The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader

Intellectual and Political Controversies

Edited by **Sandra Harding**

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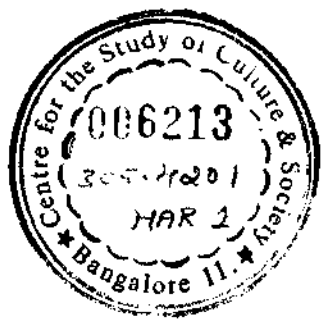

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Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate

SANDRA HARDING

A Controversial Theory

Standpoint theory has continued to attract both enthusiasts and critics during the three decades of its recent history. Moreover, tensions within and between its texts still generate lively debates in feminist circles, within which it first appeared a full generation ago. Some see this continuing controversiality as a problem to which they set out to provide a definitive solution. This theory can be saved from its controversiality, they hope. Others see such controversiality as a reason to avoid engaging with standpoint issues at all.[1]

Standpoint theory is valuable in many ways, as its defenders argue. I propose that this controversiality is another valuable resource that standpoint theory contributes to feminism as well as to contemporary scientific, philosophic, and political discussions more generally. Standpoint theory's innovations bring into focus fresh perspectives on some of the most difficult and anxiety-producing dilemmas of our era. Here I identify sources of these controversies. I do so through introducing some of standpoint theory's central themes, concepts, and projects as these have developed within feminist thinking.[2]

Standpoint Origins, Projects

Standpoint theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power. It was intended to explain the surprising successes of emerging feminist research in a wide range of projects—"surprising" because feminism is a political movement and, according to the conventional view (one that is currently under siege from various quarters, however), politics can only obstruct and damage the production of scientific knowledge. Standpoint theory challenged this assumption. Consequently, it was proposed not just as an explanatory theory, but also prescriptively, as a method or theory of method (a methodology) to guide future feminist research.

Moreover, it expanded conventional horizons of the fields or disciplines mentioned to include normative social theory. Distinctive conceptions of human nature and the ideal society lay behind feminist research. Thus, standpoint theory was both explanatory and normative. Also controversial was the further claim that in this respect standpoint theory was no different from the standard philosophies of science, epistemologies, and methodologies, which persistently obscured their normative features behind a veil of claimed neutrality. Last but not least, standpoint theory was presented as a way of empowering oppressed groups, of valuing their experiences, and of pointing toward a way to develop an "oppositional consciousness," as Patricia Hill Collins (1989) and Chela Sandoval (chapter 14, this volume) put the point. Thus, it was presented by different authors (and sometimes within a single essay) as a philosophy of both natural and social sciences, an epistemology, a methodology (a prescriptive "method of research," as several of its theorists phrased it), and a political strategy. Yet these are fields and projects that conventionally are supposed to be kept separate.

So here are already a number of sources of its controversiality. It set out to explain how certain kinds of politics do not block the growth of knowledge but, rather, can stimulate and guide it. It presented itself as a philosophy of science, an epistemology, and a methodology or method of research, appearing to conflate or even confuse fields standardly kept distinct. It framed these disciplinary projects within a feminist social theory and a political strategy, though standardly it is presumed that these fields can and should be kept immune from social and political elements. It claimed mainstream, purportedly only descriptive and explanatory, theories about science and even within science were also—perhaps always—normative, and that this was so even when they achieved maximally accurate description and explanation.

Additionally, implicitly it insisted that feminist concerns could not be restricted to what are usually regarded as only social and political issues, but instead must be focused on every aspect of natural and social orders, including the very standards for what counts as knowledge, objectivity, rationality, and good scientific method. Thus, feminist issues could not be pigeon-holed and ignored as only women's issues, but instead had to be seen as valuably informing theoretical, methodological, and political thought in general.[3]

