

Standpoint Theory in Feminist Practice

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In *The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism*, Nancy Hartsock draws on Marxian theory to suggest feminist standpoint as an epistemological tool. She argues that a feminist standpoint may be achieved where the social and biological position of the female group enables them to understand the relational nature of their oppression and the structures that proliferate their subordination. However, scholars have argued for an expansion of this application of standpoint theory in feminist practice to account for the racialized and gendered experience of black women, and the unique standpoint accessible to these individuals. Although standpoint theory offers an effective tool for recognizing the unique insight of marginalized groups, its broader application in feminist practice is necessary as its strict duality between the subservient and dominant group perspectives overlooks the multiple dimensions in which women may be oppressed, and risks stagnating the advancement of women's political interests as intended.

This essay will describe the conditions of standpoint theory, its application to feminist epistemology, and the political implications of its use. It will then consider its challenges and its potential expansion to avoid the downfalls of its original conceptualization. Altogether, this analysis aims to reveal the viability of standpoint theory's application in feminist practice.

Hartsock describes a standpoint as an exclusive perspective from which the nature of societal relations is made apparent (Hartsock 1997, 218). Hartsock describes standpoint theory as rooted in the material conditions of individuals which bind them to particular forms of labor, structure how they develop relations with others, and alter their understanding of their social position (ibid., 220). In applying Marxist ideas, the surplus value produced by the proletariat is appropriated by the bourgeoisie. The oppressed and dominant group produce differing perspectives in which the latter may determine material distribution and devalue the work of the laborer in championing the exchange of goods rather than production. In their oppression, the proletariat may recognize these power relations (ibid.). A standpoint then marks the conscious shift from a descriptive category to a political category from which a group may invest in coalition-building to move beyond these structures (ibid.). As an epistemological tool, it is only through the adoption of the proletariat's standpoint that a broader analysis of power relations may be revealed (ibid.).

Similarly, Hartsock argues that this methodological approach may be used to uncover the phallogocentric structures that dominate societal institutions (ibid., 221). She begins with the claim

that a feminist standpoint may be derived from women's material life activity as dictated by the sexual division of labor. In terms of subsistence, female labor is subsumed by the production of use-values. This refers to their production of social goods within the home and their generation of services (not commodities) for wages outside the home (ibid., 223-224). In contrast to male labor in which individuals are less concerned with work inside the home, the division between work and personal life is less apparent for women as they remain more deeply connected to the goods they produce (ibid.). Additionally, female labor involves their reproductive and child-rearing capacity. This labor involves a profound interconnection of mind and body as females must recede their physical boundaries for the production, socialization, and development of children and family life (ibid., 224-225). In this, an individual's separation to the concrete material world is further eroded due to their complex connections beyond basic agreements of cooperation or mere instrumental value.

Hartsock supports this by considering the social influences that maintain the development of women's relational capacity. In reference to the oedipal crisis, males are more likely to see themselves as separate from their mother as they strive for independence from the mother-infant relationship (ibid., 226). Females tend to retain a stronger relation to both parents as the father participates less in child-rearing (from which girls do not feel the need to separate), and the female adopts the interpersonal skills of their mother (ibid.).

Consequently, Hartsock argues that the sexual division of labor and opposing experiences in the social world between the male and female sex leads to the formation of an abstract conception of masculinity and a feminist standpoint. Abstract masculinity involves the development of boundaries between the concrete and the abstract where males strive to separate from the material world (ibid., 227). In contrast, the female experience encourages the development of empathic values and is characterized by a deep-seated connectedness between women and their world (ibid., 229). The valuation of men's work at the expense of women's labor distorts the ideals promoted in society. Females then may develop group consciousness and a unique standpoint through acknowledging the nature of this relation. From this, they may liberate themselves from the distortion of male-dominated institutions (ibid., 233).

Standpoint theory is beneficial then for feminist practice as it provides a tool to recognize the epistemic authority women may develop through their oppression. Modeled on Marxist theory, the generalization of women's experience to present a duality of knowledge between the

oppressed and dominant group enables a widely applicable basis from which the male-centred structures may be critiqued. As Hartsock argues, this generalization is possible as the female sex is largely affected by both their biological capacity to bear children and their service as a producer of use-value (and their institutional responsibility to do so regardless of their choice) (ibid., 222). The sexual division of labor and differing personalities that are derived from this arrangement provides an effective starting point for feminist analysis as these factors permeate all women's activity in broader society to some extent.

In linking the anatomic essential capacities of all females provides a basis for them to identify their commonalities regardless of race or class. Hartsock theorizes that the collectivization of women through these commonalities provides greater opportunity for a community characterized by connection rather than polarization and hostility (ibid., 233). This is because the elimination of gendered labor requires restructuring the nature of social relations to refrain from valuing the work or qualities of one group over another. Accordingly, the oppressions of broader society are thought to be alleviated in the process (ibid.). Seen in this way, standpoint theory is advantageous for feminist practice as it provides a lens to produce the requisite group identity for mobilization and political action.

