminist scholars developed an account of standpoint theory that centered on the gendered division of labor and the insights this labor made available to women (Smith 1974; Hartsock 1983).

These early articulations of feminist standpoint theory advanced the notion of a "women's standpoint", and argued that women, as a class, could produce distinctively better knowledge. Nancy Hartsock (1983), for instance, claimed that "women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy…." (Hartsock 1983: 284). Sandra Harding would similarly argue that those in the margins can produce knowledge that is "less partial and distorted"

in that it is less likely to reflect the unquestioned biases and assumptions of the socially dominant (Harding 1992: 454)

To argue that women can produce better knowledge requires, however, that theorists explain what accounts for this fact. Here, Charles Mills is instructive. Mills distinguishes between two possible explanations – 1) those which posit some biological essence to women (e.g., feminine cognitive styles or "women's ways of knowing"), and 2) those that prefer a constructivist approach and appeal to the effects of a shared social location (Mills 1998, 21-39; discussed in Medina 2013, 46).The first is a kind of *biological essentialism*, the view that there is some natural or biological property that members of marginalized groups like 'women' share, and that they are members of the group by virtue of that property (Fine 1994; Witt 2011). The second explanation, *social constructivism*, argues that epistemic advantage is accounted for by the shared experience of oppression on the basis of shared social location.

Both biological essentialism and social constructivism seem to provide the basis for deference and so either may be presupposed by those who issue such calls. Calls for deference to the marginalized are also undergirded by the assumption that dominant social positions impose strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know. Call this the s*trong epistemic disadvantage thesis* (SEDT) (Tilton forthcoming). The SEDT and deference are two sides of the same coin: if the socially dominant are incapable of arriving at certain bodies of knowledge regarding the world, then of course we ought to defer to those who are so capable. Those to whom we owe deference deserve it in virtue of some essential feature about themselves.

However, both biological essentialism and social constructivism are incompatible with key feminist commitments. The first "[endorses] the oppressor's theoretical framework" (Mills 1988: 240-1), and the second flattens the relevance of marginalized people's diverse experiences of oppression. Both the SEDT and deference will inherit these flaws.

The fear that feminist standpoint epistemology rests on biological essentialism is widespread but misplaced (Wylie 2003). While there certainly *were* feminist theorists who made claims about "women's ways of knowing" that were rooted in spurious commitments to a biological "women's essence", standpoint theorists were, at least largely, not among them (see Anderson 1995: 62 for discussion). Indeed, early feminist standpoint theorists were horrified to see their view construed in essentialist terms (Smith 1997; Hartsock 1997; Collins 1997; Wylie 2003: 28). The biological differences between men and women do not plausibly ground a universal epistemic advantage for women (Medina 2013, 46). Moreover, views that assume biological essentialism reify and naturalize differences between men and women that feminists generally want to insist are the result of social construction.

Instead, feminist standpoint theorists have historically made — and continue to make — constructivist arguments. For example, Hartsock's initial formulation of her view directly paralleled the Marxian argument that the proletariat are better positioned to understand the exploitative and contingent nature of capitalism. She argued that women were better positioned than men to recognize that the patriarchal social order isn't natural—as dominant patriarchal ideology insists—but is instead socially enforced. Women were better positioned to recognize this because they were subject to the enforcement mechanisms that punished them for failing to

conform to their social role. By contrast, it is easier for men to accept rationalizing explanations because those explanations work to their benefit. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins argued that black women were better positioned than white women to recognize women's oppression because white women's proximity to power could distort their perception of their own status (Collins 1986).

In both cases, epistemic advantage is attributed to people on the basis of group membership, but not via biological essence. The advantages are the result of the contingent social order (and women's marginalized position within that social order). Thus, constructivist arguments allow standpoint theorists to avoid charges of biological essentialism.

But constructivist views face their own difficulties. To explain why women's shared social location resulted in shared advantage, standpoint theorists seem to assume that women have shared experiences of patriarchal subordination. Nancy Hartsock, for example, appealed to women's role in the sexual division of labor to account for the epistemic advantage they shared as a class (1983). And yet, the experience of oppression under patriarchy will not be the same for all women, as race and class can multiply and compound the harms of patriarchal oppression (Crenshaw 1991). There is no universal "women's" social position, so it's hard to see how one could have a unified "women's' standpoint". Patricia Hill Collins' articulation of the black feminist standpoint was partially in response to this problem (1997). Yet the problem rears its head here as well. In talking about the "shared angle of vision" that black women have by virtue of their shared experiences (1997: 335-337), Collins seems to acknowledge the difference that race makes, while ignoring further differences that may be caused by sexuality, disability, or class.

