

Comment on Walby's "Against Epistemological Chasms: The Science Question in Feminism Revisited": Structured Knowledge and Strategic Methodology

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Sylvia Walby is frustrated with feminists who take a standpoint approach to knowledge (in this issue), and I can understand that. She, like all good feminists, is impatient for the empowerment of women and significant social change, and, like many, she sees the production of knowledge as an important part of making change effectively. Walby wants feminists to take a more confident stand about our ability to produce knowledge and shape hegemonic knowledge. We can do that, she argues, if we realize that modern science is an open discourse, trust in rationality as a basic human mode of understanding, and accept that the vision of community-based knowledge systems does not fit the reality that most knowers participate in multiple, only partially overlapping networks. I argue, however, that Walby is struggling with a real problem for feminist scholars but has misidentified its source and thus come up with a wrong-headed strategy for addressing it.

Walby's analysis is hampered by two logical flaws. First, she is inconsistent in constructing her contrast between standpoint theory on the one hand and "real science" on the other. In making a case for what science "really is," she relies on critical philosophers and sociologists of knowledge to the exclusion of widespread practices and beliefs. On the other hand, in describing standpoint theory, she draws more on how that position has been popularized than on a careful reading of how it has been developed by philosophers and sociologists of knowledge. That is, she depicts standpoint theory at its most simplistic and science as it might be under the best of circumstances. Given the way she constructs the choice, it is not surprising that she ends up preferring mainstream science. But that is not the choice we really face.

The second logical problem stems from the first: Walby, a fine sociologist, does not take sociology into account in her analysis of the production of knowledge. She ignores social structures, relations of power, and even the implications of her own data. In this comment, I first take a look at the way Walby depicts both standpoint theory and science. Then I use a

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standpoint theory argument to try to understand why standpoint theory is so often oversimplified.

What is standpoint theory?

Walby says that “standpoint epistemology is based on the presumption of a chasm between the knowledge of the oppressed and that of the oppressor, in which the oppressed develop their own practices in order to develop better knowledge” (485). She identifies three key assumptions she finds untenable: (1) knowledge bears no relation to reality, (2) the thinking of the oppressed is better than the knowledge of the oppressor, (3) there is an unbridgeable divide between the two. I would agree with Walby that these assumptions are pervasive in the talk and writing of feminist scholars across disciplines. I also agree that this simple version of standpoint theory breaks down into a kind of relativism that typically gets resolved by romanticizing the oppressed. However, when Walby argues that these assumptions are inherent in the logic of standpoint theory as laid out by its major developers in the social sciences, she, like many feminist scholars, is misreading the argument of standpoint theory.

Consider the assertion that knowledge bears no relation to reality. Let us dispose of the question of whether there is a reality — that’s a straw person. As Sandra Harding (1998) says, there are regularities in the natural world, although what they may be shifts over time and as a result of human social action. As Dorothy Smith (1987) says, what make the social real are our practices, acting in concert with one another, in social relations that organize us into rulers and ruled. But Walby’s contention that standpoint theory says knowledge is not related to reality is mystifying.

Nancy Hartsock (1985) grounds potential conceptualizations of power in the lived experience of human labor and the social relations organizing it. Donna Haraway (1988) uses the metaphor of embodied vision to argue that knowers have bodies, are located in the empirical world, and that situatedness is a strength as well as a limitation. Harding (1998) argues all knowers are located in gendered bodies in specific natural/social settings toward which they have specific interests or goals. Smith (1987) argues for the standpoint of women because, in the sexual division of labor in Western culture, women are disproportionately allocated the work of actually keeping the social going. And Patricia Hill Collins (1989, 1991) argues for African American women’s standpoint as constructed by their experience of contemporary social relations organized by a racial division of labor, respect, security, and opportunity. In each case, it is *precisely* reality,

a specific location in physical and social reality, that provides an opening for developing knowledge about it.

What about the idea that the knowledge of the oppressed is better than the knowledge of the oppressor? Walby is not alone in this misreading of the argument. Many feminists, in talking about standpoints, conflate subjectivity with social location. A standpoint is *not* how folks in a particular social location think. This point has been reaffirmed by many, if not all, of the major standpoint theorists since Hartsock took pains to specifically distinguish a standpoint from the spontaneous consciousness of social actors. A standpoint, Hartsock says, is “achieved rather than obvious, a mediated rather than immediate understanding” (1985, 132). Collins reaffirmed the point fairly recently in her essay in the previous exchange on this topic in *Signs* when she emphasized that standpoint is not about individual experiences — it is about “historically shared, group-based experiences” (1997, 375). Smith (1987, 1990) says a standpoint is a strategic choice in doing research — a place from which to start, a door to open on the social.

