

IN: UNESCO and International Social Science Council, 2010.
World Social Science Report: Knowledge Divides. Paris: UNESCO
Publishing, pages 173-175.

Standpoint methodologies and epistemologies: a logic of scientific inquiry for people

Sandra Harding

Standpoint epistemologies, methodologies and philosophies of science emerged in feminist social sciences, biology, and philosophy in the 1970s and 1980s, but remain controversial for many researchers since they challenge the adequacy of conventional Enlightenment ideals of science. This paper focuses on central standpoint themes and provides examples of such research, taking up criticisms en route.

Standpoint epistemologies, methodologies and philosophies of science emerged in feminist social sciences, biology and philosophy in the 1970s and 1980s. They were not the only such efforts. Others squeezed feminist needs into familiar empiricist and ethnographic methodologies and epistemologies. But these were more innovative; they require effort to resist the tendency to incorporate them into empiricist or ethnographic frameworks. They have since spread widely throughout the social sciences and into such natural science fields as health, medical, environmental and technological research. Moreover, their 'logic of research' has appeared independently in just about every liberatory social movement of at least the past half-century. In this sense they are 'for people' rather than for the interests of dominant institutions and groups.

This logic originated in Marxian claims about the epistemic value of the standpoint of the proletariat. However, feminisms and other social justice movements have radically transformed the Marxian account to make these research strategies and explanations relevant to contemporary political and intellectual contexts. Standpoint research remains controversial to many researchers since it challenges the adequacy of conventional Enlightenment ideals of science: value-neutral objectivity, instrumental rationality, and a narrowly conceived 'good method'. Yet at the same time it reshapes such ideals to serve the empirical, theoretical and political needs of social justice movements. It also redirects the gaze of ethnographic accounts back onto the dominant institutions and groups in society. In these innovations, standpoint projects have opened up space for productive new debates about the actual and desirable relations of experience to the production of knowledge (see Jameson, in Harding, 2004). This paper focuses on central standpoint themes and provides examples of such research, taking up criticisms en route. All human knowledge is 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, in Harding, 2004). How we interact with people and the world around us both enables and limits our knowledge of nature and social relations. In hierarchically organized societies, the daily activities and experiences of oppressed groups, which are usually ignored and disregarded by dominant groups, enable insights about how both the natural order and society function. Such insights are not available – or at least are not easily available – from the perspective of dominant group activity. Thus people who do the 'domestic labour' of the world – in their homes, other people's houses, restaurants, offices and hospitals – have distinctive experiences. These experiences help them to understand the material world, human bodies and social relations in ways that are unavailable to most of the university professors (mainly men) who produce epistemology, social theory and the conceptual frameworks of research disciplines. What appears to them as strictly physical labour is perceived as a natural activity for the less talented. Thus, conventional epistemologies tend to naturalize social power. Women intellectuals and especially women of colour tend to have a 'bifurcated consciousness', acting as 'outsiders within', since their daily lives occur on both sides of the divides that separate the 'ruling' and the 'ruled'. (See essays by Collins, Smith and others, in Harding, 2004.)

Does this mean that only those who are exploited in such ways and have such experiences can understand what standpoint epistemologies and methodologies reveal? Of course not. The people who come from such exploited groups speak, protest, write and now serve on advisory panels, tenure committees and editorial boards. To be sure, they will tend to understand subtleties of discrimination which are not at first visible to people from dominant groups.

But those from privileged groups can also learn to see those features of society. To be sure, such a brief formulation fails to acknowledge both the plurality of forms of domination (gender, class, race) and the diverse forms of upward mobility. Yet the point here is that people with privileged lives, and who often make policies that direct everyone's lives, frequently misperceive the facts about their own and less privileged lives. But they can, with effort, learn to see the world more accurately.

