**INTRODUCTION TO STANDPOINT THEORY**

**by Simon Moss**

|  |
| --- |
| **Introduction** |

**Dominant constituencies reinforce their dominance**

Feminist standpoint theory entails a few key assumptions. First, over many decades, and even centuries, the dominating constituencies in a land—often affluent men—shaped the practices and principles that pervade society. Many of these practices and principles, either deliberately or unwittingly, sustain and amplify the power and status of this constituency (Harding, 2003). That is, the laws, customs, and beliefs will tend to favour dominating constituencies over marginalized communities, aggravating inequality and injustice (Hartsock, 1987, 2003).

To illustrate, discourse or practices that discourage women from physical exercise or sport may reinforce the notion that females are weaker in some sense. Discourse or practices that discourage women from the legal fraternity limit the capacity of women to shape laws that serve the interests of females. Indeed, discourse or practices that encourage women to be pleasant rather than assertive also diminishes their capacity to seem authoritative and shape society (Harding, 2003).

**Research is biased towards the interests of dominant constituencies**

Second, consistent with this dynamic, research has tended to be biased towards the priorities and needs of dominating constituencies, such as affluent men. Many problems and issues that are especially important to women, for example, have been overlooked. Until this theory burgeoned, research had not explored how women reconcile their responsibilities, such as tending to their children, partner, and employer (e.g., Gilligan, 1982).

**Female researchers should explore issues vital to women**

Third, because of this oversight, proponents of standpoint theory encourage female researchers to explore topics, problems, and concepts that are relevant to the everyday lives of women. According to proponents of standpoint theory, male researchers have not, in general, experienced the concerns and constraints that many females endure. They have not, for example, felt obliged to prioritize unpaid domestic work over career progression. Consequently, male researchers may not be in a position to conduct research that unearths the gamut of issues that women experience (Harding, 2003).

This same rationale can be applied to other marginalized communities. To illustrate, for the same reason, according to standpoint theory, Indigenous researchers should explore Indigenous issues. Thus, although standpoint theory primarily evolved to accommodate the interests of females, the theory can be extended to many other marginalized communities as well.

**Research should explore how institutions sustain inequalities**

Proponents of standpoint theory do not only explore the everyday issues that are germane to women. Instead, these researchers also explore how the institutions in society—the government, courts, and universities, for example—continue to reinforce the existing inequalities (Harding, 2003; Hekman, 1997). That is, these researchers explore regulations and practices that, perhaps unwittingly, reflect the biases of dominant constituencies.

|  |
| --- |
| **The evolution of standpoint theory** |

Feminist standpoint theories can be traced to the works of many authors including Hilary Rose (1983), Alison Jaggar (1983), and Donna Haraway (1978, 1981). The following table outlines some of the movements and insights that inspired standpoint theory.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Inspirations | Details |
| Research was not resolving injustices to women or inequalities in general | In the fields of biology and social science, scholars were beginning to recognize how the knowledge and recommendations that were emerging from these fields conflicted with the values and pursuits of many women’s movements. That is, the insights that were emerging from these fields were not as progressive as scientists once maintained. These insights were not benefiting oppressed constituencies, such as marginalized communities or subjugated women (see Wylie, 2004). |
| Research was not exploring issues that seemed relevant to women | Many scholars felt the knowledge that was emerging from biology and social science was inaccurate, dismissing the experiences and concerns of many women and marginalised constituencies. The existing scientific methods were biased towards the perspectives and preferences of powerful communities, such as Western, affluent men. These perspectives thus, either deliberately or unwittingly, overlooked and dismissed some of the daily concerns and problems of women. |
| Post-Marxist perspectives highlighted some of the injustices that women were experiencing | Proponents of Marx and Engels recognized the traditional inequalities between workers and managers often applied to the distinction between men and women (Harding, 2003). Men were often regarded as the head of households. Women were often the workers at home; their domestic labour as unpaid; their bodies were utilized as reproductive organs.  Many of the myths and customs of society reinforced this distinction. To justify the practice that domestic work was unpaid, the myth that such domestic work was natural or completed because of love was pervasive. To justify the limited wages that women received in the workplace, many individuals promulgated the belief that women were foremost mothers rather than interested in careers. These assumptions not only permeated daily life but also shaped the assumptions of research institutions. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Study of women by women** |

To counteract these concerns, proponents of standpoint theory (e.g., Harding, 2003) recommended two practices. First, researchers should study issues and concerns that are relevant to women, or to other marginalized communities, in everyday life. To illustrate, past research around moral decision making tended to consider the decisions that are relevant to powerful men, such as managers and lawyers. This research had, until the 1980s, overlooked some of the decisions that many women had to reach in their role as mothers and caretakers.