Conversely, this articulation of standpoint theory risks overgeneralizing the nature of social relations by overlooking the multiple identities for which women may be subjugated. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, the value of feminist movements may be measured in its inclusion of people of color and black women as social change is not possible otherwise (Hill Collins 1997, 252). To expand on this point, the importance of their inclusion is emphasized in the Combahee River Collective's early conceptions of intersectionality. In *A Black Feminist Statement*, the collective argues that the racialized and gendered structure of society produces a unique experience for black women in which they endure both racial and sexual oppression (Combahee 1997, 64). Further, Kimberle Crenshaw notes how black women's subjugation is not accurately reflected in discourse as all gendered oppression is strongly linked to white women and all racial oppression commonly references the experience of black men (Crenshaw 1997, 140). This is demonstrated through her discussion of court cases such as *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*. In this case, the law failed to recognize the unique discrimination experienced by black women by dismissing their employment discrimination allegations on the basis that the company had black male and white female employees (ibid., 148).

In disregarding the particular ways oppression manifests for black women, Elsa Brown argues that movements take on a political liability. As Brown describes, culture provides the context necessary to interpret social facts (Brown 1997, 273). In this, any attempt to analyze social relations by isolating a narrow set of factors risks the possibility of overlooking critical information regarding individuals' lived experiences (ibid., 276). For example, Brown points out how the opportunities given to white women to enter the work force came at the expense of women of color who are exploited by multi-national companies and are underemployed in the labor market (ibid.). In this, not only is an adequate critique of the structures that oppress black women unavailable, but an analysis of white women's experiences (who are centred in Hartsock's standpoint theory) is also inaccessible. Consequently, this illustrates how a generalized feminist standpoint is not possible given the discrepancies between women's experiences.

Implicit in Hartsock's argument is the objection that recognizing multiple identities overly complicates and disrupts the efficacy of the women's movement. However, as Brown responds, this privileges the experiences of white women by disregarding how women of color are not able to omit how their racialized identity contributes to their oppression (ibid., 276-277). Subsequently, although Brown details how there is no unified "voice" that may accurately represent the multi-dimensional nature of oppression, this inadvertently reaffirms white women as the norm (ibid.). In addition to providing an incomplete account of the nature of dominant female voices, standpoint as articulated by Hartsock is insufficient as it goes further to assign epistemic authority to white women at the expense of women of color. This complicates the struggle for black women as it poses barriers to their collectivization in silencing their attempts to collate their shared experiences (ibid.).

The implications of this on their political organization and mobilization may be observed in how the Combahee River Collective was derived from women's movements in the 1960s as the latter deterred their participation due to elitism and racism (Combahee 1997, 64). Further, this suppresses the efforts of these groups to participate in identity politics in which they may form their own political agenda to pursue their own interests (ibid., 65). In limiting their collectivization and mobilization, Hartsock's theory does not account for how black women may potentially fulfill the conditions of standpoint in a distinct way that offers a more informative analysis of societal power relations.

Although this suggests the importance of developing a distinct black feminist standpoint, it is important to note that this also harbors challenges. As Collins argues, a black feminist standpoint must resist implementing biological prerequisites (i.e. restricting the definition of black feminist thought to only black women) as not all African American females achieve a standpoint (Hill Collins 1997, 242-243). Similarly, it must avoid detaching black feminist thought from the individuals whose perceptions generate its critical ideas as they cannot be produced in isolation from their lived experiences (ibid.).

Despite how the Combahee River Collective recognizes the distinct consciousness that arises from black women's experiences, Collins argues that overt reliance on biological classifications as the source of black women's consciousness and standpoint overlooks how this group may be parsed further into subcategories who do not share similar ideals (ibid.). To reconcile this tension between idealist and materialist conceptions, Collins suggests a black feminist standpoint founded on various dimensions that indirectly tie black women together such as the history of their struggle against racial and gendered oppression (ibid., 244). Therefore, this illuminates how standpoint theory ought to be applied in practice. Similar to the need to apply an intersectional analysis to reveal the power imbalance between white and black women, further consideration regarding other identifying factors (ex. sexual orientation and class) is necessary to ensuring standpoint theory's efficacy.

Therefore, despite the potential advantages of standpoint theory as an epistemological tool, its efficiency in feminist practice is contingent on its consideration of the multiple layers of oppression that exists in phallogocentric institutions. Rather than offering a framework to critique and eliminate oppressive structures, Hartsock's conceptualization of feminist standpoint renders any potential opportunities for political action and collectivization obsolete in reaffirming the power relations that continue to subjugate factions of women. Its application must also be informed by the possibility of articulating an equally narrow formulation of black feminist standpoint. Taken altogether, to foster a rich critique of oppressive structures, standpoint theory must be evaluated as a potentially effective (but not yet sufficient) tool to advancing interests in feminist movements as further analysis beyond the strict oppressed/oppressor duality is required.

## References

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