Two further aspects of feminist standpoint theory's origins deserve mention here, for each has occasioned significant controversy. Standpoint theory had an earlier history in Marxian thought, upon which most of the early feminist theorists explicitly drew. For those disaffected by Marxian thought and practice, this legacy was bad enough. Some criticize standpoint theory for this legacy and even try to sanitize it by reframing it in empiricist or radical poststructuralist terms. Others, whether from ignorance of or hostility to Marxian insights, ignore this framework, often thereby attributing features to standpoint theory that its framers neither intended nor desired. Yet, as Fredric Jameson argues, it is only the feminist theorists who have succeeded in overcoming fatal flaws in the earlier

standpoint projects and thus have been able to give this important aspect of the Marxian legacy a viable future.[4] Moreover, feminist theorists do so just as the last of the governments inspired by the Marxian legacy decline and disappear, and the promise of Marxian thought otherwise seems primarily an archaic relic of a bygone and failed utopian moment. Of course some Marxists disagree with the uses to which feminists have put standpoint theory. For others, however, that it should be feminists who succeed at such a project has been disquieting. Thus feminist standpoint theory revives, improves, and disseminates an important Marxian project and does so at an otherwise inauspicious moment for such an achievement.

During the same period standpoint themes—the "logic of a standpoint"—also appeared in the thinking of a wide array of other prodemocratic social movements, which did not overtly claim the Marxian legacy, standpoint terminology, or, often, feminism. Race, ethnicity-based, anti-imperial, and Queer social justice movements routinely produce standpoint themes.[5] This phenomenon suggests that standpoint theory is a kind of organic epistemology, methodology, philosophy of science, and social theory that can arise whenever oppressed peoples gain public voice. "The social order looks different from the perspective of our lives and our struggles," they say. Thus standpoint theory has both an explicit and implicit history. It has a distinctive intellectual history and also a popular or "folk" history visible in its apparently spontaneous appeal to groups around the world seeking to understand themselves and the world around them in ways blocked by the conceptual frameworks dominant in their culture.[6] Philosophers and science theorists do not take kindly to being asked to think that such a "folk philosophy" or "folk science" has something to teach them.[7] In the modern West, though not in other cultures, philosophy and science are virtually always positioned precisely against such "folk thought."

These sources of contention are by no means the only features of standpoint theory that have made it a valuable site for thoughtful researchers, scholars, and students to reflect on and debate some of the most challenging scientific, political, and intellectual issues of our era. Significantly, in spite of continuing criticisms, it just doesn't go away. Moreover, as a methodology, practitioners seem to think that it works to explain kinds of accounts of nature and social relations not otherwise accessible—accounts that provide valuable resources to social justice movements. And it helps to produce oppositional and shared consciousnesses in oppressed groups—to create oppressed peoples as collective "subjects" of research rather than only as objects of others' observation, naming, and management, as a number of the contributors here argue. Uses and discussions of it by now have appeared in most disciplines and in many policy contexts. Indeed, as several of the essayists here note, in the last few years interest in it has surged ahead in dozens and dozens of articles explaining it again to new audiences, puzzling anew over the issues it raises, or exerting considerable effort to challenge its usefulness in any context at all.[8]

The sections that follow in this introduction pursue further central standpoint themes and concepts and the ways these stimulate valuable controversies at this moment in history.

Knowledge for Oppressed Groups?

Standpoint theorists, like their critics, have differing views of what standpoint theory is and can do. Here we can set the stage for these accounts by noting, first, that women's movements needed knowledge that was *for* women. Women, like members of other oppressed groups, had long been the object of the inquiries of their actual or would-be rulers. Yet the research disciplines and the public policy institutions that depended upon them permitted no conceptual frameworks in which women as a group—or, rather, as groups located in different class, racial, ethnic, and sexual locations in local, national, and global social relations—became the subjects—the authors—of knowledge. Could women (in various diverse collectivities) become subjects of knowledge?

Of course individual women have often managed to "speak" in public. The issue here is a different and controversial one: whether women as culturally diverse collectivities could produce knowledge that answered *their* questions about nature and social relations. The implied "speaker" of scientific (sociological, economic, philosophic, etc.) sentences was never women. It was supposed to be humanity in general. As Donna Haraway famously put the point (chapter 6, this volume), the subject of knowledge claims was to be an idealized agent who performed the "God trick" of speaking authoritatively about everything in the world from no particular location or human perspective at all.

The idea that the very best research, no less than the worst, does and should "speak" from particular, historically specific, social locations has been out of the question for standard research norms. As noted earlier, the whole point of scientific knowledge in the modern West, in contrast to "folk knowledge," is supposed to be that its adequacy should transcend the particular historical projects that produce it or, at any given moment, happen to find it useful. Moreover, to repeat, that it could be the social location of women or other oppressed groups that could be the source of illuminating knowledge claims not only about themselves but also the rest of nature and social relations has remained an arrogant, outrageous, and threatening proposal for conventionalists.