Second, members of marginalized communities should study their community. These members have experienced many of the problems their peers endure. Hence, they are more sensitive to the nuances of these concerns. Thus, only from the standpoint of an oppressed or marginalized community can researchers successfully appreciate the issues and concerns of this community, sometimes called insider outsider theory (e.g., Merton, 1972). As an analogy, only a person experiencing a toothache can really understand their toothache.

In particular, according to standpoint theory, female researchers should study the issues and concerns that are relevant to women (Ruddick, 2004). That is, women should be granted more opportunities to study themselves and not be the object of study from some other vantage point, such as powerful men. The following table outlines some of the original examples of female researchers who studied issues that are central to the everyday lives of women.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Example | Details |
| The conflicting responsibilities that women experience | Carol Gilligan explored conflicting responsibilities that women need to reconcile, such as the need to care for children but satisfy their partners and employers (Gilligan, 1982) |
| The biases that pervade the legal institutions, such as law courts | Catherine MacKinnon, for example, explored how conceptualizations of rape differed between men and women. Men often conceptualize rape as violent and forceful penetration—a conceptualization that shapes legal definitions of rape. In addition, men are more inclined to exonerate the rape of a woman who was provocatively dressed or promiscuous (MacKinnon, 1982, 1983).  But, women may often feel that any sex in which women feel violated in some way should constitute rape. They challenge the notion that a provocatively dressed or promiscuous woman encourages rape and wants sex. |
| Men often explain concepts to women in a patronizing tone, sometimes called mansplaining | Men often seem overconfident about a topic and condescending when explaining concepts to women. Men often interrupt and women are often interrupted. Rebecca Solnit even wrote about a time in which a man explained a book to her that she had written (Solnit, 2014). |

|  |
| --- |
| **Strong objectivism** |

As this research progressed, proponents of standpoint theory began to question the research ideologies that dominated society at the time. The primary ideology at the time was that research methods need to be objective, divorced of bias. But, proponents of standpoint theory uncovered many nuances and limitations of existing definitions of objective research.

**Research is not objective until after the hypotheses are defined**

Around this time, before the 1980s, researchers had developed and applied methods to prevent biases and to enhance the accuracy of research. Yet, these methods affect only the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. These methods do not diminish the biases that could precede the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data (Novick, 1988), such as

* the topics researchers chose to explore
* the problems they believed need to be solved
* the main concepts they wanted to explore to solve this problem
* their main hypotheses

Consequently, the topics, problem, concepts, and hypotheses of researchers were often biased towards a male perspective. To illustrate, researchers may explore topics that males value. They might dismiss problems that women prioritize, such as domestic violence. And, researchers might choose concepts that dismiss the barriers to women, such as social arrangements that limit career progress in female employees.

To redress this limitation, proponents of standpoint theory advocated that members of oppressed communities, including subjugated women, should participate in these preliminary phases of research (Harding, 2003). They should determine which topics are studied, which problems are explored, which concepts are prioritized, and which if any hypotheses are assessed—phases that are sometimes called the “context of discovery”.

**Previous tests of objectivity were too narrow**

Arguably, whenever distinct researchers unearth comparable results, we can be more confident these findings are accurate. We can be sure these insights are not dependent on the values or assumptions of these researchers. We perceive these results as objective.

At first glance, this definition of objectivity seems reasonable. The problem, however, is that, researchers tend to be members of the dominant collective—such as affluent men in Western nations from the dominant ethnicity. Consequently, their values, interests, and assumptions may not be especially diverse. Some values, interests, and assumptions may not vary across these researchers. Thus, we cannot be certain whether or not these results are insensitive to these values, interests, and assumptions.

