Contestation about Standpoints

Standpoint theory may rank as one of the most controversial theories to have been proposed and debated in the twenty-five-to-thirty-year history of second-wave feminist thinking about knowledge and science. Its advocates as much as its critics disagree vehemently about its precepts, its status as a theory and, crucially, its relevance to current feminist thinking about knowledge. In a special feature on standpoint theory published by Signs, Helman describes standpoint theory as having enjoyed a brief period of influence in the mid-1980s but as having fallen so decisively from favor that, a decade later, it was largely dismissed as a "quaint relic of feminism's less sophisticated past." On her account, standpoint theory was ripe for resurrection by the late 1990s; it is now being reconstituted by new advocates, revisited by its original proponents, and in Helman's case (one of the former), heralded as a harbinger of a new feminist paradigm.

Helman's telling has been sharply contested by those aligned with new canonical examples of standpoint theorizing—Harristock, Harding, Smith, and Collins, most immediately—but on some dimensions the differences among her critics are as great as between any of them and Helman. Some ask whether there is any such thing as "standpoint theory"; perhaps it is a reification of Harding's field-defining epistemic categories, an unstable (hypothetical) position that mediates between feminist empiricism and oppositional postmodernism. When specific positions and practices are identified as instances of standpoint theory, the question arises of whether it is really an epistemic theory rather than a close-to-the-ground feminist methodology; to do social science as a standpoint feminist is to approach inquiry from the perspective of insiders rather than impose on them the external categories of professional social science, a managing bureaucracy, rule elites. Among those who understand standpoint theory to be the theory of knowledge, there is further disagreement about whether it is chiefly descriptive or normative, aimed at the justification of knowledge claims rather than an account of their production. And there is wide recognition that feminist standpoint theory of all these various kinds has undergone substantial change in the fifteen years it has been actively debated. As Hart-
sock observes, "standpoint theories must be recognized as essentially con-
ceptual."

As fractions this recent debate has been, however, there are some things
on which everyone agrees whatever form standpoint theory takes, if
it is to be viable it must not imply or assume two distinctive theses with
which it is often associated:

First, standpoint theory must not presuppose an essentialist definition
of the social categories or collectives in terms of which epistemi-

First, standpoint theory must not presuppose an essentialist definition
of the social categories or collectives in terms of which epistemically
relevant standpoints are characterized.

Social, it must not be aligned with a thesis of automatic epistemic privi-
lege, standpoint theorists cannot claim that those who occupy partic-
ular standpoints (usually subordinate, oppressed, marginal stand-
points) automatically know more, or know better, by virtue of their
social, political location.

Feminist standpoint theory of the 1970s and 1980s is often assumed to be a
theory about the epistemic properties of a distinctively gendered stand-
point: that of women in general, or that defined by feminists who theorize
the standpoint of women, where this gendered social location is a biologi-
cal or psychoanalytical given, as close to an "indifferent" natural kind as
a putatively social, "interactive" kind can be (as we use Hacking's terminology).7
The claim attributed to this "women's way of knowing" genre of feminist
standpoint theory is that, by virtue of their gender identity, women (or
those who critically interrogate this identity) have distinctive forms of
knowledge that should be valorized.

It is not clear that anyone who has advocated standpoint theory as a
theory of knowledge or research practice has endorsed either the essen-
tialist or the automatic privilege thesis. Hartsock and Smith, for example,
were appalled to find their explicitly Marxist arguments construed as en-
seralist terms (Hartsock, "Truth or Justice," Standpoint Revised, 232;
Smith [1997]); the point of insisting that what we know is structured by the
social and material conditions of our lives was to throw into relief the con-
tingent, historical nature of what we count as knowledge and focus atten-
tion on the processes by which knowledge is produced. Hartsock is
no doubt right that early arguments for standpoint theory have been consis-
tently misread because many of the commentators lack grounding in
Marxist theory.4 I would extend this analysis. The systematic and, in-
this sense, the perverse nature of the misreadings to which Hartsock
responds reflect exactly the thesis her critics deny: their social location (if not con-
sciously articulated standpoint—a distinction to which I will return)
seems to impose the limitations of categories derived from a dominant in-
dividualist ideology. Hartsock, Collins, Harding, and Smith all object to a
recurring tendency to reduce the notion of standpoint to the social loca-
tion of individuals, a move that is inevitable, I suggest, if it is incompre-
prehensible (to critics) that social structures, institutions, or systematically
structured roles and relations could be robust enough to shape what epistemic
agents can know.5 On such assumptions, unless the standpoint-
specific capacities of knowers are fixed by natural or quasi-naturalized
(e.g., biogenetic or psychoanalytic processes), standpoints fragment into
myriad individual perspectives, and standpoint theory reduces to the rela-
tion of identity politics.