But we do not need to go back to the significant texts to reassure ourselves that spontaneous subjectivity is not what standpoints are about. Equating a standpoint with what a category of social actors presumably think is illogical because it is highly unlikely empirically. There is a wide diversity of thinking among people in any social category — in any race or class or gender — or, more concretely, in any actual group making their lives negotiating the intersection of these social dynamics, for example, working-class white women. Scholars in search of the subjectivity of a social category inevitably must choose the members to whom they will listen; that is, they must identify which members of a category are the best spokespersons for the category. It is an empirical question, of course, but it may very well be that the wealthiest white men in the world are fairly homogeneous in their worldviews. They do, after all, have the material and social resources to identify their interests and develop an analysis that supports their social position. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to expect a much broader diversity of thought among the oppressed since those who are at the bottom of social hierarchies are less likely to have the resources to support an extensive analysis of their interests and experience.

The logic of preferring some standpoints over others emerges from a political analysis of the relation between knowledge and material interests (Habermas 1971). Distinctive standpoints are shaped by contrasting positions in social relations of domination and oppression. The strategic advantage of standpoints of those oppressed in the current organization of social

relations is that they have little stake in simply validating the status quo (Harding 1998). If standpoint theory is what these philosophers and sociologists of knowledge say it is, knowledge is situated not only in a geographical, spatial sense (as Walby describes it) but also in a relational sense. Standpoints are constructed by and within relations of power.

A third assumption Walby mistakenly identifies with standpoint theory is that there is an unbridgeable divide between standpoints. This assumption, she says, is so fundamental that the tenability of the whole approach rises or falls on it. But again Walby's characterization of the argument of standpoint theory is not supported by a careful reading of the major theorists she cites. On which side of this chasm does she place the standpoint of women in sociology, extensively analyzed by Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990)? Smith says the demands of work and family mean that, in their daily experience, women in sociology *continually cross the line* between those who do the work of keeping the social going and those who determine what sense will be made of the social. This social location, Smith says, provides the opportunity to see the "line of fault" between official accounts of social life and the everyday experience of most social actors. An awareness of the inadequacy of hegemonic accounts creates an opportunity, for it may prompt the serious feminist scholar to take seriously the accounts of everyday/everynight social actors.

On which side of the chasm does Walby place the black feminist theorists analyzed by Patricia Hill Collins (1989) as *outsiders within* the academy? Trained and certified within the hegemonic discourse, they also are confronted with the dynamics of racial oppression in their daily lives. Further, they potentially have access to traditional African American interpretive frameworks not available to their white colleagues. My reading of Collins's argument is that the power of black feminist thought emerges because it is developed by people whose lives involve continual boundary crossing, people at the intersection of two contrasting locations in social relations—official knowledge producer and racially oppressed group member.

The major developers of standpoint theory in the social sciences are not dealing in unbridgeable chasms. They do not merely allow for crossing the boundaries in social relations—they make boundary crossing the privileged strategy for developing knowledge. Donna Haraway describes the human ability to be empathetic, to listen to and imaginatively put oneself in the position of another, as a key bridging mechanism. We are, none of us, completely integrated unitary selves, and that multidimensionality allows us to make partial connections with other knowers: "Splitting, not

being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies of scientific knowledge" (Haraway 1988, 586).

Smith (1987) proposes a boundary-crossing strategy in posing as an agenda for sociology the work of making everyday life our problematic, the thing we need to make sense of. She calls on sociologists to begin with everyday life as everyday social actors know it and discover how it is shaped, constrained, and made irrational because of the operation of power relations that are not immediately visible. We can use the inconsistency between hegemonic analyses and those developed from the standpoint of everyday actors as a puzzle to solve in pursuing a better understanding. Harding too (1991) calls for a boundary-crossing strategy when she argues that men can be feminists and whites antiracists if they undertake an analysis of the circumstances that support the naturalization of their privilege. The best way to do that, Harding submits, is to begin from the standpoint of those over whom one has privilege.