Thus, one serious issue that standpoint theorists face is developing their view in such a way that it does not run the risk of "standpoints [that] fragment into myriad individual perspectives", essentially reducing the theory to "the relativism of identity politics" (Wylie 2003: 29). The worry is that standpoint theorists either cannot see, or cannot see past, differences between members of a group.

To avoid these implications, contemporary standpoint theorists have instead accounted for the epistemic privilege of marginalized standpoints by arguing that the epistemically privileged standpoint must be earned (Wylie 2003; Intemann 2010; Linker 2014; Toole 2023). Call this the *achievement thesis*. This thesis holds that a standpoint emerges through a collective process of political struggle with those who are more or less similarly situated. Thus, standpoint theorists prefer to speak of a feminist standpoint, rather than a women's standpoint, to indicate that the standpoint is one which has been achieved by those working collaboratively to develop a critical perspective, one which takes as its starting point the experiences of women. This standpoint is thought to produce better, more objective knowledge because it allows those who participate to unmask the ideological misrepresentations that distort understanding (Wylie 2003; Pohlhaus 2011; Toole 2021).

The achievement thesis allows standpoint theorists to avoid the charge that they assume there is some shared experience of oppression that automatically gives rise to a shared understanding of it. Nuanced understanding of oppression is forged—it is the result of collective, active effort. This understanding is achieved by taking women's (heterogenous) lives as the starting point, and working together to identify the mechanisms that uphold systemic oppression and to articulate

shared feminist commitments. Thus, the feminist standpoint can be said to represent women's interests broadly, without assuming that there is a universal experience of oppression. Or, as Sandra Harding puts the point, the achievement thesis turns differences between women from an *obstacle* to standpoint theory into a *resource* for standpoint theory (Harding 1991, esp. ch 11).

Because of the achievement thesis, standpoint theory needn't commit to biological essentialism or a universal experience of oppression. This improves the prospects of standpoint theory as a viable feminist epistemology. But the achievement thesis brings problems of its own.

Section 3: Disadvantage and Deference

The achievement thesis alters the apparent source of epistemic advantage: it lies in the endeavor to understand, rather than the simple occupation of a marginalized social location. The new worry is that it's no longer clear what the role of marginalization is in standpoint theory. What made standpoint epistemology radical and distinctive was the insistence that social location structures or delimits what can be known; with the introduction of the achievement thesis, it's no longer clear what makes the view either distinctly feminist, or distinctly epistemological. That is to say, it's unclear why marginalization is epistemically significant (if, for instance, anyone could just 'do the work').

Some feminist standpoint theorists have tried to escape this dilemma by suggesting that occupying a marginalized social location is necessary (but not sufficient) for epistemic advantage. Sharon Crasnow, for example, writes that "standpoint theorists claim that marginalization is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for their epistemic privilege" (Crasnow 2008: 1092; see Tilton *forthcoming* for further discussion). This view preserves a role for marginalization that is compatible with the achievement thesis. Marginalization offers new *possibilities* for knowledge, possibilities that the socially dominant do not have, but marginalized people must put in the work required to make this possibility actual.

The claim that marginalization is necessary for the achievement of a standpoint has some intuitive plausibility. It captures the intuition that experiencing something for one's self confers a unique kind of epistemic authority, or that someone without first-hand experience of something can't *really* understand it. This interpretation of standpoint theory implies the strong epistemic disadvantage of the socially dominant, and motivates deference epistemology.

In the subsections that follow, we briefly consider the motivations for the *strong epistemic disadvantage thesis* (SEDT) and deference. We then discuss the problems that plague the SEDT and deference, before offering (in section 4) an interpretation of standpoint epistemology that avoids a commitment to either.

Section 3.1 Social Dominance and Strong Epistemic Disadvantage

The view that marginalization is necessary for achieving the advantage that derives from a standpoint entails what we call the *strong epistemic advantage thesis* (henceforth, SEDT) , according to which occupants of dominant social positions face substantive and inescapable limits on what they can know about the oppression of others (Tilton *forthcoming*). The thought is that

experience of oppression enables knowledge or understanding of oppression that is not available to those who have not experienced that oppression.