It has to be said that, in her rebuttals to Hekman and various other crit-
ics, Hartsock makes little mention of her early use of psychoanalytic theory
(object relations theory) to account for how individuals internalize the
power relations constitutive of a sexual division of labor (specifically, re-
productive labor) and the associated gender roles.6 If essentialism lurks
anywhere, it is in this component of her original argument, and it is this
that has drawn the sharpest criticism.7 It was the use of object relations
theory to develop feminist theories of science and knowledge that Hartsock
challenged in 1986 when she argued that the epistemic orientation attrib-
uted to women could not be a stable or universal effect of psychoanalytic
processes set in motion by interactions with female caregivers; the charac-
teristics distinctive of women closely parallel those claimed by the adva-
çees of a pan-African world view as typical for men as well as women (The
Science Question, 167 - 179, 185). But her critique left standing the central
and defining (Marxist) insights of standpoint theory as articulated by
Hartsock.8 Indeed, Harding drew attention to structural characteristics of
the power relations that constitute marked categories in opposition to (as
exclusions from) whatever is normative in a given context—the opposi-
tions between colonial elites and those subject to colonial domination be-
tween men and women/not-men—and she argued that these have power-
ful, if contingent, material consequences for the lives of those designated
"other" in relation to dominant social groups. It is an empirical question
exactly what historical processes created these hierarchically structured rela-
tions of inequality, and what material conditions, what sociopolitical
structures and symbolic or psychological mechanisms, maintain them in
the present. But these are precisely the kinds of robust forces of social dif-
ferentiation that may well make a difference to what epistemic agents en-
bedded in systemic relations of power are likely to experience and under-
stand. The processes of infantile socialization described by object relations
theory may play an important role but so too, do the ongoing relations of production and reproduction—the different kinds of wage and sex-affective labor people do throughout their lives—that are at the center of Hartsock’s epistemic theory and Smith’s sociological practice.

By the early 1990s a number of standpoint theorists and practitioners had explicitly argued that it is this historical and structural reading of standpoint theory that bears further examination; essentialist commitments, if they were ever embedded or immanent, were routinely repudiated. In this case, the variants of standpoint theory that have been five options in the last decade need not be saddled with a commitment to claims of automatic privilege. Like essentialist readings of standpoint theory, I suspect that attributions of automatic privilege persist not because anyone advocates them, but because they are necessary to counter deeply seated anxieties about what follows if strong normative claims of epistemic authority cannot be sustained. Debates about the viability of standpoint theory often seem to be driven by the assumption that, unless standpoint theorists can provide grounds for a new foundationalism, now rendered in social terms, they risk losing any basis for assessing and justifying knowledge claims unless standpoints provide specific warrant for the knowledge produced by those who occupy them, standpoint theory devolves into a corrosive (now solipsistic) relativism. Hekman protests that, although standpoint theorists routinely claim that “starting research from the reality of women’s lives, preferably those who are also oppressed by race and class, will lead to a more objective account of social reality,” in the end, these theorists “offer no argument as to why this is the case” (“Truth and Method,” 355). Hekman is satisfied with Harding’s appeal to the epistemic advantage of standpoints that produce less partial, less distorted, “less false” knowledge (“Truth and Method,” 353–355; Harding 1991, 185–187), and she rejects out of hand Hartsock’s references to standpoints that put us in a position to grasp underlying realities obscured by ideological distortion (“Truth and Method,” 340; Hartsock “Historical Materialism,” 299). Her objection seems to be that talk of better and worse knowledge can make no sense unless we have a firm grip on truths and objectivity that are robust enough to anchor epistemic justifications; standpoint theorists have invoked, but failed to deliver, epistemic foundations.

I believe there is another way of reading the claims central to standpoint theory. Nonfoundationalist, nonessentialist arguments can be given (and have been given) for attributing epistemic advantage to some social location and standpoints, although they are not likely to be satisfying for those who hunger for the security of aontical, transcendational founda-

**Situated Knowledge vs. Standpoint Theory**

First, the distinction. An ever more frequent response to Hekman, among others, is an insistence that standpoint theory is concerned, not just with the epistemic effects of social location, but with both the effects and the emancipatory potential of standpoints that are struggled for, achieved, by epistemic agents who are critically aware of the conditions under which knowledge is produced and authorized. Although the importance of standpoints in this second sense is emphasized in these exchanges, I believe that standpoint theorists should concern themselves with the epistemic effects of (systematically defined) social location as well as with fully formed standpoints.

On the first more minimal sense, the point of departure for standpoint analysis is commitment to some form of a situated knowledge thesis: social location systematically shapes and limits what we know, including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit understanding, what we take knowledge to be as well as specific epistemic content. What counts as a “social location” is structurally defined. What individuals experience and understand is shaped by their location in a hierarchically structured system of power relations by the material conditions of their lives, by the relations of production and reproduction that structure their social interactions, and by the conceptual resources they have to represent and interpret these relations.

Standpoint in the sense that particularly interests standpoint theorists is our differential capacity to develop the kind of a standpoint on knowledge production that is a “project” (Weeks, 181), a critical consciousness about the nature of our social location and the difference it makes epistemically. Standpoint theory is itself such a project, carried out both through the kinds of social research that take seriously the understanding of standpoints—e.g., feminist research that starts from women’s experience and women’s lives (Smith 1980; Harding 1991)—and by feminist philosophers who are intent on creating a politically sophisticated, robustly social form of naturalized epistemology and philosophy of science. In either case, what is at stake is the jointly empirical and conceptual question of how power relations inflect knowledge: what systematic limitations are imposed by the social location of different classes or collectivities of knowers, and what po-
tential they have for developing an understanding of this structured epis-
temic partiality.