According to proponents of standpoint theory, to overcome this problem, researchers need to be more diverse. They should not all be members of the same dominant constituency. If researchers from diverse and marginalized communities also generate the same results, the findings are more likely to be objective—insensitive to the values, interests, and assumptions of these individuals. This principle is sometimes called strong objectivity (see Harding, 2003).

**Researchers should not be dispassionate about the topics they study**

To maintain objectivity, before the advent of standpoint theory, scholars argued that researchers should be dispassionate about the topics they study and the problems they explore. They should not be emotionally invested, otherwise they might bias the results.

Proponents of standpoint theory challenged this principle. First, this principle overlooks the reality that powerful constituencies were already choosing topics that resonate with their interests. After all, all military and medical research is designed to achieve some agenda. Yet, few researchers had, before standpoint theory, felt this research is too sensitive to the interests and passions of people. Hence, the notion that personal agendas might shape the research choices, although sometimes denigrated, is inevitable and universal (Harding, 2003).

Second, this principle that researchers should be dispassionate about the topics they study and the problems they explore impedes discovery. To demonstrate, past research had tended to be biased towards the perspective of the dominant constituencies. For example, not only do men often study women, but

* European Americans often study African Americans
* European Australians study Indigenous Australians
* Western researchers study people in developing nations, and so forth.

Members of these marginalized communities are granted few opportunities to contribute to choices around the topics, problems, concepts, designs, and dissemination of this study. Consequently, the research is more likely to uncover findings that are biased towards the interest of dominant sectors of society, such as affluent men.

Indeed, these researchers often receive funding to temper the contributions of marginalized communities. They might receive funding to diminish the attempts of marginalized communities to redress inequalities—attempts that are labelled as protests or insubordination. In contrast, the issues that oppressed constituencies might want to explore often seem extraneous or outlandish to funding bodies—bodies that are replete with members of the dominant elite. To illustrate, the proposal that social practices, rather than biological traits, explain the achievement of men in maths and science might seem an appropriate line of enquiry for subjugated women but not for successful men.

Because of this bias, if female or marginalized researchers pursue topics, problems, and concepts that resonate with their values, interests, and passions, they are more likely to explore novel perspectives. They are more likely to uncover insights that had been overlooked before. Their research is more likely to be productive. Their findings are more likely to be representative of broader society and thus accurate (for comparable arguments, see Jameson, 1988).

|  |
| --- |
| **Criticisms and counterarguments** |

Many scholars have criticized various features of standpoint theory. The following table outlines some of these criticisms, coupled with counterarguments.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Criticism | Counterargument |
| Researchers who are not members of marginalized communities can apply practices that offset their limited experience in this community. They can develop empathy, listen actively, and immerse themselves in the community, for example. | These practices are limited for several reasons. First, if someone is an outsider, they can never really experience the range of emotions and issues that insiders endure. Hence, the intuitions of outsides—intuitions that emanate from the concatenation of all these experiences—will diverge from the intuitions of insiders.  Second, this empathy, listening, and immersion is not sufficient to shift the fundamental inequalities. These practices do not shift the economic resources and political status of the researchers or participants (e.g., Blauner & Wellman, 1973). |
| Researchers who are not members of marginalized communities can acknowledge their status in their writing. They might concede they have been educated at a prestigious university and had not experienced the life and issues of the individuals they study. The readers can then consider this positioning while they reach conclusions | But, this confession offers limited insight on how the privileged experiences of the researcher biases the topic, problem, concepts, and results. And, furthermore, this confession is constrained: No researcher can readily articulate all of their experiences and positions that could bias the research. |
| Standpoint theory implies that all women, in one sense, are the same. All women share some essence, an assumption called essentialism. | Yet, nothing in standpoint theory implies that women share an essence. Proponents of standpoint theory can explore the diversity of experiences that women endure and enjoy |
| The perspectives of outsiders can be beneficial. After all, sometimes a person outside a community may notice patterns that insiders might overlook. That is, insiders might become habituated to these patterns. This tendency is called the power of the stranger. | Standpoint theory does not reject all insights from strangers or outsiders. Indeed, this power of the stranger merely reinforces their assumptions. For the same reason that insiders might become habituated to their behaviours and tendencies, researchers from the dominant elite might not be able to challenge their own assumptions effectively. This argument highlights the need to encourage researchers from marginalized communities. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Contemporary variations of standpoint theory** |

In recent decades, standpoint theory has evolved considerably. For example

* many researchers have extended the principles of standpoint theory to explore the practices and principles that instill racism, classism, and colonialism.
* Indigenous standpoint theory, for example, has significantly guided research around Indigenous issues.