Why might one endorse the SEDT? First, some standpoint theorists claim that marginalized social locations are, in and of themselves – prior even to the development of a standpoint – epistemically advantageous (Fricker 1999; Wylie 2003; Pohlhaus 201; Toole 2022, Dror 2022, Tilton *forthcoming*). These theorists argue quite compellingly that these social locations provide epistemic resources that aren't available elsewhere—the uniqueness of these resources is what makes knowledge produced from marginalized locations better. One could infer from this claim that only some people can achieve a standpoint: since the resources that ground a standpoint are only accessible to some people, only the people who have access to those resources can achieve that standpoint.

But the appeal of the SEDT is not limited to those who are working within the narrow standpoint literature. This is best demonstrated by way of example. Consider these real-world examples:

> **Freelance:** A non-Black freelance journalist, Helen, is working on a pitch that involves discussing Blackness. Helen offers the opportunity to take up the pitch in her stead to Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, a Black philosophy professor. Helen explains that she doesn't think she is "the right person to tell the story," since she has "no idea what it is like to be Black" (Táíwò 2020).

> **The Daily Show:** In an episode of The Daily Show, Trevor Noah is poking fun at Marco Rubio's (anti-choice) position on abortion. Ending on a more serious note, Noah remarks: "I don't understand how any man thinks that he has the right to dictate to women what they should do with their body. Men know nothing about what it's like to be women" (Noah 2016).

We hope the reader will recognize examples of this kind as widespread. This suggests that the SEDT, or something like it, has appeal outside of the limiting confines of the academy. People who lack the experience of oppression that marginalized social positions afford are taken to be incapable of understanding that oppression.

In these examples, the SEDT is invoked to justify practical norms that appear to serve feminist political goals. If men aren't permitted to speak on abortion, then presumably there will be fewer advocates for anti-choice policies; if non-black people use their platforms to allow black people to speak to anti-black forms of oppression—rather than trying to speak to those forms of oppression themselves—then more informed analyses will get uptake. Moreover, in each case, marginalized people get the chance to speak for themselves, which combats the long-running tendency to silence or dismiss them.

Despite their intuitive appeal, we will argue that such deference epistemologies don't facilitate but *inhibit* feminist political goals.

3.2 Epistemic Deference

On interpretations of standpoint epistemology that entail the SEDT, the dominant ought simply defer to whatever the most marginalized person in society says, since they're most likely to be reliable with respect to questions about social marginalization. We see such demands for deference in the examples above. In each example, there is a presumption that the non-marginalized defer to the perspective of marginalized folks with respect to the question under discussion.

Broadly, deference involves adopting some other person's opinion or judgment as your own; one outsources one's judgment to another (see, for example, Buchanan 2022). In the case of standpoint epistemology, deference is required under the assumption that the dominant lack access, *in principle*, to knowledge that the socially marginalized have. Of course, not all deference is bad, and there are asymmetries in expertise. It is proper to defer to the expert opinion of climate scientists with respect to forming judgments about climate change. Deference to climate sciences involves what we might call *practical deference.* Deference in these cases is not required because, in practice, given hard work, effort, and interest, I could arrive at the conclusions that climate scientists arrive at. In short, there is nothing in principle that bars access to the knowledge they have. Rather, I defer merely because I lack the time and energy required to acquire the knowledge that climate scientists possess.

By contrast, consider cases that involve what Sarah McGrath (2009) calls *pure deference*. Pure deference involves cases in which an epistemic agent must defer because the truth is somehow *inaccessible* to her. Pure deference presupposes that 1) access to 'truths' are not, in principle, equally available to all of us, and 2) some people are "in a privileged position relative to anyone else when it comes to accessing…truths" (McGrath 2009: 323). Though pure deference is undesirable in some domains (e.g., morality), it is warranted in those cases where the truth of the matter is in principle inaccessible and so one could not arrive at the truth except by deferring to an expert on the matter.

For standpoint epistemology to be an account that calls for pure deference, it would need to imply not only that some people are in an epistemically privileged position when it comes to accessing truths about the social world, but also that these truths are in principle *inaccessible* to others.