On standpoint theory so conceived, it is necessarily an open question what features of location and/or standpoint are relevant to specific epis-
temic projects. For example, although any location or standpoint that "da-
appears gender" should be suspect, 33 we cannot assume that gender is
uniquely or fundamentally important in structuring our understanding, or
that a feminist standpoint will be the key to understanding the power dy-
namics that shape what we know. The project of developing critical con-
sciousness—a jointly empirical, conceptual, and social-political enter-
prise—is the only way to answer questions about the epistemic relevance of a standpoint (in either sense) to specific epistemic projects.

But then the normative question natters itself is there any basis for
claiming that we should privilege the knowledge produced by those who
occupy a particular location or standpoint? Does an analysis of the epis-
temic effects of social location or achieved standpoint provide a basis for
justification or does it reinforce a social constructivism that ultimately
gives rise to corrosive relativism? The inversion thesis that underpins most
forms of feminist standpoint theory suggests that, when standpoint is
taken into account, often the epistemic tables are turned. Those who are
economically dispossessed, politically oppressed, socially marginalized and
are therefore likely to be considered as epistemic agents—e.g., as edu-
cated, uneducated, unreliable—may actually have a capacity, by virtue of
their standpoint, to know things that those occupying privileged positions
typically do not know, or are invested in not knowing (or, indeed, are in-
vested in systematically ignoring and denying). It is this thesis that
Hekman contests when he objects that no argument has been given for at-
tributing greater objectivity to such standpoints.

Epistemic Advantage

The term "objectivity" (like truth) is so freighted it might be the better part
of wisdom to abandon it. But for present purposes, I propose a reconstruc-
tion that may be useful in showing what a standpoint theorist can claim about
epistemic privilege without embracing essentialism or an automatic privil-
edge thesis.

As Hekman uses the term, objectivity is a property of knowledge claims. Objectivity is also standardly used to refer to conventionally desirable proper-
ties of epistemic agents: that they are neutral and dispassionate with re-
gard to a particular subject of inquiry or research project. And sometimes it is
used to refer to properties of the objects of knowledge. 30 Objective fac-

and objective reality are contrasted with ephemeral, subjective constructs:
they constitute the "really real." Lloyd puts it (1976), a broad category of
things that exist and that have the properties they have independent of us:
prosaically, Hackling's "indefinite" kinds are at the core of this category of
objects of knowledge (1999, 104–106). As a property of knowledge claims,
objectivity seems to designate a wholly defined family of epistemic virtues
that we expect will be maximized, in some constellation, by the claims we
authorize as knowledge. Standard lists, from authors as diverse as Kuhn,
Longino (1990), Dupre, and Ereshefsky, include, most prominently, a re-
quirement of empirical adequacy that can be construed in at least two ways:
as fidelity to a rich body of localized evidence ("empirical depth"); or, as a capacity to "travel" (Harré-ways) such that the claims in question can be
extended to a range of domains or applications ("empirical breadth"). 31 In
addition, requirements of internal coherence, inferential robustness, and
consistency with well-established collateral bodies of knowledge, as well as
explanatory power and a number of other pragmatic and aesthetic virtues,
may be taken as marks of objectivity collectively or individually.

Standpoint theory poses a challenge to any assumption that the neu-
trality of epistemic agents/objectivity in the second sense, is either a neces-
sary or a sufficient condition for realizing objectivity in the first sense, in
the knowledge claims they produce. Under some conditions, for some pur-
poses, observe neutrality—disengagement, strategic affective distance from
a subject—may be an advantage in learning crucial facts or grasping the
causal dynamics necessary for understanding a subject. But at the same
time, considerable epistemic advantage may accrue to those who approach
inquiry from an interested standpoint, even a standpoint of overtly politi-
cal engagement. The recent history of feminist contributions to the social
and life sciences illustrates that such a stand-point may fruitfully raise stan-
dards of empirical adequacy for otherwise unexamined presuppositions. ex-
pand the range of hypotheses under consideration in ways that ultimately
improve explanatory power, and open up new lines of inquiry. 32

Likewise, there is no reason to assume that the qualities of empirical ade-
quacy, consistence, explanatory power, and the rest cannot be realized, in
some combination, in the investigation of objects of knowledge that are not
"really real," for example, in the study of social phenomena that are inter-
active. Certainty, objectivity in these cases may be sharply domain-limited;
empirically adequate knowledge about an interactive social kind that
transforms itself in the course of investigation will not travel very far, but it
is no less objective for that.

This last points to a key feature of the epistemic virtues that figure in
any list of objectivity-making properties: they cannot be simultaneously

maximized. For example, the commitment to maximize empirical adequacy in understanding a rapidly transmuting interactive kind requires a trade-off of empirical depth against empirical breadth. Similarly, explanatory power often requires a compromise of localized empirical adequacy as does any form of idealization. The interpretation of these requirements is open-ended; they are evolving standards of practice. The determination of how one virtue should be weighed against others is, likewise, a matter of ongoing negotiation, which can only be settled by reference to the requirements of a specific epistemic project or problem. None of the virtues I have identified as constitutive of objectivity in the first sense are context- or practice-independent; they are all virtues we maximize for specific purposes. That said, the list I cite consists of epistemic virtues that have proven useful in a very wide range of enterprises—virtually any in which success turns on understanding accurately and in detail what is actually the case in the world in which we act and interact.

