**Feminist epistemologies and science studies**

Discussion paper on Standpoint theories and epistemic privilege

Davina Vačkářová (Gender Studies, 1. combined), September 2020

Feminist standpoint has been articulated by the feminist Marxists and materialist feminists who brought two key vantage points: that the position of women is structurally different from that of men, and that the lived realities of women’s lives are profoundly different from those of men (Hartsock 1983, p. 284). Standpoint theories are one of the core contributions of feminism to epistemology. The structural difference in women´s lives makes a ground for knowledge from a marginalized perspective. This knowledge can provide more comprehensive and less distorted accounts of reality (Harding 1993). We could say it brings research questions which would not be asked by dominant groups because they don´t have lived experience for these critical accounts. Standpoint theories have been applied also to other oppressed or socially marginalized groups with regard to race, ethnicity, class, or sexuality.

As noted by Haraway (1988, p. 581): “Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*.” By this, Haraway proposes that objectivity is not about the traditional dissection of subject and object and illusionary universal objectivity, which led to hegemony of white male ideologies (“White Capitalist Patriarchy”). Rather, it is always situated within specific embodiment which is located, either historically or socially. Therefore, only partial perspective can be objective and arises from situated knowledges. How I understand statements by Haraway is that knowledge (and knowledge generation) can never be definitive and always is dependent on agency and embodiment. We can´t know (epistemological perspective) by applying some neutral “view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity” (Haraway 1988, p. 589). This is what Haraway describes as a “God Trick”. We can only know from specific locations, positions and situations (hence situated knowledges, in plural). These make knowledge accountable.

From the perspective of standpoint theories, the view from the marginalized lives provides only necessary starting point – not sufficient for maximizing objectivity (Harding 1993). Feminist objectivity thus means always partial and situated knowledges (Haraway 1988). Any of these marginalized perspectives is a good place to start epistemological inquiry. The standpoint theories oppose the universal and standard knowledge claims which placed themselves as superior. These dominant claims originating in socially stratified societies are, inter alia, result of power and in principle they are “ethnocentric” (Harding 1993). Ethnocentrism is the belief on inherent superiority of one´s own ethnic group or culture (Harding 1993) and thus producing “universally valid beliefs” (Harding 1993, p. 60).

The concept of situated knowledges leads to the notion of strong objectivity, introduced by Sandra Harding (1993). Harding proposes that situated knowledges are not different from other knowledge claims: they all bear the fingerprints of the communities that produce them (Harding1993 p. 57). Situated theories require strong examination of the subject which is producing knowledge. Therefore, the subject producing the knowledge receives the attention equivalent to the object of knowledge. Subjects producing situated knowledges are embodied, socially located, heterogeneous and incoherent. Only appreciating and accounting for this interaction among knowledge subjects and objects can provide strong objectivity. Both subject producing knowledge and object of knowledge should be critically examined within the process of knowledge production. The strong objectivity requires strong reflexivity (Harding 1993).

Concerning the epistemic privilege, some feminist scholar claimed that oppressed and marginalized groups, including all women, pose epistemic privilege because it reveals social reality (Hekman 1997). Only the lives of women and other oppressed groups (such as black women) were considered to provide privileged standpoint and vantage point for knowledge production due to their unique life experiences. However, according to both Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding, all knowledge is situated and partial and therefore, there is no universal or privileged standpoint. Standpoint theories have been introduced to challenge “objectivism” in Western knowledge dominated by white males. Every knowledge which takes a strong reflexivity and partial positioning is equally valid and therefore, not epistemologically privileged to other standpoints.

**References**

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