Any version of standpoint epistemology that asserts that a marginalized social position is necessary for the relevant knowledge would call for pure deference. This is what we think is going on in the cases above. That is why, instead of calling for the non-marginalized people to *learn more*, it calls for them to defer to marginalized people.

At least some standpoint theorists (and feminist epistemologists, more broadly) seem to understand standpoint theory as requiring deference on this basis. Cat Saint-Croix (2020), for instance, writes that "epistemic (and moral) normativity requires inquirers to include occupants of relevant standpoints…and to treat the contributions of those standpoint occupies with deference" (Saint-Croix 2020: 5). Norms of deference, Saint-Croix argues, are motivated by the fact that (in some cases) members of marginalized groups have access to certain kinds of evidence (i.e., phenomenal evidence) that nonmembers will lack.

Pearlman and Williams (2022) echo this, writing that deference is "prima facie obligatory in cases in which the testifier is a member of a marginalized group that the receiver is not and testifies about their marginalized experience" (Pearlman & Williams 2022: 2). To motivate their view, they consider a case in which a non-binary person tells a cis-person that representing gender-neutral bathrooms with whimsical, mythical creatures (like mermaids, aliens, or superheroes) is harmful, even if well-intentioned (bid. 1, 10). They argue that the cis-person (S) ought to defer to the non-binary person (T) with respect to proposition p: that the use of whimsical signs to denote all-gender bathrooms is harmful. They further add that S ought to defer to T merely in virtue of T's testimony and even if T offers no reasons in favor of p. They defend this position on the basis that "members of marginalized groups have greater relevant expertise regarding claims about their experiences qua member of that marginalized group than nonmembers" (bid. 10). Thus, they take it that T's epistemic authority is grounded in the 'relevant expertise' that the experience of marginalization makes available.

Though Pearlman and Williams make no mention of standpoint epistemology, it's apparent that they are invoking elements of standpoint theory, both in their assertion that members of marginalized groups have greater expertise with respect to their experiences of marginalization, inaccessible to the dominant, *and* in their claim that the dominant ought to defer on this basis.

Though we cannot say with confidence what motivates interpretations of standpoint epistemology as calling for deference, we speculate that it has to do with a desire to amplify voices that are often silenced, to make central those bodies of knowledge that are often at the margins, and to avoid the harms that come from failing to properly attend to the epistemic significance of positionality. We'll argue in Section 4 that such an interpretation of standpoint theory rests on a mistake. But first we'll show that deference epistemologies come with certain costs.

3.3 Illustrating the Problems with Deference Epistemology

Some, like Táíwò, have argued against deference epistemologies on the basis that such epistemologies serve only to amplify those marginalized voices that are already present, the group's already most advantaged members.[1] Others (Dror 2022; Casey 2021; Tilton *forthcoming*) have argued elsewhere that to understand standpoint epistemology as claiming that certain knowledge is inaccessible to the dominant makes it difficult to hold them responsible for their ignorance. We suggest that the SEDT, and corresponding deferential norms, flatten the available political and epistemic possibilities by promoting the cultivation of *epistemic laziness*. We follow José Medina in understanding epistemic laziness as a habituated lack of curiosity, which manifests as persistent refusal to probe for evidence or to consider the perspectives of others. But where Medina emphasizes the connection between laziness and arrogance, we emphasize the connection between laziness and *cowardice*.

Medina's aim is to identify the epistemic vices that enable "active ignorance", which he takes to play an important role in maintaining systems of oppression. Active ignorance is neither inevitable nor passive; it requires "a battery of defense mechanisms". That is, it requires the cultivation of epistemic habits that allow one's worldview to be preserved in the face of counter-evidence. Active

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[1] Táíwò (2022) refers to this phenomenon as *elite capture.*

ignorance is a vice that is especially common among the privileged, as they don't need to understand mechanisms of oppression in the way that those who are subordinated do. Moreover, there is often an active need *not* to know, since such knowledge would threaten their standing in society or their perception of themselves.

Medina's broader project makes the connection between laziness and arrogance especially salient. An arrogant knower is one who is unwilling to acknowledge mistakes or limitations (Medina 2013: 31). This vice is more likely to be found among the socially dominant, as they are frequently assumed to be competent epistemic agents and are less likely to be challenged when wrong (ibid.). Medina thinks that this arrogance will often result in epistemic laziness—the arrogant knower will *see no need* to probe beyond what is initially apparent to them. In other words, the arrogant knower will often cut short empirical investigation and demonstrate closedmindedness, as they will be uninterested in considering whether others have reached different conclusions.