If the objectivity Heidegger in mind were understood in this sense—as designating a family of epistemic virtues that should be maximized (in some combination) in the claims we authorize as knowledge—there would be no incoherence in claiming that contingently, with respect to particular epistemic projects, some social locations and standpoints confer epistemic advantage. In particular, some standpoints (as opposed to locations) have the especially salient advantage that they put the critically conscious knower in a position to grasp the effects of power relations on their own understanding and that of others. The justification that an appeal to standpoint (or location) centers is, then, just that of a nuanced, well-grounded (naturalized) account of how reliable particular kinds of knowledge are likely to be, given the social conditions of their production: it consists of an empirically grounded assessment of the limitations of particular kinds of knowers, of how likely they are to be partial, and how likely it is that the knowledge they produce will fail to maximize salient epistemic virtues.

The Advantages of an Insider-Outsider Standpoint: A Framework for Analysis

Consider the kinds of epistemic advantage that may accrue to a particular type of standpoint invoked by quite diverse advocates of standpoint theory: that of a race, class, and gender disadvantaged “insider-outsider” who has no choice, given her social location, but to negotiate the world of the privileged, a knower who must understand accurately and in detail the tacit knowledge that constitutes a dominant, perspective world view at the same time as she is grounded in a community whose marginal status generates a fundamentally different understanding of how the world works. Collins draws on the wisdom of black women domestics to illustrate what such an insider-outsider knows, and there are antecedents in the sociological literature as well as a number of parallel discussions in feminist contexts. But one of the most compelling accounts of “what homoeunaines know,” one that affirms and extends Collins’s central points, is a fictional account: Barbara Neely’s murder mystery, Blanche on the Lam. Blanche, on Neely’s telling, clearly occupies a standpoint, not just a social location: she is sharply-tongued and incise in her analysis of the conditions for survival that require her to know more, to know better, and to know more quickly, than those she works for. Consider the epistemic advantages of Blanche’s standpoint that emerge with particular clarity in Neely’s novel. Blanche is a black woman for a rich white family in North Carolina whose help is on the level while they sojourn in their summer house. A murderer has been committed, but you do not learn exactly who has died until late in the plot. So the story unfolds as Blanche learns the peculiarities and history and finally the murderous secrets of the family that temporarily employs her. At one point, she reflects on the “ass-kissing” behavior of a long-time family retainer: “If it’s for real, it’s pitiful” (On the Lam, 52), she says, but then observes that “a black man in America couldn’t live to get that old by being a fool” (On the Lam, 60). Performing epistemic incompetence goes with the territory: “This is how we’ve survived in this country all this time by knowing when to act like we believe what we’ve been told and when to act like we know what we know” (On the Lam, 73). In particular, conforming to expectations of epistemic inauthenticity serves a purpose. As Collins observes, Afro-American women have long been prey to some of the most intimate secrets of white society” (1991, 35). At least in part because they are treated as epistemic incompetents, Neely, through Blanche, describes in detail how this works. Because Blanche is presumed stupid, and anyway of no account, she is largely invisible to the family she works for. Time and again she glean information that is critically important to her survival (literally and figuratively) from conversations conducted in her presence as if she were a piece of furniture, from messes she cleans up, garbage she disposes of, errands she is sent on: “As far as the Graces of the world were concerned, hired hands didn’t think, weren’t curious, or observant, or capable of drawing even the most obvious conclusions” (On the Lam, 185).

This asymmetry of recognition puts Blanche in the way of empirical evidence to which few members of the white community, not even the immediate family, would have access. But when puzzles arise that Blanche cannot resolve in terms of what she learns by observing the family directly,
she mobilizes an extended network of other insider-outsiders whose experience has much in common with her. She contacts Blanche: "Because she knew the black community, Miss Mabin had plenty of information about the white one. Blanche wondered if people who hired domestic help had any idea how much their employees learned about them while fixing their meals, mending their beds, and emptying their trash. (On the Lawn, 115)"

She learns a wealth of detail about the history of the family she's working for. She learns about its money problems and domestic disputes, its eccentricities, crookedness, legal tangles, and, most important, its position in the white elite, who its members can count on as allies and where the "lines of long-standing feuds have been drawn. This collateral knowledge is critical to Blanche's understanding of the situation in which she finds herself; it provides key resources for interpreting fragments of observed behavior as evidence of underlying motivation and encompassing social relations, for checking the robustness of local patterns she has already discerned, and testing the hypotheses she is formulating to explain them. But beyond gathering and cross-checking a wide range of empirical evidence, Blanche has much to say about the uses of evidence made possible (and necessary) by her standpoint that illustrates another dimension of the epistemic advantage that may accrue to insider-outsiders. At a moment such as this, Blanche comments on the necessity for a woman in her position to develop a subtle and sophisticated set of inferential heuristics to do with the kinds of motivations that might inform the actions of her white employer. She details psychological profiles that characterize those who occupy positions of power and privilege, sometimes making clear how sharply they contrast with those that are typical for members of her own community. "As a person whose living depended on her ability to read character" (On the Lawn, 184), she clearly recognizes that this critical understanding is essential; she must be able to discern patterns in the behavior she observes, and to construct and assess explanatory hypotheses about the underlying causes of this behavior, at lightning speed and with unerring accuracy."