The conceptual frameworks of research disciplines, like those of dominant social institutions more generally, have been organized in ways that satisfy the groups that support and fund them. They therefore tend to serve the interests and desires of those groups (Hartsock and Smith, in Harding, 2004). In order to get a critical perspective on such conceptual frameworks, research must begin from the 'outside'. (Of course we cannot entirely escape the dominant frameworks, but just a little 'outside' will help.) Standpoint projects do this by starting research from the daily lives of social groups that are not well served by dominant institutions. Cheryl Doss, for instance, looks at the problems for women caused by the introduction of 'improved' agricultural technologies in Africa. Stephanie Seguino analyses the problems with the way the World Bank conceptualizes the bargaining power of women in labour disputes (both in Kuiper and Barker, 2006). The very concept of 'Third World' development and how women were being harmed by it has been increasingly challenged by feminist critics over the past two decades (see Tinker, Young, Braidotti et al., all in Visvanathan et al., 1997). It is important to note that the aim of such studies is not to undertake an ethnography of women's lives but rather to examine critically the dominant institutions and their policies, cultures and practices that affect women's lives (for more examples of such work, see Kuiper and Barker, 2006; Visvanathan et al., 1997).

A standpoint is not an easily accessible 'perspective'. It is rather, as Nancy Hartsock has pointed out, an achievement that requires both science and politics (in Harding, 2004): science in order to see beneath the hegemonic ideologies within which everyone must live; and politics because to engage in such science requires material resources and access to dominant institutions to observe how they function. Moreover, a standpoint is a collective achievement, not an individual attribute. It requires critical discussion among the people whose positions it represents. Thus standpoints are politically engaged epistemic and methodological research strategies. They intend to produce the kinds of knowledge that oppressed people need and want in order to flourish, or even just to live another day. After all, our dominant knowledge systems are now solidly positioned within the perceived needs of nationalists and state administrators, military leaders and corporate profiteers. Politics is already present in the research agendas induced by such a configuration. Feminists or other social justice researchers try to create intellectual and political spaces where knowledge can be produced for their constituents.

A good example of the transformation of a regulative ideal for research is the notion of 'strong objectivity'. Some social interests or values are shared by an entire research community. Both male and white supremacy and heteronormativity have been accepted for much of the history of Western social science. Traditional ways of 'operationalizing' the value-neutral objectivity of research have lacked the resources to detect how such commitments were implicitly embedded in disciplinary theories, methodologies and institutional cultures. It was with the emergence of social movements representing those who were disadvantaged by such disciplinary features that everyone else (not just the disadvantaged) became able to see the ways in which discriminatory social values had profoundly fashioned social research. The work of feminist, labour and postcolonial movements informs Lourdes Benaria's criticisms of how international agencies fail to perceive women's work accurately (Visvanathan et al., 1997). Feminist and other global activist groups' activities on reproductive issues contribute to shaping Betsy Hartmann's criticisms of the US Agency for International Development (USAID)'s sexist and racist assumptions, and their effects on the agency's population control policies (Visvanathan et al., 1997).

In addition to the misunderstandings and criticisms addressed above, feminist standpoint theory has been accused of essentializing the concept of 'women'. To be sure, some feminist writers have inappropriately generalized from their own situation. Yet the logic of standpoint theory should work against such tendencies, directing every inquiry to start off in the actual lives of a particular group of women or other people as they understand their lives (see examples cited above). Standpoint theory has been charged with Eurocentrism, in that it focuses on problems such as ositivism that are not of major importance to women in other cultural settings. Moreover, the re-evaluation of women's experiences does not have the political edge in societies such as India that supposedly already value women's traditional experience, yet in practice still discriminate deeply against women (see Narayan, in Harding, 2004). Such criticisms draw attention to the constant need to articulate research projects on the basis of concrete local experience. The standpoint logics of research should be controversial. They produce and attempt to rectify some of the most troubling challenges to today's widely noted 'epistemological crisis of the West', which also appears to be a global epistemological crisis of masculinity.

Sandra Harding

Is the author or editor of fifteen books and special issues of journals, most recently *Sciences From Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities* (Duke University Press, 2008). She co-edited *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*

(2000–2005), and has acted as consultant to the Pan American Health Organization, UNESCO, and the United Nations Development Fund for Women.