Yet feminist researchers were identifying how the conceptual frameworks of the disciplines and of public policy never achieved the desired political and cultural neutrality that their scientific methods and related administrative procedures had been claimed to promise. The problem was not prejudiced and biased individuals, or other kinds of cases of "bad science," as the Liberal, empiricist (or "positivist") philosophies of science proclaimed. (Not that such individuals and cases didn't exist—alas.) Rather, it was a different kind of obstacle that these researchers encountered. The conceptual frameworks themselves

promoted historically distinctive institutional and cultural interests and concerns, which ensured that the knowledge produced through them was always socially situated, in Haraway's phrase (chapter 6, this volume). All too often these interests and concerns were not only not women's but, worse, counter to women's needs and desires. The disciplines were complicitous with sexist and androcentric agendas of public institutions.

Worst of all, the sciences' commitment to social neutrality disarmed the scientifically productive potential of politically engaged research on behalf of oppressed groups and, more generally, the culturally important projects of all but the dominant Western, bourgeois, white-supremacist, androcentric, heteronormative culture. Commitment to an objectivity defined as maximizing social neutrality was not itself socially neutral in its effects (MacKinnon, chapter 12, Harding, chapter 8, this volume). To be sure, politics and culture often function as "prisonhouses" of knowledge, as conventional wisdom points out. Yet they can and often do also function as "toolboxes," enabling new perspectives and new ways of seeing the world to enlarge the horizons of our explanations, understandings, and yearnings for a better life.[9] The feminist research projects, which were guided by politics and thus also socially situated, often succeeded in producing empirically more accurate accounts as well as expanding the horizons of human knowledge. The "goodness" of "good science," feminist or not, was inadequately understood by mainstream philosophy of science, epistemology, and methodology standpoint theorists argued.[10]

Androcentric, economically advantaged, racist, Eurocentric, and heterosexist conceptual frameworks ensured systematic ignorance and error about not only the lives of the oppressed, but also about the lives of their oppressors and thus about how nature and social relations in general worked. In the dominant androcentric accounts it remained mysterious through what processes women's life choices became so restricted. How did it come about that violence against women in every class and race, often committed by men women trusted from within their own social groups, was interpreted persistently by the legal system as women "asking for it" and only "deviant" men doing it?... or, as the duty of husbands or slave owners. Who benefits from only one form of "the family" being regarded as normal and desirable, and all others, in which live the vast majority of the citizens of North America and the rest of the world, devalued as deviant and undesirable? How did it occur that a double day of work, one day of which was unpaid, was regarded as normal and necessary for women but not for men? Why were women who were menstruating, birthing, or going through menopause treated by the medical profession as if they were sick? Who benefits when standards for rationality are restricted to the instrumental rationality of those sciences and public institutions from the design and management of which women, the poor, and people of non-Western descent are barred? What social processes made reasonable the belief that women made no contributions to

human evolution? The answers to these questions required research about the dominant institutions, and their customs and practices, including, especially, their conceptual practices.

The remedy for the inadequate philosophies of science, epistemologies, and methodologies justifying and guiding mainstream research, and the social theories that informed them, according to these theorists, was to start off thought and research from women's experiences, lives, and activities (or labor) and from the emerging collective feminist discourses. That is, researchers were to avoid taking their research problems, concepts, hypotheses, and background assumptions from the conceptual frameworks of the disciplines or of the social institutions that they served (the legal, welfare, health, education, economic, military, and other institutions). Thus standpoint projects would be "outside the realm of the true" from the perspective of those disciplines and institutions. Moreover, such projects were not intended to end in ethnographies of women's worlds (as some observers have assumed), though often such work became a necessary preliminary step. Rather, women needed to understand the conceptual practices of power, in Dorothy E. Smith's felicitous phrase, through which their oppression was designed, maintained, and made to seem natural and desirable to everyone. Thus standpoint projects must "study up"; they must be part of critical theory, revealing the ideological strategies used to design and justify the sex-gender system and its intersections with other systems of oppression, in the case of feminist projects.