"As Narayan develops this point, not only do the oppressed "have epistemic privilege when it comes to immediate knowledge of everyday life under oppression" (36), their experience fosters an inferential acuity with respect to the dynamics of oppression that those living lives of relative privilege do not have to develop. Insider-outsiders are alert to "all the details of the ways in which their oppression... affects the major and minor details of their social and psychic lives" (36); they grasp subtle manifestations of power dynamics and they make connections between the contexts in which these operate that the privileged have no reason to notice or, indeed, have good reason not to notice. In short, it is an advantage and a liability of subdominance that you may have to develop sharply honed skills of pattern detection and an expansive repertoire of robust explanatory models to survive as an insider-outsider."

It is important to recognize, however, that this epistemic advantage is neither automatic nor all encompassing. While an insider-outsider like Blanche may have particular advantage in understanding the dynamics of oppression close up, and may be especially likely to recognize the simultaneity of oppressions operating along multiple lines of difference, a condition of oppression is very often unequal access to key epistemic resources: certain kinds of information; the analytic skills acquired through formal education; a range of theoretical and explanatory tools. Narayan observes that, because oppression is "partly constituted by the oppressed being denied access to education and hence to the means of theory production (which would include detailed knowledge of the history of their oppression, conceptual tools with which to analyse its mechanisms etc.), it is to be expected that ""the oppressed may not have a detailed causal-structural analysis of how their specific form of oppression originated, how it has been maintained and of all the systemic purposes it serves"" (36). In short, recognizing that the oppressed have epistemic privilege in some areas "need not imply that [they] have a clearer or better knowledge of the causes of their oppression" (35-36). Factory workers in the Maquiladora District will have intimate knowledge of how work disciplines are manipulated to extract maximum profit, but they may not have access to the background knowledge and information necessary to understand the international movement of capital responsible for bringing a factory to their district from West Virginia, or for moving it to a tariff-free zone in Indonesia or Thailand."

A final dimension of the epistemic advantage that accrues to Blanche, and any who use the resources of a location like hers to develop the political-epistemic standpoint of an insider-outsider, is the critical dissociation she has from the authoritative forms of knowledge that are born of and that serve (that legitimate, rationalize) positions of privilege. Blanche has no investment in maintaining the world view that her employees take for granted; she is suspicious of the presumptions of epistemic authority that underpin their confidence in what they think they know, and it is this that puts her in a position to outmaneuver them as they attempt to cover up the
murder they have committed. By virtue of having to know how the world looks from more than one point of view, an insider-outsider like Blanche has at hand a set of comparisons that throws into relief the assumptions that underpin, and confound, a dominant world view. As Collins describes the standpoint of an academic insider-outsider, the dissonance between what she knows *as* a woman and what she has learned as a sociologist—the assumptions that "traditional sociologists see as normal"—throws into relief the situated nature and the partiality of what has typically been privileged as authoritative knowledge (1991, 49, 51).

What Collins draws attention to here is the capacity of standpoint theory to account for the contributions that insider-outsiders have made to various forms of systematic empirical research. Standpoint theory has the resources to explain how it is that, far from automatically compromising the knowledge produced by a research enterprise, objectivity may be substantially improved by certain kinds of anamnetrality on the part of practitioners. To extend the example cited earlier, it is the political commitment that feminists bring to diverse fields that motivates them to focus attention on lines of evidence others have not sought out or thought important; to discern patterns others have ignored; to question androcentric or sexist framework assumptions that have gone unnoticed and unchallenged; and, sometimes, to significantly refine the research agenda of their discipline in light of different questions, or an expanded repertoire of explanatory hypotheses.

Some of these epistemic advantages may accrue to those who occupy the social location of insider-outsiders even if this does not incline them to develop critical self-consciousness about the epistemic implications of their social location. Consider the rapidly expanding body of research on the "archaeology of gender" that has taken shape in the last decade. It is largely due to women who have focused attention on a range of neglected questions about women and gender, but nearly half of those who attended the first "Archaeology of Gender" conference in 1989 disown any affiliation with feminism. While the dearth of contact with feminist literature in other fields has certainly limited the scope of their work, those working in the "gender genre" have challenged androcentric and sexist assumptions in virtually all active fields of archaeological research, and they have successfully introduced questions about women and gender to the research agenda of the field as a whole. My thesis is that the location of these practitioners as women in a strongly masculinist discipline has mitigated against their development of a feminist standpoint at the same time as it has created for them a decisive rupture, in the sociological sense. Their very presence in the field—specifically, their collective presence, as members of the first cohorts of archaeologists in which the representation of women exceeded 20 percent (Wylie 1997, 95–96)—derails the conventional assumptions about gender roles that underpin not only the institutionalized practice of archaeology but also its conceptual framework. This dissonance has sensitized some practitioners (mainly, but not only, women) to questions about gender inequality and gender ideology that were never considered so long as gender schemas remained unchallenged. And in some cases, it has induced those working on questions about women and gender to develop a feminist standpoint.

