

The View from Here: Standpoint Feminisms and the Long Road from Objectivity to Inclusivity

Adrienne Munro

Abstract

Standpoint epistemologies have been hugely influential in the social sciences, and instrumental in the development of feminist theory over the past four decades in particular. This paper briefly traces the trajectory of standpoint feminisms and closely allied theoretical paradigms such as intersectionality, and argues that in offering *and* responding to criticisms of exclusivity, these epistemologies have succeeded both in increasing awareness of, and moving social sciences away from, a frame of reference based on an assumed but invisible normative (white, able-bodied, heterosexual) male to more inclusive models that create space for those (the vast majority) who exist outside this frame. Much as the notion of (re)centring the margins has been used to advance postcolonial theory, standpoint has helped to decentre the former social scientific ideal of “objectivity” (the view from nowhere) and establish every vantage point—with an emphasis on those from what have traditionally been seen as the margins—as a viable and equally authoritative place from which to experience and interpret the world.

Keywords: *standpoint, feminism, intersectionality, androcentrism, objectivity.*

Feminism is about the sciences of the multiple subject with (at least) double vision.

- Donna Haraway

Introduction

Standpoint epistemologies have been hugely influential in the social sciences, and instrumental in the development of feminist theory over the past four decades in particular (Bartlett, 2014;

Harding, 2009; Hartsock, 1998; Intemann, 2010). Women's standpoint, which emphasizes the location and "situated knowledge" of the individual (Haraway, 1988), is deeply rooted in the women's movement (Smith, 1992/2013, 1997), critical theory (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983), and early feminist critiques of the androcentric traditions of sociology and scientific "objectivity" (e.g., Hartsock, 1983a; Smith, 1974), as well as Marx's standpoint of the proletariat (Bartlett, 2014; Cockburn, 2015; Fraser, 2009; Hartsock, 1998). Conceived of variously as a theory, a methodology, a philosophy, a sociology, and a "logic of inquiry" (Harding, 2009, p. 193), standpoint has created diverse understandings and even controversy among feminists and social scientists (Bartlett, 2014; Bowell, n.d.; Crasnow, 2009; Cockburn, 2015; Harding, 2004, 2009; Hekman, 1997; Smith, 1992/2013). Dorothy E. Smith (1992/2013), widely credited as among the first to recognize standpoint's applicability to women's lives and lived experience, has been particularly vocal about defending her conceptualization(s) of standpoint from what she calls "the violence of misinterpretation" (p. 363).

Having emerged from mainstream, academic strains of Western feminism, feminist standpoint has (arguably¹) benefited from its increasing responsiveness to the pluralistic projects of intersectionality²—as seen, for example, in the development of Black women's standpoint in the U.S. (e.g., Collins, 1989) and Indigenous (women's) standpoint theories in Australia and North America (e.g., Ardill, 2013; Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Morton, 1999). In this paper, I demonstrate that, despite the controversy and misinterpretation they may have engendered, standpoint feminisms³ and closely allied theoretical paradigms such as intersectionality have been successful both in increasing awareness of and moving social sciences away from a frame of reference based on an assumed but invisible normative (white, able-bodied, heterosexual) male to more inclusive models that create space for those (the vast majority) who exist outside this norm. Much as the

¹ Fraser (2009), for example, has questioned whether feminism's focus on diversity has reduced its effectiveness in achieving gender equality.

² Intersectionality is discussed in greater detail in Section II of this paper

³ The term "standpoint feminisms" is used here in recognition of the diverse interpretations and uses of standpoint by feminist scholars and activists. While the term "feminist standpoint" is used frequently (e.g., Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983, 1998), Smith (1997) has specified that she is "not proposing a feminist standpoint at all," asserting that "taking up women's standpoint as [she has] developed it is not at all the same thing and has nothing to do with justifying feminist knowledge" (p. 393). I therefore adapt the terminology throughout this paper to reflect the usage appropriate to the thinkers and/or contexts under discussion.