We don't dispute the connection that Medina draws between arrogance and laziness. Instead, we want to demonstrate that arrogance is not the only route to epistemic laziness—just as habitual *over*estimation of one's epistemic capacities can inhibit successful inquiry, so can habitual *under*estimation. Our claim may seem somewhat surprising, given the connection between laziness and unwillingness to consider other people's perspectives. After all, deference of the sort Pearlman and Williams discuss may seem to involve a willingness to consider - and adopt - another person's perspective. However, we argue that deference denies the possibility of the engagement required for genuine understanding -- and in turn, the active participation understanding can yield – that standpoint theorists are in search of.

To see this, we will need to investigate more closely the mechanics of deference. As Pearlman and Williams helpfully explain, deference involves accepting someone else's judgment on the basis of *assurance* rather than on the basis of evidence. Assurances are essentially a personal guarantee that the claim in question is accurate (Pearlman & Williams 2022: 5). Moreover, when someone defers, "they do not continue to seek out others' opinions or purposefully inquire on the topic in order to determine the validity of the claim" (ibid.). Someone who defers does not seek out further confirmation (or disconfirmation) because they take the matter to be *settled*.

So, when a socially dominant person defers to the judgment of a marginalized person, they accept that judgment without considering its epistemic merits. There is an important sense in which they do not *understand why* the judgment ought to be adopted. Despite this lack of understanding, fuller inquiry is called off; no more evidence is sought out. This is a kind of epistemic laziness.

If deference were only *occasional*, then the problem might not be so serious. But deferential norms would require habitual deference. When deference is habitual, the socially dominant systematically farm out the work of 'getting things' right to the socially marginalized. This has negative consequences for both the marginalized and the dominant. Deferential epistemic norms exacerbate the epistemic exploitation (Berenstain 2016) of already overburdened groups, because members of these groups are taken to be the only ones who could get things right. (Táíwò 2021; Tilton *forthcoming*). Moreover, deference compromises the potential of the socially dominant to learn from and contribute to our collective understanding. In farming out the work of getting things right, the socially dominant fail to develop for themselves the skills necessary to deftly probe for

further evidence, to ask critical questions, or to consider others' perspectives. They are, then, not engaged in a process of self-transformation that would allow them to pierce through the veil of ideology for themselves; instead, they content themselves with repeating—often without even understanding—what they have been told to say by others.

Deference does not just make the socially dominant worse epistemic agents—deference renders them less useful allies. Suppose that the cis person in Pearlman and Williams' case defers to the non-binary person's (correct) judgment that whimsical signs are harmful, but that they do not understand *why* the incident is harmful. In deferring, the cis person does successfully reach the right conclusion. However, the socially dominant will be unable to explain or defend their conclusion. If questioned, they will have to 'pass the buck' and refer to the marginalized people to whom they initially deferred. But this squanders the unique reach, connections, and social capital that correspond to membership in dominant groups.

Moreover, while deference may lead the socially dominant person to get things right in *this* case, there is no reason to think that they will be able to *consistently* make the right judgment. Without an understanding of how the initial incident is connected with dismissive and harmful attitudes about gender, the cis person is unlikely to be able to recognize similar harms in different contexts, or situations. Deference doesn't permit the cultivation of genuine sensitivity to prejudicial wrongdoing, and so the socially dominant are unlikely to be able to independently recognize similar wrongdoings in the future.

To avoid interpretations of standpoint epistemology that imply SEDT and deference, and to appreciate the distinction between what deferring and weighing require, we propose several amendments to standpoint theory and how it should be understood.

Section 4: Rehabilitating Standpoint Theory

Above we argued that interpretations of standpoint epistemology which understand it as calling for deference are mistaken. Part of that mistake involves the assumption of the SEDT. This misunderstanding arises, we argue, because of unclarity in the literature regarding who can achieve a standpoint, the relationship between standpoints and the epistemically privileged knowledge that standpoints allegedly produce, and the role of marginalization in this production.

We first deny that marginalization is either necessary or sufficient for achieving a marginalized standpoint. This allows standpoint theorists to avoid a commitment to the strong epistemic disadvantage thesis, as it clarifies that the socially dominant can achieve marginalized standpoints. This is compatible with the *achievement thesis*, which specifies that standpoints are earned. Whether dominantly or marginally situated, one must struggle to occupy such a standpoint through a process known as *consciousness-raising*.