**Indigenous standpoint theory**

Proponents of Indigenous standpoint theory argue that feminist standpoint theory overlooks many of the distinct features that Indigenous peoples experience (see Moreton-Robinson, 2006, 2013). After all, the advocates of feminist standpoint theory were white women. Their ontology, epistemology, and legal framework—such as the perception that land is private property—was consistent with the broader society in which they lived. In this sense, these advocates were privileged. In contrast, Indigenous standpoint theory recognizes some of the distinct perspectives of Indigenous peoples. For example

* in the health and education sector, Indigenous people are often perceived as failing—a perspective that overlooks the systemic or societal impediments to education and health
* similarly, discourse around Indigenous communities are often preoccupied with deficits and shortcomings
* therefore, Indigenous research benefits from a theory that systemic or societal impediments to health and education as well as underscores the strengths and opportunities of Indigenous communities—while recognizing their beliefs and values around family, culture, and country

Indigenous standpoint theory fulfils these needs. Foley (2003) articulated some of the key features of Indigenous standpoint theory. Specifically, to preserve and develop Indigenous epistemological positions and Indigenous knowledges, proponents of this theory advocate that

* the researchers who study Indigenous communities should be Indigenous; if supervised, these supervisors should be Indigenous
* these researchers should be versed in theories to protect their research from the distortions of Western approaches
* the research must benefit the Indigenous community, the Indigenous research community, or both
* the recordings should be in the traditional language of the community

A variant of this theory, Indigenous Women’s Standpoint Theory, is especially relevant when the research primarily revolves around issues that are germane to Indigenous women (Moreton-Robinson, 2006, 2013).

|  |
| --- |
| **References** |

Barker, D. (2005). Beyond women and economics: Rereading women's work. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 30(4), 2189–2209.

Barker, D., & Feiner, S. F. (2005). Liberating economics: Feminist perspectives on families, work, and globalization. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Blauner, R., & Wellman, D. (1973). Toward the decolonization of social research. In J. A. Ladner (Ed.), The death of white sociology (pp. 310–330). New York: Random House.

Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. Social Problems, 33(6), S14–S32.

Collins, Patricia Hill. (1991). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. New York: Routledge. In B. Cooke & U. Kothari (Eds.). (2001). Participation: The new tyranny? New York: Zed Press.

Fausto-Sterling, A.. (1994). Myths of gender: Biological theories about women and men. New York: Basic Books.

Foley, D. (2003). Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous standpoint theory. Social Alternatives, 22, 44-52.

Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Grant, J. (1987). I feel, therefore I am: A critique of female experience as the basis for a feminist epistemology. Women and Politics, 7(3), 99–114.

Haraway, D.. (1981). In the beginning was the word: The genesis of biological theory. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 6(3), 469–481.

Haraway, D. (1989). Primate visions: Gender, race, and nature in the world of modern science. New York: Routledge.

Haraway, D.. (1991). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspectives. In D. Haraway (Ed.), Simians, cyborgs, and women (pp. 183–202). New York: Routledge.

Harding, S. (1991). Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Harding, S. (1993). Rethinking standpoint epistemology. In L .Alcoff & E. Potter (Eds.), Feminist epistemologies (pp. 49–82). New York: Routledge.

Harding, S. (1997). Can men be the subjects of feminist thought? In T. Digby (Ed.), Men doing feminism (pp. 171–195). New York: Routledge.

Harding, S. (1998). Is science multicultural? Postcolonialisms, feminisms, and epistemologies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Harding, S. (2003). How standpoint methodology informs philosophy of social science. In S. P. Turner & P. A.Roth (Eds.), The Blackwell guide to the philosophy of the social sciences (pp. 291–310). New York: Blackwell.

Harding, S. (Ed.). (2004a). The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies. New York: Routledge.