As science, standpoint projects were to see "beneath" or "behind" the dominant sexist and androcentric ideologies that shaped everyone's lives to the relations between, on the one hand, the actualities of women's everyday lives and, on the other hand, the conceptual practices of powerful social institutions, especially including research disciplines. Yet such sciences could not occur without political struggles. Political engagement, rather than dispassionate neutrality, was necessary to gain access to the means to do such research—the research training, jobs in research institutions, research funding, and publication. It was also needed to create women's collective, group consciousnesses that would enable women's groups to design, and to value and engage in, the kinds of research that could enable women to transform their consciousness into an oppositional one and to begin see the possibility of ending their oppression. Last but not least, political struggle itself produced insight. The more value-neutral a conceptual framework appears, the more likely it is to advance the hegemonous interests of dominant groups, and the less likely it is to be able to detect important actualities of social relations (as Smith, Harding, and MacKinnon argue in different ways in this volume). We need not—indeed, must not—choose between "good politics" and "good science," standpoint theorists argued, for the former can produce the latter.

Yet such standpoint projects raise further troubling issues for standpoint theorists themselves as well as for their critics. One continuing theme has focused

on whether it is women's experiences, women's social locations, or feminist discourses that are to provide the origin of knowledge projects. Clearly the experiences of oppressed groups can become an important source of critical insight. Moreover mainstream research always draws on distinctive social experience and scientific experience, as recent histories, sociologies, and ethnographies of science argue, so it cannot be that experience is in itself the problem. Indeed, the very best human knowledge of the empirical world is supposed to be grounded in human experience. Yet some critics ask if standpoint theory's focus on the importance of the experience of women and other oppressed groups ensures that it has abandoned the epistemological uses of concepts of truth, objectivity, and good method. And if so, would it not thereby have lost the solid grounding, the epistemological foundations, that any political movement needs to make its claims plausible to dominant groups, and to be useful in political struggle? Relatedly, critics ask if women's experiences and discourses gain automatic epistemic privilege in standpoint theory. Moreover, aren't consciousnesses only individual? So what is a "collective group consciousness"? Furthermore, how does and should standpoint theory account for and engage with differences between women? Can feminist discourses be legitimate if some women cannot agree to them on the basis of their particular experiences? Who are these "women" whose experiences, social locations, and discourses are to ground feminist knowledge? Are they only the women privileged to speak and write from the dominant universities, research institutes, and national and international institutions and agencies? What is the relation between the standpoints of different groups of women? This entangled set of issues arises in the essays here. We can begin to sort them out by focusing first on the scientific and epistemological value of differences between women.

How Can Differences in Oppression Become Political and Scientific Resources?

Let us begin with the claim that knowledge is always socially situated. Thus, to the extent that an oppressed group's situation is different from that of the dominant group, its dominated situation enables the production of distinctive kinds of knowledge. (And let us not forget that dominant groups have always insisted on maintaining different material conditions for themselves and those whose labor makes possible their dominance, and they have insisted that those they dominate do not and could not achieve their own exalted level of consciousness.) After all, knowledge is supposed to be based on experiences, and so different experiences should enable different perceptions of ourselves and our environments.

However, more than this social situatedness is at issue for standpoint theorists. Each oppressed group can learn to identify its distinctive opportunities to turn an oppressive feature of the group's conditions into a source of critical insight about how the dominant society thinks and is structured. Thus, standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into

an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage. With this second claim, a standpoint can not be thought of as an ascribed position with its different perspective that oppressed groups can claim automatically. Rather, a standpoint is an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle, something that requires both science and politics, as Nancy Hartsock put the point.[11] Here the term becomes a technical one in the sense that it is no longer simply another word for viewpoint or perspective, but rather makes visible a different, somewhat hidden phenomenon that we must work to grasp. For an achieved standpoint, science and politics turn out to be internally linked, contrary to the standard Liberal, empiricist, Enlightenment view. Empowerment requires a distinctive kind of knowledge (knowledge *for* one's projects), and that kind of knowledge can emerge only through political processes.