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Standpoint Feminisms: Foundational Voices

The development of women’s standpoint epistemologies owes much to the early work of Dorothy E. Smith (1974, 1987, 1990a, 1990b) and Nancy C. M. Hartsock (1983a, 1983b, 1989-90). While Smith, now in her 90s, is still active in the field,⁴ feminism lost an important thinker and ally with Hartsock’s death in 2015.

Feminist standpoint epistemologies have evolved, in part, from Smith’s (1974) recognition that

The profession of sociology is predicated on a universe which is occupied by men and it is itself still largely appropriated by men as their “territory.” Sociology is part of the practice by which we are all governed and that practice establishes its relevances. (p. 8)

Core to Smith’s (1974) work is the search for “an alternative way of thinking sociology” (p. 11) that “*begin[s]* from the analysis and critique originating in [women’s] situation” (p. 13, emphasis added). In addition, Smith (1974) introduced the notion of women’s “bifurcated consciousness” (p. 11), a sort of “split personality” resulting from the necessity of operating both within female-centered realities and an androcentrically constructed social realm. Smythe (2009) reports that Smith has “achieved a sphere of influence extending beyond sociology and women’s studies to such diverse areas as geography, philosophy, political science, commerce, law, education, social work, nursing and lesbian/gay studies” (p. 23).

⁴ At the time of this writing, Smith was an Adjunct Professor of Sociology at the University of Victoria.

Hartsock (1983a), meanwhile, approached the development of standpoint from a materialist perspective grounded in the sexual division of labour, and set herself an ambitious task:

I will attempt to develop, on the methodological base provided by Marxian theory, an important epistemological tool for understanding and opposing all forms of domination—a feminist standpoint. (p. 283)

This pronouncement is documented in a volume co-edited by Sandra Harding (Harding & Hintikka, 1983), another foundational presence in feminist standpoint epistemology. Indeed, Harding and Hintikka's (1983) publication was designed to respond to the following epistemological deficiency:

In the last decade feminist thinkers have provided brilliant critiques of the political and social beliefs and practices of patriarchal cultures. But less attention has been given to the underlying theories of knowledge and to the metaphysics which mirror and support patriarchal belief and practice. Are there—can there be—distinctive feminist perspectives on epistemology, metaphysics, methodology and philosophy of science? (p. ix)

At the risk of perpetuating hegemonies-within-hegemonies—Harding (1983, 1986, 1993, 2004, 2009) has truly distinguished herself among standpoint theorists. According to Smith (1997), “Feminist standpoint theory, as a general class of theory in feminism, was brought into being by Sandra Harding (1986)...In a sense, Harding created us.” (p. 392).

Patricia Hill Collins (1989, 1992, 2004), another influential voice, has provided two key critiques of feminist standpoint. The first—its lack of consideration of the experiences of diverse women—is one that has been levelled at feminism(s) from many quarters (e.g., hooks, 1981; King, 1988; Rhode, 1990; Springer, 2002). According to Collins (1992),

When we account for the diversity of people's experiences, for diversity among women, and for the experiences of people of color and other historically marginalized groups, the importance of local knowledges—of theorizing from locations other than the controlling “texts” of dominant discourse—comes into sharper focus. Because Dorothy Smith underemphasizes diversity created by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and age, her

work overlooks the knowledges produced by these groups as they actively resist objectified knowledge that justifies their subordination. (p. 78)

It is worth noting here that Smith (1992/2013) herself argued for localized, embodied forms of knowledge rather than the abstracted “transcendent subject...[of] text-mediated discourse”—and further clarified that standpoint, as a “method of inquiry...make[s] a space into which anyone’s experience, however various, could become a beginning place” (p. 362, emphasis added). Nonetheless, Collins’s (1992) critique helped pave the way for the integration of feminist standpoint and intersectionality, which has advanced feminist standpoint to a place of greater emphasis on inclusivity and (in)equality. Less than two decades later, Harding (2009) was able to say that, as a “more general ‘logic of inquiry’—a trans-disciplinary, regulative ideal—standpoint theory is widely used in research projects focused on race, class, sexuality, and studies in postcolonial research”⁵ (p. 193).