Consciousness-raising refers to the practice of unmasking the ideological frames that structure how one understands one's self and others, and how one relates to the world and understands their position within it (Ruth 1973; MacKinnon 1989). Consciousness-raising thus involves moving from one understanding of one's self and one's experiences (seen through the lens of dominant

perspectives and ideologies) towards an understanding that is not so distorted. A standpoint represents the achievement of this new sense of understanding.

Given that anyone can come to occupy a marginalized standpoint, it is not the case that those truths which are accessible to the marginalized are, *in principle*, inaccessible to the dominant. This undermines the strong epistemic disadvantage thesis, without which there is little to motivate a reading of standpoint theory as an epistemology that calls for deference.

However, we must now clarify the role of marginalization, since to deny that marginalization is either necessary or sufficient seems both to undermine the project of standpoint theory and to leave unclear what is feminist about the theory. While a particular epistemic agent need not be marginalized to occupy a marginalized standpoint, marginalized standpoints *are* informed by and center the insights, experiences, attentional patterns, and conceptual repertoire of those at the social margins. Marginalized people are more likely to attend to and be aware of patterns and inner-workings of social oppression in virtue of their direct, first-personal experience with it and incentive to think critically about those experiences (Bright and Kinney *forthcoming*). To elaborate upon an example from Pearlman and Williams, a person with a disability who uses a scooter will know more about the layout of the city where she lives, and the accessibility of certain buildings, in virtue of having to navigate the city from that embodied perspective (Pearlman and Williams 2022: 10-11). It is for this reason – the fact that marginalized standpoints are organized around and center the insights that marginalization makes available – that marginalized standpoints are thought to produce "better, more objective knowledge" (Kukla 2006: 82).

But the epistemic benefits of social locations are distinct from the epistemic benefits of standpoints. The epistemically privileged knowledge of standpoints (and standpoints, themselves), must be struggled for. Still, there *are* certain epistemic advantages attached to mere social location. Being socially marginalized places one in a position to know certain facts about the world that may escape the notice of those who are not so marginalized. As Kukla observes, "Women are more likely to see sexism than men; people of color are more likely to see racism than white people; trans folks are more likely to see transphobia than cisfolks", and the reason for this is that "bigoted and discriminatory acts are more likely to happen around them, precisely because they are there!" (Kukla 2021: 46). In short, the marginalized may be in a better position to notice (and know about) oppression because they are more likely to suffer it.

Thus, marginalized social locations do confer significant epistemic advantages, and privileged social locations confer significant disadvantages. But this doesn't mean that the socially dominant should defer to the marginalized. Instead, we argue that the socially dominant should give *special weight* to the testimony of the marginalized, when they are testifying on a topic to which marginalization is relevant, where this special weighting is compatible with having an active understanding. As we discussed in Section 3, deference requires a fundamentally passive response to the testimony of the marginalized, since real insight is taken to be inaccessible to the socially dominant. The best they can do is to accept the judgment that is offered, without fully understanding it.

By contrast, weighing testimony requires more active engagement. Considering a claim and its merits involves treating it as *part* of inquiry—or even allowing it to *prompt* inquiry—rather than shutting inquiry down prematurely. Given this, if a marginalized person makes a claim to which

their experience of marginalization is relevant, their testimony should be taken seriously: it should be given special weight, in accordance with the epistemic advantages that correspond with their location in social hierarchy and experience of oppression. This is perhaps especially the case if a marginalized person makes a claim to which their social location is relevant that doesn't cohere with a non-marginalized person's worldview. Such a claim might be surprising because it challenges an assumption that ought to be challenged. A surprising claim, then, should give you pause—why do they think that? Following up on this question requires striving to understand the reasons that support their judgment. Such engaged inquiry gives the socially dominant the opportunity to engage in the kind of process that enables broader-scale belief revision and is partially constitutive of self-transformation and understanding. It also facilitates the cultivation and exercise of epistemic capacities that would otherwise go undeveloped.