Standpoint theory is grounded in reality, including the social relations of domination organizing experience and the creation of understandings of that experience. It calls us to use these socially organized divisions strategically.

What is science?

Walby says feminist critiques of science are unrealistic, as if feminist critics are jousting at a positivist windmill that no one accepts any more. When Walby is talking about what science "really" is, she draws on the carefully argued accounts of knowing developed by a few critical philosophers and sociologists of knowledge such as W. V. O. Quine, Bruno Latour, and Roy Bhaskar.

As a sociologist, I see science as far more than what a few critical scholars say it should be, more than the loosely connected networks that Walby describes. Science is, most importantly for the concerns of those committed to feminist change, what scientists actually do and how they do it. It is an organized institution of research institutes, universities, journals, funding agencies, militaries, and for-profit research and development organizations that are given the resources and the authority in our society to be official producers of knowledge. These organizations are made up of individuals in definite social relationships through which resources and influence are distributed. Those who are in control of the resources available to do knowledge production — the research grants, the tenured positions, the publication outlets — apply a system of evaluative standards that are consis-

tent with the basis for their own privilege. Hidden behind the veil of the “important,” the “interesting,” and the “rigorous” are systematic selection patterns that reflect the evaluators’ stakes within the existing network of prestige and their own experiences of social life and their own class-, race-, and gender-based interests in how social life is organized.

Critical realist epistemology may accept the notion that knowledge is not a perfect mirror of reality, that the subjectivity of knowers shapes the construction of knowledge. But stopping there is just not being critical—or realistic—enough. Standpoint theory calls us to ask whether there is something *systematic* to the form that this lack of fit takes. Many feminist scholars working in this tradition have done the groundwork here. They show us over and over again that if we actually consider the data—the kind of knowledge that gets produced and accepted as “good”—we find systematic patterns. For example, life sciences develop technologies for controlling the kinds of life being made, not methods for respectful, responsible stewardship of the diversity of life forms (Shiva 1995). Medical science looks for genetic and individual behavioral explanations of cancer rather than for environmental sources (Harding 1998). Social science defines the social as centered on the domain of privileged men—the formal economy and the state, to the exclusion of the domestic and informal labor, the work of meeting human needs, the domains assigned to women (Sprague 1997). Walby provides supporting data in her own essay: as she observes, most of the critical philosophers of science she uses do not take gender into account. These scholars are men, thus gender is part of their own basis of privilege. They do not have to be intentionally trying to legitimate gender hierarchy—they are simply not in a position for gender domination to be salient in their own experience and primary in their political interests.

Equally supportive data are embedded in Walby’s reference to the way that knowledge has changed since feminists have been participating in it. Feminist standpoint theory calls us to consider the process by which changes in feminist directions have happened. Looking at the case of sociology, it is not a simple matter of involving more diverse knowers, though that certainly has been an important part of the process. Many of those who have changed our understanding of basic social phenomena such as work, family, health, violence, politics, race/ethnicity, demographic patterns, and criminology have been women; several have been scholars of color; and I would suspect that they come disproportionately from non-elite backgrounds. However, some have been white middle-class men. Further, there have been many women and originally working-class men and

men of color who have not pushed us to challenge taken-for-granted ways of thinking, who have instead operated within traditional frameworks.

Rather, change has come in our understanding of the social when knowers, diverse in race, gender, and class origins, have taken previously marginalized standpoints as their gateway to developing questions, collecting evidence, and developing interpretations. For example, our notion of violence changed when scholars started challenging the prevailing conceptualization of rape by asking whether married women could be raped and whether unwanted sex with an acquaintance could be considered rape. But they could not simply ask women if they had been raped, since the dominant definition of the word in our culture made it very difficult for any of us to recognize rape by an intimate. Scholars had to re-operationalize various sexual behaviors from the perspective of women's interests and preferences (see, e.g., Russell 1984).

Similarly, our ideas of how wages are determined changed when scholars started asking whether the work women were doing was adequately described and consistently evaluated with analogous masculine jobs in existing pay systems. These scholars, too, found that they could not simply ask women and working-class men to describe their jobs, because they, like the rest of us, were blinded by elitist standards that hid large components of skill, stress, and/or responsibility in non-elite jobs (Steinberg and Hagnere 1987). What made it possible to ask the question was taking these workers and their contributions seriously. In both of these examples, and, I would predict, in most cases, knowledge has changed in feminist directions when knowers have taken the experiences, the material interests, the descriptions, and the accounts of women and oppressed men into account in developing it.