Now we come to the issue of differences. Not all women have the same conditions or experiences. Standpoint theory has often been accused of the very same kind of "centered" and "essentialist" ontology that feminists criticize in androcentric accounts. The Marxian ontology originally borrowed by standpoint theorists shared the Enlightenment tendency to envision only one kind of homogenous, oppressed, heroic, ideal knower, and agent of history versus a homogenized, ideology-producing, economically and politically powerful ignoramus: the idealized proletarian knower versus the ignorant bourgeoisie. Differences between nonbourgeoisie, whether or not they were industrial workers—gender, racial, ethnic differences, for example—were noted in Marxian accounts but not of theoretical interest. Indeed, no theoretical framework was created within classical Marxism to explore the distinctive forms of oppression and sources of resistance that might characterize different such groups.

From its beginnings feminist standpoint theorists have had to struggle, along with other feminists and members of other social justice movements, to create a different kind of *decentered subject* of knowledge and of history than was envisioned either by Enlightenment or Marxian accounts. The work of women of color has been especially important here in developing notions of "intersectional" social locations where oppressive hierarchical structures of gender, class, race and other antidemocratic projects intersect in different ways for different groups. And women of color have led the way in envisioning coalitions of such decentered subjects of knowledge and history whose common experiences are both discovered and forged through shared political projects.[12]

What are these distinctive aspects of oppression that scientific and political projects can turn into epistemic and scientific resources? Dorothy Smith points to women's responsibility for daily life as a source of valuable critical questions and insights about the dominant institutions and the "conceptual practices of power" that the discipline of sociology provides for them. Hilary Rose argues that women's responsibility for their bodies and for emotional labor gives women a distinctive perspective on their own bodies and on the sciences. Patricia Hill Collins argues that Black women's distinctive activities in slavery, in the kinds

of work Black women are assigned today, and in their ongoing struggles to support their families and communities gives them powerful critical perspectives on the limitations of mainstream sociology and the social institutions it services.

Other authors focus on other resource-producing oppressive situations and practices: Sara Ruddick on mothering, bell hooks on marginality, Catharine A. MacKinnon on violence against women, Kathi Weeks on women's labor, and Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva on the "subsistence" (survival) activities of women in the Third World. And Chela Sandoval argues that the very exclusion of women of color from the kinds of subjectivity favored in the main forms of white women's feminist theory has in itself provided a distinctive resource for women of color's innovative theorizing.[13] My point here is that this kind of account enables us to understand how each oppressed group will have its own critical insights about nature and the larger social order to contribute to the collection of human knowledge. Because different groups are oppressed in different ways, each has the possibility (not the certainty) of developing distinctive insights about systems of social relations in general in which their oppression is a feature.

When women refuse to assent to some particular claim made in the name of feminism, that is always a good reason to seek to identify the different situations and experiences that support such dissent. Feminism has a long history of association with bourgeois Liberal rights movements, racially and ethnically discriminatory projects, heteronormative understandings, and other theoretical "luxuries" available to women from the dominant groups. Feminist projects often have been too conservative to appeal to the wide range of women they imagine as their eager audience. Moreover, the dominant intellectual projects against which standpoint theory is positioned in Europe and North America today can take other forms in other cultures, leaving standpoint projects positioned against women's interests. (See, for example, the accounts by Uma Narayan [chapter 15, this volume], and by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva [chapter 26, this volume].) It cannot be overemphasized that the epistemic privilege oppressed groups possess is by no means automatic. The "moment of critical insight" is one that comes only through political struggle, for it is blocked and its understandings obscured by the dominant, hegemonous ideologies and the practices that they make appear normal and even natural. That oppressed groups are indeed capable of precisely the forms of rationality so highly valued by logicians, scientists, and in law courts cannot become visible so long as those groups are denied access to the educations and practices it takes to make logicians, scientists, and lawyers. That women are physically inferior to men appears obvious as long as ideals of womanliness require women to appear weak and frail, to be discouraged from athletic training, to be encouraged to wear clothing that restricts their movement, and as long as athletic performances such as ballet and modern dance are treated as mere entertainment.

Standpoint theory's focus on the historical and social locatedness of knowledge projects and on the way collective political and intellectual work can transform a source of oppression into a source of knowledge and potential liberation, makes a distinctive contribution to social justice projects as well as to our understanding of preconditions for the production of knowledge.

There are yet other sources of standpoint theory's controversiality that have not been addressed by this discussion. Here we take up just two more of them.

Relativism?

Critics often accuse standpoint theory of committing or even embracing a damaging epistemological relativism since standpoint theorists argue that all knowledge claims are socially located, and that some such locations are preferable as possible sources of knowledge. What is and is not at issue here?