It is worth being clear that when we say a "surprising" claim ought to be given special weight, we are not exclusively imagining that a "woke" marginalized person makes a generally progressive claim to an "unwoke" member of a dominant group. A marginalized person may challenge apparently established or consensus progressive views, and this challenge can count as "surprising". Sometimes this "surprise" will be illusory—marginalized people live in a world structured by oppressive ideology just like everyone else, and they too can develop a false consciousness. But we should make judgments of this kind with caution. Dismissing these people out of hand can be a mistake, even if they are wrong. Not only does it come off as elitist or snobbish, but ruling out disagreement results in a kind of feedback loop that shields consensus progressive views from what may be legitimate critique. We cannot treat the "progressive" view as settled, or completely figured out. This requires that we be open to criticism.

Giving special weight to the testimony of the marginalized and conducting inquiry in good faith does not guarantee success. We live in a complex world, and we have limited time and cognitive resources. Figuring out whose testimony to take seriously and investigating the merits of their claims, without succumbing to our tendency to accept those claims that cohere with what we already believe and reject those that don't, is a tall order. We are bound to make mistakes and get things wrong. But by interpreting standpoint epistemology as calling for inclusion, rather than deference, standpoint epistemology provides us with resources that better equip us to face these difficulties.

Section 5: Where from here?

In "Being in the Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference", Táíwò expresses the worry that the norms of applying standpoint epistemology seem to call for deference. Some standpoint theorists interpret standpoint theory in this way, as do many of its critics. However, we've argued that calls to merely 'defer to the most marginalized' rests on problematic assumptions that are incompatible with the aims of feminist epistemology. Moreover, we've endeavored to show that such assumptions are not fundamental to the project of standpoint theory.

Both the SEDT and deference epistemologies interpret standpoint epistemology as resting on *essentialist* or *constructivist* claims. But, as we've seen, standpoint epistemology does not require either in order to account for the epistemic relevance of social features. This then undermines the basis for SEDT and deference.

We've further shown that the dominant and marginalized alike can access the knowledge made available from such a standpoint, though we agreed that giving special weight to the testimony of those who are marginalized is called for in some domains. Doing so may cultivate a healthy epistemic humility that both allows us to acknowledge the limitations of our perspective and to affirm the broader perspective that others, positioned differently, may have.

Thus, we understand standpoint epistemology as an epistemological theory that calls for *inclusion*, not deference. Standpoint epistemology, understood as an inclusion epistemology, invites us to be open to the experience of others, to acknowledge the epistemic limitations of our socialized perspective and, as a consequence to (in some cases) weigh more heavily the testimony that comes from perspectives which we are unlikely to take as a starting point. This approach to standpoint theory comes out most clearly in the work of Harding, who writes that "understanding ourselves and the world around us requires understanding what others think of us and our beliefs and actions, not just what we think of ourselves and them" (Harding 1992: 461).

What standpoint epistemology seeks is deeper, more demanding than deference. Instead, the standpoint epistemologist seeks *understanding*, which can be better achieved through inclusion. Inclusive epistemologies insist that "those who are excluded ought to be brought in, considered part of the inquiry, and given the opportunity to play *an ongoing role*" (Saint-Croix, 10). In this way, those who have been previously excluded become full participants in the epistemic community which ensures they "are able to contribute to knowledge production—that their testimony is received by that community and influences its course" (Saint-Croix 9). This can transform who we are, as epistemic agents, as well as the epistemic communities of which we are apart.

One such example of a community transformed, is "Grandfathers for Yes", a pro-choice movement in Ireland comprised of a demographic (i.e., older white men) most likely to be pro-life. As Helen Lewis writes of the movement, part of the success of "Grandfathers for Yes" is that "Baby Boomers weren't being scolded that they didn't 'get it' by young activists; instead, Grandfathers for Yes presented pro-choice beliefs as sensible, compassionate, and mainstream.

Were standpoint epistemology a deference epistemology, it would, as Táíwò argues, "insulate us from connection and transformation". We might, as in The Daily Show scenario, tell men to sit down, to defer to the voices and experiences of women, and to be silent. Instead, including men as advocates for change served as a catalyst to repeal the 8th amendment, which had banned abortion (especially surprising in a largely Catholic country).

Táíwò concludes his essay by issuing a challenge and an invitation: we should do more, he argues, than merely "navigating the rooms history has built for us". Instead, he argues, we should "build the kinds of rooms we could sit in together" (Táíwò 2021). Understood as an inclusive epistemology, standpoint epistemology gives us the tools to do precisely that.

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