Social versus subjectivist epistemologies

Walby is responding to a real problem within feminist scholarship, but the problem is not the theoretical argument but rather with the subjectivist way it has been popularly transformed. Walby is correct in arguing that this popularized subjectivist stance is politically disempowering. However, her solution, critical realist epistemology, is sociologically naive and, thus, ultimately disempowering.

In the end, the choice between critical realism and standpoint theory has to do with how we understand the knower. Are we looking at knowers as abstract individuals swimming about in an amorphous cultural soup, as critical realism implies? Or are we seeing knowers as people who are lo-

cated in specific positions in the social relations organizing inequalities by race, class, gender, and nation, with all that implies for conflicting material interests, access to interpretive frameworks, and admission to effective participation in the dominant discourse?

Standpoint theory is not a theory — it is a political stance and a methodological strategy. It poses political questions for each scholar: whose questions do we ask; from whose lives, needs, and interests do we begin; whose ordering of experience do we take seriously; to whom are we responsible to communicate; when has a question been adequately answered? Whether and, more importantly, under what conditions the knowledges developed from contrasting standpoints are commensurable is an empirical question — an exciting and crucial question. Taking contrasting standpoints seriously and working to reconcile differences among them is the heart of what feminist scholarship can contribute to social understanding. Standpoint theory, as I interpret it, identifies the authority of our experience as scholars and calls us to take responsibility for how we exercise the social power that we have. Rejecting our own authority is, from this perspective, intellectually irresponsible, as well as politically naive.

Why is the popular, subjectivist version of standpoint theory so different from the arguments that have been formally detailed by scholars whom most would recognize as its leading developers? Why does this misunderstanding not go away, even though many have taken pains to try to dispel it? A fully social standpoint analysis casts some light on the problem. Consider the location of feminist scholars in the West. Those of us who have grown up in Western cultures have developed our worldviews within and daily encounter pervasive cultural discourses of individualism. We have been culturally prepared to be satisfied with and even to prefer personalized and subjectivist accounts of human behavior and outcomes.

Those of us who are women are oppressed by gender. Within the academy, this takes the form of devaluing the worth of what we do: our areas of scholarship are held to be less central to our disciplines, our teaching is less dynamic, and our service is, like housekeeping, underrated and never ending. Our cultures, broad and narrow, do not grant us the automatic authority bestowed on men. It is not surprising that we might be more comfortable with an epistemology that accords special authority to the underdog. While we are in many ways diverse and disproportionately occupy the lower strata of the academic hierarchy, women in academe still share a relatively privileged class location compared to the broader population. The racialized class organization of education specifically, and society more generally, restricts the flow of working-class people, especially if they are not white, into our ranks. We do not daily struggle to feed ourselves, to

have a place to live, to keep our loved ones safe while we work; we do not typically worry about what next event will topple any tenuous sense of economic security we may have attained. Further, academics are less likely, especially if we are white, to have personal relationships with people who face these economic insecurities. Those of us who are economically privileged can be a little more patient about some kinds of social change—for us, change may be more a deeply held moral commitment than a pressing material necessity. We can afford to indulge in a lack of clear answers.

The standpoint of feminist scholars has limitations but it also has strengths. We have access to discourses different from those of the people with whom we ally ourselves. We spend long hours and years working at our craft. Through research, teaching, consulting, and other scholarly work, we have created experiences for ourselves to which others do not have access. We are in a privileged position in the social division of labor organizing the production of knowledge, an important part of which is the opportunity to strengthen our collective understanding through rigorous intellectual debate. These characteristics of our social location are not only valid but highly valuable resources for producing knowledge.

A fully social standpoint theory offers us a strategy for constructing knowledge that explicitly takes into account the distortions prompted by social relations of domination and works to ground and reconcile divergences. Ultimately, it presents us with a political challenge and holds us accountable as scholars for our role in meeting it. The surest way to increase the commensurability of standpoints is to use them strategically to construct knowledge that exposes and undermines the social relations that now divide us.

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