Collins’s (1992) second critique, related to Smith’s (1974) notion of the “bifurcated consciousness,” is equally applicable to any actor challenging a dominant discourse of which s/he is (intentionally or otherwise) a part: how to make change to a system from within:

One first must learn the language of the inner circle in order to understand what is being said and to gain credibility. Yet assuming the language of dominant discourse, even using the language of objectified knowledge to critique its terms, weds the thinker to the relations of ruling supported by objectified knowledge.

(Collins, 1992, p. 79)

Before going further, it is necessary to address the question that has now been alluded to several times in this paper: *What’s the problem with objectivity?*

⁵ For a subsequent discussion by Harding on the tensions between feminist and postcolonial research, see iSchoolUofT (2015).

The problem with objectivity

Objectivity has long been touted as a basic criterion for credibility in the worlds of Western academic and scientific research (Betz, 2011), journalism (Brewin, 2013), law (Bartlett, 2014), and other fields where “being ‘right’ matters” (Bartlett, 2014, p. 376). Bartlett (2014) describes objectivity as “the quality of approaching decisions and truth claims without the influence of personal preference, self-interest, and emotion” (p. 376). According to Betz (2011), “the physical and biological sciences are the most well developed methodologically and therefore *provide the standard of scientific excellence and objectivity* about nature” (p. 191). However, while “true” objectivity may be possible in some instances⁶—Betz (2011) cites, for example, the speed of light as “an objective constant in the universe, measured exactly the same by any observer”⁷ (p. 191)—the realization has gradually dawned that the application of objectivity in the social sciences is a different beast altogether (Acker et al., 1983; Bartlett, 2014; Betz, 2011; Davis, 2013; Haraway, 1988; Weber, 1904/2013). Bartlett (2014) describes neurological evidence that discredits the assumption that objectivity is positively associated with rationality and accuracy. Similarly, Davis (2013) discusses the “paradox” of the “fact-value dichotomy” in American society, which attempts to separate objectivity—purported to be *value-free*—from the inherent *value-ladenness* of subjectivity (p. 554). However, as Davis (2013) explains, this objectivity, far from being impartial, actually seeks to regulate society by reinforcing existing norms and values in a way that only *appears* to be value-free. As an example, he points to the increasing use of medicine, “with its ostensibly objective, value-free modes of discourse, to manage issues of difference and deviance” (Davis, 2013, p. 554).

When feminist theorists began to take a hard look at scientific objectivity, the cracks in its façade became increasingly obvious (Acker et al., 1983; Bartlett, 2014; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986, 1993). Rather than an essential and impartial truth, those cracks revealed “a conquering gaze from

⁶ Even this may be questioned; see, for example, discussions in Bartlett (2014) and Haraway (1988). The latter characterizes the social constructionist view of science as “a contestable text and a power field” (p. 577).

⁷ Certainly, this assertion is based on a series of assumptions, such as that the speed of light is being measured by someone trained in the Western scientific tradition, with knowledge of “acceptable” Western methodologies and with access to the requisite equipment. Were I, or anyone else lacking these basic requirements, to attempt to measure the speed of light, Betz might be quite surprised by the results.

nowhere” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581)—a so-called objectivity that not only reflected but also promulgated a constructed and deeply skewed male-dominated “reality”—with the “power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation,” and that “signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White” (Haraway, 1998, p. 581).

Freeland (1998), in the introduction to *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*, discusses Margeurite Deslauriers’s exploration of “how a scientific conception can be related to, or can ground, broader social and political viewpoints and systems” (p. 4). For example, while Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* acknowledges women as fully human, “his biological works, like his ethical and political works, seek to deny this through an implicit assumption of certain normative links between maleness and form, and femaleness and (inferior) matter” (Freeland, 1998, p. 5). Such “normative links” in contemporary research prompt Harding (1993) to ask,

What are the causes of the immense proliferation of theoretically and empirically sound results of research in biology and the social sciences that have discovered what is not supposed to exist: rampant sexist and androcentric bias—“politics!”—in the dominant scientific (and popular) descriptions and explanations of nature and social life? (p. 49)