Harding, S. (2008). Sciences from below: Feminisms, postcolonialities, and modernities. Durham: Duke University Press.

Harding, S. (2009). Postcolonial and feminist science and technology studies: Convergences and dissonances. Postcolonial Studies, 12(4), 401–421.

Hartsock, N. (1987). Rethinking modernism: Minority vs. majority theories. Cultural Critique, 7, 187–206.

Hartsock, N. (2003). The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism. In S. Harding & M. Hintikka (Eds.), Discovering reality (pp. 283–310). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Reidel/Kluwer.

Hekman, S. (1997). Truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 22(2), 341–365.

Hirschmann, Nancy. (1997). Feminist standpoint as postmodern strategy. In S. J.Kenney & H. Kinsella (Eds.), Politics and feminist standpoint theories (pp. 73–92). New York: The Haworth Press, Inc.

Jaggar, Alison. (1983). Feminist politics and epistemology: Justifying feminist theory. In A. Jaggar (Ed.) Feminist politics and human nature (pp. 353–394). Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld.

Jaggar, Alison. (1989). Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology. In A. Jaggar & S. Bordo (Eds.), Gender/body/knowledge: Feminist reconstructions of being and knowing, (pp. 145–171). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Jameson, F. (1988). “History and class consciousness” as an unfinished project. Rethinking Marxism, 1, 49–72.

Kesby, M. (2005). Retheorizing empowerment-through-participation as a performance in space: Beyond tyranny to transformation. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 30(4), 2037–2065.

MacKinnon, C. A. (1982). Feminism, Marxism, method, and the state: An agenda for theory. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 7(3), 515–544.

MacKinnon, C. A. (1983). Feminism, Marxism, method, and the state: Toward feminist jurisprudence. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 8(4), 635–658.

Maguire, P. (1987). Doing participatory research: A feminist approach. Amherst, MA: The Center for International Education, University of Massachusetts.

Merton, R. (1972). Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. American Journal of Sociology, 78(1), 9–47.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2006). Towards a new research agenda? Foucault, whiteness and Indigenous sovereignty. Journal of Sociology, 42(4), 383–395. doi: 10.1177/1440783306069995

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2013). Towards an Australian Indigenous Women’s Standpoint Theory, Australian Feminist Studies, 28(78), pp. 331-347. DOI: 10.1080/08164649.2013.876664

Novick, P. (1988). That noble dream: The “objectivity question” and the American historical profession. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Pels, D. (2004). Strange standpoints, or how to define the situation for situated knowledge. In S. Harding (Ed.), The feminist standpoint theory reader (pp. 273–290). New York: Routledge.

Petras, E. M., & Porpora, D. V. (1993). Participatory research: Three models and an analysis. The American Sociologist, 23(1), 107–126.

Proctor, R. (1991). Value-free science? Purity and power in modern knowledge. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rose, H. (1983). Hand, brain, and heart: A feminist epistemology for the natural sciences. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 9(1), 73–90. http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/494025

Ruddick, Sara. (2004). Maternal thinking as a feminist standpoint. In S. Harding (Ed.), The feminist standpoint theory reader (pp. 161–168). New York: Routledge.

Seager, J. (2003). Rachel Carson died of breast cancer: The coming of age of feminist environmentalism. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 28(3), 945–972.

Simmel, G. (1921). The sociological significance of the “stranger.” In R. E.Park & E. W.Burgess (Eds.), Introduction to the science of sociology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, D. E. (1987). The everyday world as problematic: A sociology for women. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Smith, D. E.. (1990a). The conceptual practices of power: A feminist sociology of knowledge. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Smith, D. E. (1999). Writing the social: Critique, theory, and investigations. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Smith, D. E. (2005). Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Smith, L. T. (1999). Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples. New York: Zed Press.

Solnit, R. (2014). Men explain things to me. Granta Books.

Tickner, J. A. (2001). Gendering world politics: Issues and approaches in the post–cold war era. New York: Columbia University Press.

Weeks, K. (1998). Constituting feminist subjects. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Wylie, A. (2004). Why standpoint matters. In S. Harding (Ed.), The feminist standpoint theory reader (pp. 339–352). New York: Routledge.