Let us begin by noting that while ethical relativism is a very old issue for Western thinkers, the possibility of epistemological relativism is relatively new. Different cultures seem to have not just different moral practices, but different standards—different ethical principles—for what counts as a desirable kind of moral practice. So on what culture-neutral grounds could one decide between competing moral or ethical claims? Attempts to identify a universally valid standard that could fairly adjudicate between competing local practices seem invariably to be confronted with the challenge that the standard proposed—egoism or altruism, utilitarianism, Kantian or Rawlsian rationalism—is not in fact culturally neutral. So the issues of moral and ethical relativism are not new. But until the emergence of post–World War II social studies of science, claims to knowledge about nature, and (their authors hoped) social relations appeared to escape such relativist charges.

Knowledge claims certified by modern Western sciences were assumed to be grounded in reality in ways that claims without such a pedigree were not. Non-Western cultures' knowledge systems were, at best, merely technologies, speculative claims, or prescientific elements of traditional thought. At worst, they were dogma, magic, superstition, and even the "products of the savage mind," in French anthropologist E. G. Lucien Levy-Bruhl's (1926) memorable phrase (see Harding, 1998b). However, with the appearance of Thomas S. Kuhn's 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the horrifying possibility of epistemological relativism emerged. Kuhn had argued that even the most admired moments in the history of modern science had an "integrity with their era"; that is, they were somehow permeated by historically and culturally local values and interests. Revolutionary changes in science were not a matter of linear progress, but rather of a scientific community simply moving into a different conceptual and research world—a different paradigm, as he put it. The subsequent four decades of the history, philosophy, and social studies of science and technology have had to struggle continuously against charges of a damaging epistemological relativism that, the critics say, threatens to undermine the rationality of preferring

modern sciences to other knowledge systems, and thus the legitimacy of these new fields themselves.[14]

Standpoint theory, along with postmodernist and some postcolonial approaches, can seem to share this debilitating relativism because it, too, acknowledges that all knowledge claims are socially situated. Worse, standpoint approaches argue that some kinds of social values can advance the growth of knowledge. Such anxieties require more extended attention than can be given to them here. Yet perhaps relativist fears can be set aside for a while by consideration of the following four points. First, there are familiar research areas where values and interests clearly shape the direction, conceptual frameworks, research methods, and content of research, and yet this is not considered to deteriorate the empirical or theoretical quality of the research. For example, medical and health research is directed to preserving life, finding a cure for cancer, relieving pain, and other such values. We can easily forget that these are indeed particular cultural values. They are not shared, for example, by some religious groups who think either that this life is a misery to be endured so believers can get to the better afterlife or that one should trust God's mysterious ways rather than modern medical interventions. Yet we do not disqualify the results of searches for a pain reliever because the research was shaped by such a value.

Second, claims of any sort only have meaning in some particular cultural context—that is, relative to some set of cultural practices through which the meaning of the claim is learned and subsequently understood. Claims thus have meaning "relative" to that context of practices.[15] We are often surprised when our communication goes astray in another culture because our words are understood through some other set of assumptions than we intended. But this kind of semantic relativity does not remove grounds for evaluating the empirical adequacy of the claims. Neither does the fact that standpoint projects are designed to produce knowledge that is for women, instead of for the effective management of dominant institutions, remove grounds for evaluating the empirical adequacy of the results of standpoint research. Does it or doesn't it produce a reliable account of some part of reality and an account of what women need to know?

Third, in everyday life we often have to make choices, for example, of health therapies, between value-laden and interested claims (by pharmaceutical companies, physicians, insurance companies, our kin, and friends). We sometimes have to do so in conditions of great urgency with insufficient evidence to feel completely certain about the choice made. Yet we gather all the information we can from every kind of source available, weigh it, and tentatively choose, standing ready to revise our decision if the patient doesn't improve. We would regard as mentally disturbed someone who let himself be paralyzed by relativist considerations in such circumstances.

Last but not least, if in fact all knowledge claims are necessarily socially located, including those of modern sciences, and thus permeated by local values

and interests, then it should seem a poor strategy to continue to insist that one particular set of such claims—those credentialed by modern science—are not. Instead, we need to work out an epistemology that can account for both this reality that our best knowledge is socially constructed, and also that it is empirically accurate. The first three remarks above are intended to direct us to such a project.