In short, contrary to Hekman, arguments have been given for ascribing contingent epistemic advantage to (some) subordinate standpoints. These are arguments that demonstrate that objectivity can sometimes be improved, and partiality reduced, when inquiry is approached from these standpoints, not in an abstract sense measured against an absolute, abstrical, transcendent standard, but with reference to one or another subset of the more homely virtues I have identified as constitutive of objectivity. When it comes to solving the complex puzzle posed in Blanche on the Lam, Blanche is a better bet than (most) members of the family she serves, the elite while community of which they are a part, and the authorities who investigate the murder, because she is in a position, by virtue of her social location and her insider-outsider standpoint, to get more and better evidence, to discern motivations more accurately, to make connections between causal factors more quickly, and to test and cross-test a wider range of explanatory hypotheses than virtually anyone else in Neddy’s story. Blanche’s knowledge deserves to be treated as authoritative, with respect to the epistemic project she engages, because she maximizes empirical adequacy (of the localized-depth variety): establishes consistency with a wide range of collateral knowledge, and develops an explanatory account of particular critical probity.

Conclusion

Although Blanche’s investigations are fictitious and her epistemic project is local and pragmatic, the central points I have made about the salience of standpoints can be readily extended to research in the social sciences and well beyond. Whencever structures of social differentiation make a systematic difference to the kinds of work people do, the social relations they enter, their relative power in those relations, and their self-understanding, it may be relevant to ask what epistemic effects a (collectively defined) social loca-
tion may have. And whenever communalities of location and experience give rise to critical (oppositional) consciousness about the effects of social location, it may be possible to identify a distinctive standpoint to which strategic epistemic, advantage accrues, particularly in grasping the partiality of a dominant way of thinking, bringing a new angle of vision to bear on old questions and raising new questions for empirical investigation.

Extended to philosophical science studies, standpoint theory complements the social naturalism and pragmatism evident in the proposals for refraining post-positivist philosophy of science suggested by an increasingly broad spectrum of philosophers of science. Advocates of standpoint theory in the sense outlined here are centrally concerned to understand science as a collective enterprise shaped by the kinds of factors identified by Sorenson (2001). They share Longino's commitment to move beyond the rational-social dichotomy that has so deeply structured divergent traditions of science studies (2002), a commitment that, as Rose and Hacking have argued, directs attention to the practice (rather than the products) of science as it unfolds in socially and politically structured fields of engagement.4 And they share Kitcher's appreciation of both the need and the potential for reframing ideal of objectivity so that scientific success can be understood in explicitly normative, pragmatic terms (2001). Most important, standpoint theorists recognize that questions about what standpoints make an epistemic difference and what difference they make cannot be settled in the abstract, in advance; they require the second-order application of our best research tools to the business of knowledge production itself. And this is necessarily a problem-specific and open-ended process.

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Notes

1. Here in mind four recent monographs that, in quite different ways, make this mediation their central objective: Joseph Bruno, Engaging Science: How to Under


6. Wetherby notes an important shift in emphasis in Hartsock’s own characterization of standpoint theory that involves a move “from outlining the substantive
context and difference of the feminist perspective, based upon the shared char-
acter of women’s experience; to a more formal understanding of the function-
ing of a standpoint, without emphasis on the actual content of this perspec-
tive (1992, 75). This point is also made by Hirschmann although she notes a
persistent emphasis in Hartslock’s writing on the “motion of standpoint as a
methodology” (1992, 76) and on communalities in “the process of developing a
standpoint,” rather than in the content of the standpoints that emerge from
this process, that predates “Historical Materialism.” Hartslock herself enumer-
ates a number of issues that have drawn critical attention and require further
analysis by standpoint theorists of the “next century”: analysis of the status of
cognition, especially the notion of collective epistemic ownership of the
factors (in addition to labor) that are constitutive of the experience distinctive
deforam group of people; development of a more detailed account of “how experience becomes mediated and transformed into a standpoint” (“Next Century,” 94).

University Press, 1999), 100-124.

8. Hartslock makes this point in Standpoint Revisited (229, 233) with reference to
the Marxist-derived account of standpoint theory that she presented in “His-
 torical Materialism.” See also Hirschman’s assessment of various ways in
which critics of essentialism and universalizing tendencies are initial to Hart-
slock’s early formulation of standpoint theory (1992, 74-5).

9. See, in particular, Hartslock’s discussion of this point. She objects that even
symptomatic commentators continue to give the individual (individual per-
spectives, subjectivity) too much prominence in their formulations of stand-
point theory and calls for a clearer recognition of “the importance of epistemo-
logical collective in the production of standpoint analysis” (“Next Century,” 94).

10. In the Marxist-feminist analysis that Hartslock developed in “Historical Mat-
erialism,” the role of psychoanalytic theory was to supply an account of the
dissociative content of a feminine standpoint that might be derived from the shared
(gender-specific) experience of women. Object relations theory loses its cen-
trality as Hartslock responds to critiques of these universalizing claims and
moves away from a concern with content to the emphasis on similarities in the
processes by which feminist standpoints take shape—the shift outlined by Wel-
ton (1979). Welton, Hirschmann, and other contributors to Kenney and Kin-
sella (1997) describe these processes as essentially social and political com-
munalities in experience become the basis for forming a collective identity and
associated standpoint which, in turn, allows for the discursive constitution of experience as relevant for understanding the world in standpoint distinctive
ways. Experience does not figure in this account as the autonomous foundation
for a distinctive standpoint, but neither is it entirely a discursive construct as
such postmodern critics have argued. Hirschmann argues, in this connec-
tion, that “while experience exists in discourse, discourse is not the totality of
experience”; the possibility of reinterpreting experience, in the process of form-
ulating a standpoint, suggests that “there must be something in experience
that escapes or is even prior to language” (1997, 84). By extension, O’Leary ar-
Rues that experience rather than ideality should be treated as primary in the
formation of a standpoint; it is the essentially interpretive process of articulat-
ing communalities in experience that underpins the feminist of collective
identity: Catherine M. O’Leary, “Counteridentification or Counterhegemony:
Transforming Feminist Standpoint Theory,” in Fleets and Feminist Standpoint
Theories, ed. Sally J. Kenney and Helen Kinsella (New York: Haworth Press,
1997, 65).

