

On Feminist Epistemology: The Fallibility of Gendered Science
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That science remains free from bias and epistemological contamination is a claim that must be examined thoroughly — especially in terms of context. Contextualization aims to deconstruct the practice of science with respect to notions of power relations, capitalism, and the default/Other dichotomy among others. Feminist epistemology focuses not only on the place of ‘women’ in science, but also on all the Other unprivileged groups of society. It does so by analyzing the social, political, and ideological contexts comprising science. This analysis critiques the institution of science and brings forth questions on the nature, and achievability, of objectivity. This essay will discuss how science’s claim of objectivity is fallible in the light of feminist epistemology, and will present an alternative notion of objectivity in the light of context and intersectionality.

The Other were rarely neither the agents of science, nor the subjects of it. Instead, they were the invisible consumers of what science produced. Objectivism erased all social values from the process of science and instead imagined building a neutral realm in which empirical data was waiting to be snatched. By making this value-free claim, science asserted its value-loaded framework as a doubtless default. The white, male, able-bodied, and western-centric science establishes hegemony over knowledge production and, in turn, a hegemony over body politics, economics, and international relations.

The conception of value-free, impartial, dispassionate research is supposed to direct the identification of all social values and their elimination from the results of research, yet it has been operationalized to identify and eliminate only those social values and interests that differ among the researchers and critics who are regarded by the scientific community as competent to make such judgments (Harding 2008, 744).

Colonialism allowed a power structure — perpetuated by capitalism — to emerge. That structure was/is an extension of white, male, western ideologies imposed on the world as the ‘truth’ and science, in turn, works within these boundaries.

If science is deemed as a hegemonic power of the androcentric west, and its objectivity is refuted, does that entail an entire rejection of the notion of objectivity as it relates to science? Embracing a skeptical view and denying the existence of a uniform external world enables one to easily accept relativism, which itself holds many dangers. Relativism allows scientists to admit their faulty and centric ways and just carry on with it. Relativism permits opting out of discussions where worlds, struggles, and oppressions are different. Cultural relativists dangerously tread on the boundaries of separation between the respect for human rights and respect for cultural diversity. Therefore, awareness of a different context is not enough given that the western androcentric science operates in the world and affects it respectively — leaving the Other to operate her own science is not a valid alternative since the production of science already exists in an institutionalized power structure. Instead, one should accept the limitations of awareness, just as the fish does not know what water is, and aim towards a more holistic, inclusive, intersectional science based on a probability conscious of the context and power structure

in which it exists. This transforms the concept of objectivity from a singularity to a spectrum: a claim can be ‘more objective’ and a more real reflection of reality than another.

Feminist epistemology operates within this spectrum and questions the essentialist claims made in the west. Anthropology began as a colonial science aimed at studying ‘the native’. It facilitated the perpetuation of existing racist claims in the west, and in turn, science occupied that same position. Feminist epistemology tackles the essentialist claims that readily identifies ‘women’ and continues to reinforce the constructed image of one. Science produces value-loaded ‘knowledge’ into a capitalist system, framed in terms of patriarchy. The business of ‘woman-making’ is a highly profitable one in which ‘women’ (or people who identify themselves as such), both the privileged and the Othered, feed the system financially and ideologically. Marxist feminism is a form of epistemology that acknowledges the power structure set up by capitalism and patriarchy and aims to deconstruct the ideological manifestations in terms of that structure.

Feminist standpoint theory, among others, is a form of feminist epistemology.

Feminist standpoint theorists make three principal claims: (1) Knowledge is socially situated. (2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized. (3) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized (Bowell, IEP).

The theory situates science in the structure it was produced in to allow critical analysis of its nature, and in turn understand its effect on the Other’s life. Feminist standpoint theory begins with a descriptive project and ends with a normative one. Its intersectional approach appeals to the pragmatic nature of science. Capitalism uses science to establish new means of exploitation in order to increase profit. The monopoly of science, in the hands of the capitalists, allows the production of new sciences for the aims of profit. As Marxists continue to claim, the machine is not innately exploitative, but rather the capitalist’s application of it. Instead of relieving the workers from intense physical labour, it just establishes a more monotonous and strenuous type of work. As long as science continues to operate in a power structure that demands new tools, science can never claim to be an ‘objective’ state.

Since feminist standpoint theory already exists in an androcentric western structure, it could be described as having a close resemblance to an Othering project — one with a relativist sense. Feminist standpoint theory and its projects “conflict because the notions involved are perfectly coherent with the maintenance of elitist knowledge production and systems” (Harding 751). Acknowledging different agendas and claiming to truly understand the Other — only to then prefer the already established elitist project — is just another form of hegemony. It aims to integrate the Other into the power structure by pretending to address the oppressions and differences found, rather than completely deconstructing the structure. The Other is given a footnote, an imaginary agency which complies to the hegemonic and pre-existing scientific institution. The Other is still the

subject of study, the deviation from the hegemonic norm. The production of knowledge carries on with the assumption of objectivity, and the default nature of the elite is never subject to explanation and questioning.

Nonetheless, the feminist standpoint theory project should continue. Although the risk of Othering may be present — especially at the hands of those who hold the positions of power in the hegemony — this intersectional form of knowledge production should not be abandoned. Due to its duality of description and normativity, feminist standpoint theory appeals to the necessity of changing the androcentric western structure. Standpoint theory understands how science, as a pragmatic practice, can be molded to benefit those it has long wronged. The theory situates the agents of knowledge production in their respective context and allows a meta-analysis of this knowledge; it does not treat it as an unquestionable absolute truth. Ideally it allows agency to be granted to the Other in order to produce knowledge, supposedly set to be as equal to that of the hegemony. However, academia is structured in a way that does not allow the Other to enter without institutionalization, without the removal of the Other from the ‘native’ self in order to comply to the structure. Feminist standpoint theory acknowledges such claims by contextualizing the given, and in turn sets to question the state of ‘objectivity’. The theory allows science to move along the spectrum of ‘objectivity’ towards a stronger form of it — the theory is a support of constant questioning. Even though at instances in academia it can be claimed by the hegemony, the theory should not be given up on for the importance of its intersectional approach.

Science can never be a ‘pure and objective’ form of knowledge. If it is, then its value would be questionable by having its pragmatic nature compromised. If it cannot be related to a real context, the experience generating it and its application would be futile. “To insist that no judgments at all of cognitive adequacy can legitimately be made amounts to the same thing as to insist that knowledge can be produced only from “no place at all” (Harding, 750). Feminist standpoint theory aims to further push knowledge production along the spectrum of objectivity via its intersectional approach. It cultivates the agency of the Other and grants an opportunity to question the hegemonic process of knowledge production which so deeply influences everyone’s life.

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