Disciplinary Debates

Finally, a less obvious source of contention arises from the way standpoint theory has developed independently within debates in several distinct disciplinary contexts, with their different discursive histories and contemporary concerns. Carrying out standpoint projects within disciplines is a crucial task since a main objective of standpoint theory and research is precisely to map the conceptual practices through which particular institutions, such as disciplines, serve oppressive forms of power. As Dorothy E. Smith has pointed out (chapter 2, this volume), ruling in our kinds of modern, bureaucratic societies occurs largely through concepts and symbols, and it is the disciplines that work up and legitimate these particular sociological, economic, historical, jurisprudential, or philosophy of science concepts and symbols. Moreover, as bell hooks insists, writing can be a powerful form of political resistance. Such resistance can be effective within disciplinary discourses. Thus researchers have used the resources of disciplinary debates to develop standpoint projects in directions pertinent to the particular conceptual practices of power of each such discipline. This phenomenon becomes clear if one examines the different concerns of theorists and researchers working in the sociology of knowledge (e.g., Smith, Rose, and Collins), political philosophy (e.g., Hartsock and Jaggar), and the philosophy of natural sciences (e.g., Haraway, Harding, Rouse, and Wylie) in the essays collected here, for example.

One continuing site of dissonance between standpoint theorists themselves has such a source. How should one think about the role of experience in the production of knowledge? Feminist standpoint sociologists think about this differently than do political philosophers and philosophers of science. This is one source of the different emphases on "women's standpoint" versus a "feminist standpoint" in these writings. It may be preferable for this reason, among others, to think of the development of standpoint theories, plural. These share a family resemblance and collectively contrast with dominant epistemologies, methodologies, and philosophies of science, yet importantly differ from each other in other respects.

The disciplinary production of standpoint theories creates other striking phenomena. For example, often theorists in one discipline appear unfamiliar with standpoint writings and arguments from other disciplines, though the latter are relevant to the former. Furthermore, as Dorothy E. Smith points out

(chapter 20, this volume), aggregating the work of theorists in these disciplines as "standpoint theorists" in order to map the shared differences between their projects and those of traditional epistemologies and philosophies of science[16] obscures the ways these writers were and remain intensely involved in critical and creative conversations, debates, and projects within their disciplines.

Some further sources of controversy will appear in the essays themselves and the introductions to each section.

The Benefits of Controversy

After all this controversy, what remains notable is that standpoint projects appear to have survived and even to be flourishing anew after more than two decades of contention. Few people exposed to the "logic of the standpoint" remain nonchalant about its potential effects, for, as I have been arguing, it has managed to locate its analyses at the juncture of some of our deepest contemporary anxieties. Disturbing though virtually everyone may find one or another of its claims and projects, standpoint theory apparently is destined to persist at least for a while as a seductively volatile site for reflection and debate about difficult to resolve contemporary dilemmas.

Notes

1. Diverse criticisms of standpoint theory appear in these essays. Additional critical sources can be located through the citations.
2. In the interests of full disclosure, I confess to playing four roles in this collection: as one of the standpoint theorists on whom some of its essays focus; as a standpoint practitioner who has used this approach in my own work on the implications for epistemology and philosophy of science of gender and of race relations and European expansion (for example, in Harding 1998b); as an author and editor who has reported, analyzed, defended, published, and reprinted others standpoint essays in a number of publications over the last two decades; and as the editor of this particular collection, who is—in this introduction—giving my current understanding of these issues. Of course others surely would give (and have given) different accounts of the history, nature, strengths, and limitations of standpoint projects, as the selections that follow reveal.
3. Many of these sources of controversiality originate outside standpoint theory. Other feminists have sometimes been criticized in similar ways. This frequently occurs when critics who are apparently new to feminist epistemology take a caricatured representation of standpoint theory as their model for what is wrong with feminist epistemology in general, or with what they claim is "radical feminism." (See, for example, Walby 2001.)
4. See the essays by Hartsock (chapter 3), Jameson (chapter 9), Pels (chapter 22), and Hirschmann (chapter 25) for accounts of this history, and also Jaggar's full chapter from which the excerpt here is drawn.
5. See, for example, essays here by bell hooks (chapter 10), and by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (chapter 26). Michel Foucault's analyses have strong standpoint components, as do many lesbian accounts (Foucault, 1980; Harding, 1991, chapter 10: "Thinking From Lesbian Lives"). See also Pels' (chapter 22, this volume) account of standpoint themes in politically regressive accounts. Manuel Castells (1997) discusses the emergence of standpoint claims (he does not use this language) in the American Militia and Patriot Movement of the 1990s as well as in other religious, land, and ethnicity-based fundamentalist movements whose projects are not well served by either modernity