11. There are intriguing parallels here with the use Kellner made of object relations
theory in her early discussions of the gendered character of scientific practice;
see his “Psychoanalytic and Contemporary Dilemma,” 1.1 (1978), 409-35; “A World
of Difference,” in Reflections on Gender and Science (New Haven: Yale Univer-
sity Press, 1983), 158-79. For an excellent sympathetic to Kellner’s project see
Jane Roland Martin, “Science in a Different Style,” American Philosophical

12. This is an argument I have made in more detail in a review essay, “The Philoso-
phy of Ambivalence: Sandra Harding on The Science Question in Feminism,”

13. See, for example, Smith (1990); Hartslock’s discussion in “Historical Materialism”
(286-90), and in “Next Century” (95).

14. For a review of these developments, see Helen E. Longino, “Feminist Stand-

15. See, for example, O’Leary’s discussion of the threat of relativism that arises
from a “logic of fragmentation” that many have assumed to be inherent in
critiques of standpoint theory (1997, 77).

This is a point Hartslock emphasizes in her earlier discussions of standpoint
theory: “a standpoint is not simply an interested position interpreted as bias but
is interested in the sense of being engaged” (“Historical Materialism,” 285).
She reaffirms this point in “Next Century,” where she emphasizes that the for-
mation of a standpoint is a matter of developing “an innermost conscious-
ness . . . which takes nothing of the dominant culture as self-evidently true”
(96-97) and in “Truth or Justice” where, quoting Weeks, she argues that “a
Kafka Weeks, “Subject for a Feminist Standpoint,” in some Malikus, Couri
Castricino, and Rebecca K. Kirk ed., Marxism Beyond Marxism (New York:
Routledge, 1996), 89-138. This view of standpoint as a collectively achieved
moment is also central to the sympathetic commentators assembled by Kenney
and Kinsella (Editors). See especially O’Leary, Hirschman, and Catherine
Theories, ed. Sally J. Kenney and Helen Kinsella (New York: Haworth Press,
1997, 4).

16. Miriam Solomon offers an especially useful account of various ways in which
such a thesis may be construed: “Statedness and Specficity” (unpublished
manuscript in possession of the author, 1997).

17. In discussions in which standpoint theory is treated as a resource for develop-
ing a response to normative issues (e.g., in feminist philosophy of law or ethics),
orating a "poststructural" research program (e.g., in communication or social work), standpoint in this first sense—as social location—is often emphasized. Any Blan, "The Difference of Difference and Feminist Standpoint Theory," Feminist Review (1982), 3-12; Mary C. A. Sosnick, "Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Questions of Social Work Search," Affilia 8:2 (1993): 171-85; Julia T. Wood, "Gender and Moral Voice: Moving from Woman's Nature to Standpoint Epistemology," Women's Studies in Communication 15:1 (1992): 1-24. Here standpoints are characterized as gendered subject positions (Wood, 12); a "social position" from which "certain feelings of reality come into prominence and other aspects of reality are obscured... one can see some things more clearly than others" (Sosnick, 172); or a recognition that "knowledge is perspectival... necessity shaped by... personal perspective which is in turn shaped by the particularities of individuals' life experiences, their relationships with others, and their historical situations" (Blan, 39-40). See also: Jenny B. Harer (Cher)'s characterization of standpoint theories, as, in the first instance, a form of social perspectivalism; "gender is a constitutive element of experience" and "some perspectives are more revealing than others." "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege," in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., Feminist Epistemologies (New York: Routledge, 1993), 83. And Simons's assessment that "feminist standpoint theory, and standpoint theory generally, makes the claim that there are social positions from which privileged perspectives on knowledge can be obtained." The Scientific Domains of Feminist Standpoints, Perspectives on Science 4:1 (1995): 49.

Respondents to Helnman observe that such formulations obscure the power dynamics that constitute standpoints as a collective achievement, reducing them to the idiosyncratic perspectives of individuals and abandoning the political dimension of standpoint analysis. While an analysis of the epistemic effects of social location by no means exhausts what standpoint theory has to offer, it does have valuable insight to offer, and it need not reduce to the apologetic approach that limits and capabilities of individual epistemic agents.


23. This is a point Longino makes with respect to a related but different list of epistemic virtues. (1994, 475). I have proposed a redefinition and extension of Longino's list in "Doing Philosophy as a Feminist: Longino on the Search for a Feminist Epistemology," Ethics 106 (2006). It remains a position that the world looks the way it does to a great extent because that is how it can come to be seen correct; or that we can engage in a full understanding of the world.

24. The tension between explanatory power and empirical adequacy is especially clear when explanation is conceived in unificationist terms. Although Kitcher has significantly modified his position (2001, 474), the position's commitment to the idea that the way the world is to a great extent because that is how it can come to be seen correct.