Feminist responses to “rampant sexist and androcentric bias” in science

The discovery that traditional constructions of objective knowledge were only truly objective from a hegemonic male standpoint was pivotal. The concerted feminist interrogation of male bias in the social sciences that began to gain traction in the 1970s has continued unabated (e.g., Bartlett, 2014; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986; Intemann, 2010; Smith, 1992/2013). Bartlett (2014) documents three distinct schools of feminist thought—liberal feminism, nonsubordination feminism, and positionality feminism—and their approaches to addressing the androcentricity of traditional notions of scientific objectivity:

1. *Liberal feminism* (empiricism) focuses on addressing discrimination by correcting stereotypes about women, arguing that these are neither rational nor objective; this approach relies on the use of “facts and rigorous reasoning” (p. 381), but continues to operate largely within the traditionally constructed bounds of scientific objectivity.
2. *Nonsubordination feminism* seeks to “[explode] the myth of objectivity,” believing that the “whole legal and social order [has] been deliberately designed to subordinate women to the interests of men,” and that “the appearance of objectivity ...legitimizes men’s power as simply the way things are” (p. 380).
3. *Positionality feminism* emphasizes “the partiality and social constructedness of all knowledge,” recognizing that no standpoint can claim an “objectivity” that is universal (p. 382).

Bartlett (2014) associates *nonsubordination feminism* with standpoint epistemology and *positionality* with situated knowledge (p. 390), and argues in favour of *positionality* and its recognition that “it is not enough to be suspicious of objectivity; we must also be committed to trying to achieve it. [Positionality] views truth as contingent, partial, and provisional, but worth seeking as if it, in fact, exists” (p. 383). Despite positing a separation between them, Bartlett (2014) also acknowledges the convergence of these ideological positions:

Positionality recognizes, like standpoint epistemologies, that what passes for objective truth tends to reflect the interests of those with the power to define what is objective, and that repositioning the viewpoint of the oppressed can help to expose the non-naturalness of certain societal givens. (p. 383)

The separation thus appears largely illusory, given that (feminist) standpoint theorists such as Haraway (1988), Harding (1993), and Smith (1974) have also embraced and promoted the concept of situated knowledges, recognizing that each standpoint is inherently partial and that no single standpoint can represent or reflect the experience of all women. As Haraway (1998) explains,

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims.... I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.... There is no single feminist standpoint because our maps require too many dimensions for that metaphor to ground our visions. But the feminist standpoint theorists' goal of an epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable positioning remains eminently potent. The goal is better accounts of the world, that is, "science." (pp. 589-590)

Situated Knowledges as Objective Subjectivities

Early on in the development of women's standpoint, Smith (1974) proclaimed that "if sociology cannot avoid being situated, then sociology should take that as its beginning and build it into its methodological and theoretical strategies" (p. 11). Ultimately, standpoint feminists are not trying to do away with the idea of objectivity altogether. As Bartlett (2014) points out, a certain tension is created when one attempts to make claims about the realities of women's lives while simultaneously positing that no objective reality exists. Rhode (1990), too, discusses the "awkward position of maintaining that gender oppression exists while challenging our capacity to document it" (p. 620). These issues, however, were anticipated by standpoint feminists. Rather than working toward an absolute disavowal of the notions of objectivity and reality, they draw attention to the fact that there is no single, disembodied, independently objective reality that stands for all people, all women, and the full range of human experience; and that the claim to objectivity in the Western scientific tradition necessarily reflects privileged standpoints, assumptions, and experiences. The project is not the erasure of these standpoints, but recognition of their limitations and the creation of space for other, equally valid standpoints unbounded by (white, able-bodied, heterosexual) male hegemony;⁸ and, finally, the understanding that each of these reflects the situated knowledge of its bearer. To this, Haraway (1988) adds that situated knowledges

⁸ Nonetheless, Haraway (1988) notes that "many currents in feminism attempt to theorize grounds for trusting especially the vantage points of the subjugated; there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the

require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of “objective” knowledge.⁹ (p. 592)

Similarly, in their work to develop an “emancipatory” feminist methodology for social scientific research, Acker et al. (1983) express their intention “to minimize the tendency ...to transform those researched into objects of scrutiny and manipulation,” in order that the “objects” of research may participate as active subjects (p. 425).