or the emerging postmodern (postindustrial) economic, political, and cultural social order.

6. No doubt for some of these spontaneous standpoint theorists some form of the Marxian legacy was part of the intellectual world of their thinking. For example, "world systems theory" has become familiar in the perspectives of Third World critiques of Western so-called development policies (see Frank, 1969; Wallerstein, 1974; Sachs, 1992).
7. This is certainly not to imply that the carefully crafted writings of bell hooks, Maria Mies, Dorothy E. Smith, Vandana Shiva and other such highly trained and sophisticated theorists are no different than the complaints and folk wisdom in the less artful speech of people in their everyday lives, insightful as are the latter. Rather, these authors give voice and theoretical support to perspectives and "yearnings," as hooks puts it, which arise in the everyday lives and insights of the oppressed.
8. To give one indication of the dimensions of this dissemination, I considered for this collection over 150 essays that were overtly engaged with standpoint issues (in contrast to the many, many more that simply used standpoint approaches). Many interesting ones could not be included—alas. For those wishing to continue pursuit of these concerns, the citations in the essays here contain excellent guides to the large standpoint literature.
9. See chapters 4 and 6, "Cultures as Toolboxes for Sciences and Technologies" and "Are There Gendered Standpoints on Nature?" of Harding 1998b for further discussion of this point.
10. Standpoint theory emerged alongside the post-Kuhnian (1962) postpositivist social studies of science and technology, which took up similar criticisms of mainstream philosophy, history, and sociology of the natural sciences. Standpoint theorists who worked on the natural sciences were influenced by this work but have not much succeeded in influencing it. See Joseph Rouse's discussion of how this is far more than an issue of missing gender-awareness (chapter 28, this volume), and also the essays by Hilary Rose, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Alison Wylie.
11. Readers will notice that while most of the essays in this reader restrict the term "standpoint" to its technical use as an achieved (versus ascribed) collective identity or consciousness, one for which oppressed groups must struggle, a few of the authors use it colloquially, as a synonym for a viewpoint or perspective, and to refer to dominant perspectives as well as those of oppressed groups. They sometimes use the term this way even while otherwise insisting on the importance of "science and politics" in oppressed groups' struggles to understand nature and social relations. This is confusing. (The term has this double usage also within the Marxian tradition in which it originated.) I will continue to use it here in the restricted, technical sense indicated.
12. Women of color frequently refer to value-systems that existed prior to the colonization of their peoples and that survive through colonization, imperialism, or slavery in contemporary postcolonization communities (post- at least formal colonization!). See, for example, Collins' (1989) discussion of this phenomenon.
13. See these essays in Sections I and II below. Marxists referred to this phenomenon as the "moment of truth" for an oppressed group. (See Jameson chapter 9, this volume.) My own position these days is to avoid such "truth language" (except in everyday discourse and formal logic) since it is unnecessary (it claims more than the situation requires), and it seems virtually impossible, in scholarly and scientific as well as popular discourses, to pry it away from the old "unity of science" argument for one world, one "truth" (empirically adequate, coherent statement) about it, and one ideal science capable of representing that "truth." (And, of course, one ideal knower capable of creating that science.) Claims to truth seem to me often to be intended to shut down further critical examination of the knowledge claimed. At any rate, when truth and power supposedly issue from the same social site, we are always entitled to be suspicious. See Harding, 1998a.
14. This kind of issue is at the base of the recent "science wars". See Gross and Levitt, 1994, for example.
15. One important discussion of this issue appears in Ian Hacking's (1983) and Joseph Rouse's (1996) call for conceptualizing scientific activity as fundamentally intervention in rather than as representation of nature.
16. As I did initially in my 1986 and have continued to do.

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