27. This is a point Hardt emphasizes in response to Helnman and other recent critics. She observes that one key element of epistemic advantage is the degree to which a particular standpoint lets one in a position to "grasp the interaction among the various determinants that constitute one's social location." (Standpoint Review, 272-8).


29. This proposed to treat claims to epistemological privilege as contingent and relative to independent epistemic virtues rather than a question that has been debated since Harding characterized standpoint theory as an unstable mediatrix between feminist empiricism and cartesian modernism: that of whether, on such a construal, standpoint theory does not collapse into a form of social empiricism (The Science Question, 3-42).

30. Hardly addresses this issue in response to reductive arguments presented by several prominent feminist empiricists; for her recommendation that standpoint theory should be seen as comple-
mistery to sepiaized feminist empiricism rather than as a sharp distinction, competing position (1972, 25, 35).


34. As Blanche puts it in this point: “a family couldn’t have domestic help and secrets,” (On the Lamp, 95).

35. In Blues Lamp, Neely draws a series of parallels between Blanche’s invisibility and that which characterizes the experience of Mumsie, a London syn drome adult who is a cousin of the main protagonist.

36. Wrenn on to rows of his fellow characters, including the least than least communicative male characters, showing that makes right it front of her, because his condition made him as invisible as her color and

37. Neely revisits this point in Blanche Posse, Go, underscoring the significance of these common features of experience in a way that rubs against the points made by O’Loury, Hurndlock, and Hartsock about the complexity of the relationship between communalities of experience and a commonly articulated, collective standpoint (1997).

38. Because of her more considerable, much of the world treated her the same way it treated her; in the world what she used to be called to be female was the dummy in the room, to be laughed at; because of parts of herself over which she had no control. This gave them some measure of immunity. But she didn’t think much about it and assumed that they were worth a little bit of kindness.

39. It is an important feature of Neely’s later novel, Blanche Posse, Go, that a number of those she turns to in the black community—neighbors and acquaintances, neighbors who work for the wealthy white families, Blanche investigates—make it clear that they do not share her critical standpoint (87, 152).

40. For example, “Blanche had seen it so many times before it no longer amazed her—people too rich to worry about being fired from their jobs or evicted from their homes who seemed to seek, the threat of local disaster that poor people sought to avoid” (On the Lamp, 117).

41. An outsider outsider like Blanche may be less likely than white- and class-privileged femininies, for example Coley, to understand that the sex dimension of difference is fundamental or essential. This point is discussed at some length by Collins (1991) and is aptly argued by the Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in Alison M. Jaggar and Paula S. Rothenberg, eds., Feminist Founders (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 202-9.

42. As Hartsock observes, this critical distance underlies a complex analysis: “It is worth remembering that the vision of the ruling groups structure the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate and, therefore, cannot be dismissed as simply false,” (“Next Century,” 96).


44. This is the term Comery and Goto use to refer to this growing tradition of non-feminist archaeological research on questions about women and gender (1997); Margaret W. Comery and Joan M. Grif, Gender and Feminism in Archaeology. Annual Review of Anthropology 26 (1997): 61-77.


47. This has had the effect not only of opening up a range of new lines of research but of mobilizing interest in a number of practical and political questions about how the gender structures evident in archaeology are created and main-
tained. A particular focus for these discussions has been the organisation of ar-
thological labor in various contexts, employment and reward structures, and
typical patterns of recruitment and training in archaeology. See, for example,
contributions to the section "Gender and Practice" in Gender and Archaeology,
ed. Rita P. Wright (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990),
199-280; and contributions to Margaret C. Nelson, Sarah M. Nelson, and Ali-
son Wylie (eds.), Equity Issues for Women in Archaeology: Archaeological Papers
of the American Anthropological Association, No. 5 (Washington, D.C.: Amer-
ican Anthropological Association, 1994).

For example, Ian Hacking, "The Self-Vindication of the Laboratory Sciences," in Science as Practice and Culture, ed. Andrew Pickering (Chicago University of

A World of Sciences
Sandra Harding

The Information Society and Indigenous Knowledge Movements

During the last four decades, expanded globalization has been accompa-
nied by increased interests in cultural identity. Indeed, social theorists see
the latter as an acceptable response to the increased homogenization and
universalization of cultural forms created by the globalization of econo-
 mies, politics, and of culture itself.

Both tendencies have generated distinctive interests in scientific and
technological knowledge and practices. On the one hand, the base of the
global economy has shifted from industrial manufacture to the production
and management of information. Witness the way money speeds around
the world with the tap of a computer key, leaving changed patterns of labor
and leisure in its wake, bringing down some governments and stabilizing
others, and making some groups immensely wealthy (for sometimes only a
very short time) and others yet further impoverished. It becomes more and
more difficult to see Western modern sciences as only Western, they do in-
deed seem to be truly international. Yet at the same time, paradoxically, it
has also become more difficult to see their direction as independent of
powerful social and political interests and desires.

On the other hand, a global movement has begun to establish intellec-
tual property rights for indigenous knowledge; indigenous knowledge
movements have been established in at least several countries; the United
Nations and other organizations have sponsored indigenous knowledge
conferences around the world; and the World Wide Web permits an ongo-
ing global networking and exchange of information about the past, pre-
sent, and possible futures of indigenous knowledge systems. (For example,