The outcome of this work must ultimately be a social scientific structure and method that replaces an outmoded, privileged, and hegemonic (white, able-bodied, heterosexual) male objectivity with a new, “improved,” situated objectivity (that is instead a keenly self-aware subjectivity) and a “no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world” (Haraway, 1988, p. 579). Williams (2015), too, defends a socially situated form of objectivity in sociology,

not as is usually conceived as ‘value freedom’ or ‘procedural objectivity’, but rather as a socially constructed value that can nevertheless assist us in accessing social reality. It is argued that objectivity should not be seen as the opposite to subjectivity, but rather arising from particular intersubjectively held values. (p. 76)

Although it is not until five pages in that Williams (2015) first references the lively “situated knowledge” dialogue ongoing in feminist theory, he does acknowledge that

The response from feminism, both epistemological and methodological, has been influential on social science. Standpoint theorists, in particular Sandra Harding ...maintained that by privileging the voices of the oppressed a more valid or authentic knowledge is likely to ensue. (p. 82)

This recognition is critical, in that it illustrates the movement of feminist standpoint theorizing into the mainstream social scientific world, and valorizes the work to make this world more livable and

brilliant space platforms of the powerful”; she also argues against “various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible [and unaccountable], knowledge claims” (p. 583).

⁹ I have left this line gendered, as I believe was Haraway’s intent.

inclusive for women and others moving in from the margins. It also reinforces Harding's (1993) claim that "many feminists, like thinkers in the other new social liberation movements, now hold that it is not only desirable but also possible to have that apparent contradiction in terms—socially situated knowledge" (p. 50).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, with its focus on the compounding nature of the interactions between sites of oppression such as race, sex, gender, and class, has been no less critical than standpoint in the development of feminist theory (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Geerts & Van der Tuin, 2013; hooks, 1981, 1989/2015, 1991, 2000; MacKinnon, 2013; Mann, 2013; Roth, 2017; S. Smith, 2013-14). Despite the relatively recent popularization of the term, intersectionality has a long pedigree, having grown out of the resistance movement of Black women in the United States contesting the violence and exploitation of racism, sexism, classism, and slavery, as well as their exclusion from mainstream women's movements (S. Smith, 2013-14; Springer, 2002). As Sharon Smith (2013-14) explains,

After Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality in 1989, it was widely adopted because it managed to encompass in a single word the simultaneous experience of the multiple oppressions faced by Black women. But the concept was not a new one. Since the times of slavery, Black women have eloquently described the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender—referring to this concept as "interlocking oppressions," "simultaneous oppressions," "double jeopardy," "triple jeopardy" or any number of descriptive terms. (para. 8)

Like standpoint, intersectionality has engendered debate and a diversity of perspectives, interpretations, and applications; also like standpoint, intersectionality continues to evolve. Intersectional theory and method have expanded beyond an explicit focus on the lived experience of Black women to address the challenges of—among others—women with disabilities, lesbian women, Chicana women in the United States, and women in the "developing world" (Chantler &

Thiara, 2017; Konstantoni, Kustatscher, & Emejulu, 2017; Mason & Watson, 2017; Roth, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2006). This expansion has been at once lauded for its inclusiveness and criticized for its mutability, its tendency to result in inexhaustible and at times fragmentary conceptualizations and categorizations of “difference” (which it may or may not be possible or even desirable to address in an integrated way), and the elision of Black women’s lives as central to the project (Chantler & Thiara, 2017; Konstantoni, Kustatscher, & Emejulu, 2017; Mason & Watson, 2017; Roth, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Further, intersectionality’s institutionalization—its ready acceptance and projection onto populations across the globe by academia, NGOs, and governmental organizations like the United Nations—has raised charges of elitism (Mason & Watson, 2017) and imperialism, particularly from the perspectives of the global South (Connell, 2014; Menon, 2015). Nevedita Menon (2015) decries “the manner in which concepts developed in the global North are assumed to have universal validity,” pointing out that the reverse is rarely assumed to be the case. She goes on to suggest that the concept of intersectionality cannot be unproblematically applied to all social and legal contexts, and certainly not in the case of India:

Generally, the term intersectionality when used in India expresses one of two familiar feminist ideas—“double and triple burdens,” or that “Woman” must be complicated by caste, religion, class. When used in this sense, the term has no particular purchase, and adds nothing new to our understanding. This is because the politics of engaging with multiple identities, their contradictions and interrelations, goes back to the early 20th century and the legacy of anti-imperialist struggles in the global South.

(Menon, 2015, ‘Woman’ in Indian Feminism section, para. 1)

Menon (2015) elaborates, explaining that “what [she finds] revealing in debates on intersectionality, even among its critics, is the total lack of engagement with literature outside the Euro-North American (at most Australian) academy,” despite the fact that “entire libraries can be filled with feminist theorising available in English, precisely of multiple identities, from South Asia, Africa and Latin America” (Reconsidering Intersectionality section, para. 11). Connell (2014), in discussing the work of Beninese philosopher P. J. Hountondji, further describes this difficulty, “not as the simple imposition of Western perspectives, but as a global division of labor

in the production of knowledge, with its roots in imperialism” (p. 523). While Northern and Western feminists, spurred on by thinkers like Spivak (1985), have increasingly sought to integrate research and data from their Southern and Eastern sisters, this recognition has typically stopped short of embracing non-Northern/non-Western *theoretical* perspectives (Connell, 2014).

Such targeted critiques from global South scholars and theorists add important dimensions to the ongoing development of standpoint and intersectionality, and challenge assumptions about their broader applicability. They also highlight the potential dangers of replacing prevailing hegemonies with new, “improved” hegemonic forms and systems, which are ultimately no less damaging for being unintentionally so. The apparent (and still evolving) convergence of standpoint, intersectionality, and global post- (or anti-)colonial perspectives honours Springer’s (2002) reminder that “remaining mindful of the links between the struggles for freedom from racism and sexism is critical as future social justice coalition work depends on accurate—for better or worse—historical memory” (p. 1062).

Conclusion

Standpoint and intersectionality have both grown beyond their origins in mainstream academic feminism (in the former case) and Black women’s activism (in the latter) to consider multiple experiences of marginality and how the intersections of sex, gender, sexuality, class, race, ability, culture, geography, nationality, and other markers of identity can intensify forms and experiences of oppression. The integration of insights from intersectionality has proven essential to the continuing progress and relevance of feminist standpoint epistemologies and their instrumental role in decentring hegemonic (white, able-bodied, heterosexual) male notions of objectivity (e.g., Collins, 1989, 1992, 2004; Davis, 2008; S. Smith, 2013-14) and moving social scientific research toward theoretical and methodological paradigms where increasing plurality, inclusivity, and acceptance of “situated knowledge” provide a new base (or bases) from which to operate. Standpoint feminisms have demonstrated the ability to absorb and respond to criticisms such as their failure to adequately accommodate diversity; an ongoing commitment to hearing and

responding meaningfully to concerns such as the deeply entrenched North/South and East/West divides will further enrich intersectional and standpoint epistemologies, and continue to push them beyond feminist “enclave” scholarship to influence disciplines across the broader social scientific realm.

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Adrienne holds a Bachelor of Arts in archaeology, anthropology, and English from Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, BC, and is in the final project stage of her Master of Arts - Interdisciplinary Studies degree from Athabasca University, with a focus on cultural and literary studies. She lives in the beautiful Shuswap region of British Columbia, within the unceded traditional territory of the Secwepemc people. After winning the Cathy Bray Essay Award in 2018, she bought a kayak with the proceeds, and now tries to get out on the water as often as she can.
