

Do black women have a privileged epistemology standpoint or is there “no hierarchy of oppression”.

In an era of constant debates about identities and oppression, the thought that the pain encountered by one will obscure the other is more than debatable; it is also extremely divisive. The fabric of feminist epistemology has been stretched and reshaped by the controversy over the epistemological standpoint, where knowledge is claimed to be based on one's social standing (Perez, 2021). The epistemological standpoint is the position from which one constructs their understanding, commonly affected by social identities and their related power structures. The terms 'privilege' and 'hierarchy of oppression' used in this context imply an automatic authority or perspective that grants higher credibility or significance. These concepts portray a situation where some forms of domination are deemed more significant than others (Kwok, 2021; Lorde, 1983). Exposing the intersectionality theory, a concept that suggests that several types of oppression interconnect forming a multi-faceted system that mirrors 'the matrix of domination' (Alinia, 2015), is a question of whether an epistemological hierarchy is indeed possible or beneficial. This essay will explore the idea that claims that black women's epistemology is superior and will point out that the perspective of 'no hierarchy of oppression' is more aligned with the broad umbrella of feminism. It will achieve this by trying to explain why covertly challenging systematic oppression is far more powerful than focusing on the individual suffering.

Reason 1: Epistemological Privilege from Unique Experiences

Looking into the roots of epistemological privilege leads to a fundamental re-examination of how we view and make use of knowledge, particularly in feminist circles. Audre Lorde is a ground-breaking figure who disproves this idea of a linear hierarchy of oppression and argues against the boxing in of oppressions into a fixed order of the worst to the least. In the words of Lorde (1984), our struggle is not against one particular oppression

but a combination of these oppressions, which have a different meaning and consequences for every one of us. Such an angle on epistemology differs sharply from that of mainstream epistemology which postulates marginalized people to have a distinctive standpoint for knowing particular forms of oppression as they go through those. Lorde's essay highlights how these types of oppression are all connected, and thus makes the case for more inclusive notions of feminist struggles and the need for multiple voices in the struggle against systemic inequalities.

Using Lorde's ideas on intersectionality and standpoint epistemology together may be very helpful in providing a deeper understanding of oppression and mechanisms for social change. The integration of diverse vantage points in knowledge production is stressed in this synthesis as no particular stance can capture the complexity of the oppression in total. For instance, Lorde's intersectional approach enables us to explore how marginalized communities are subjected to disproportional "double oppression" during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic increased disadvantages for marginalized people not only in health but also socially and economically, underlining an intricate nature of oppression (Crenshaw, 2020). Black women, for instance, have had to embark on a journey that comes with serious challenges, e.g., working in essential services with fewer protective measures, the burden of caring for others, and the high chances of health risks among others. This circumstance highlights the need for alternative epistemologies that acknowledge the joint and interwoven nature of social identities and oppressions. However, a critique might arise suggesting that standpoint epistemology, if interpreted narrowly, could inadvertently support a hierarchy of oppressions by privileging certain experiences of marginalization over others. This critique posits that while standpoint epistemology seeks to uplift marginalized voices, it risks establishing a new form of exclusion by suggesting some forms of oppression are more valid or worthy of attention than others.

In rebuttal, combining Lorde's intersectional approach with standpoint epistemology offers a solution to this critique by providing a more nuanced and egalitarian framework for understanding and combating oppression. This integration champions a diversity of voices and experiences, recognizing that all forms of oppression are interconnected and cannot be fully understood in isolation. Lorde's work, in harmony with standpoint epistemology, urges us to see the fight against oppression as a collective struggle that benefits from the inclusion of varied perspectives and experiences. This approach does not negate the unique insights provided by different standpoints but rather weaves them together to form a more complete picture of the social fabric. It advocates for a form of solidarity and activism that is empathetic and inclusive, acknowledging the complex realities of those who navigate multiple, intersecting oppressions (Lorde, 1984; Crenshaw, 2020). Thus, the synthesis of Lorde's intersectionality with standpoint epistemology does not merely add to the discourse on oppression but fundamentally transforms it, encouraging a more holistic and inclusive movement toward social justice.

Reason 2: The Myth of an Oppression Hierarchy

A second pillar supporting the thesis of this essay is the contention that oppression, being inherently multifaceted, eludes any form of hierarchical classification. Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal work on intersectionality underpins this argument, asserting that various forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, and more, intersect in complex ways that defy a simple layered structure (Crenshaw, 2021). Crenshaw's intersectionality framework challenges the notion of a linear hierarchy, advocating instead for an understanding of oppressions as mutually constitutive and inextricably linked. The implications of her theory suggest that oppressions cannot be ranked because their impacts are experienced simultaneously in the lived realities of individuals, especially for black women who navigate multiple margins. By asserting that no singular form of oppression can

be considered supreme or foundational, intersectionality aligns with the thesis that the construct of a 'hierarchy of oppression' is a flawed concept. It illuminates how the attempt to prioritize one form of oppression over another fails to account for the complex and overlapping experiences of those who endure them. This line of thought aligns with Lorde's (1983) assertion that no hierarchy of oppressions exists because oppression functions as a network of intersecting forces, each reinforcing the other.

Nonetheless, a counterclaim could suggest that the differential recognizability and acknowledgment of various oppressions in society confer a semblance of hierarchy. Due to factors such as media focus and the historical narrative, certain discriminations become more conspicuous than others. This heightened visibility, often construed as primacy, could inadvertently imply a hierarchy. Duran and Jones (2020) highlight that not all oppressions enjoy the same level of recognition, and this uneven attention can create the illusion that some forms of oppression are more pressing or legitimate. The disparities in visibility may consequently result in the elevation of certain struggles over others within public discourse, a discourse that influences policy and social action. In such instances, the voices that find resonance in mainstream platforms tend to dominate, while others are sidelined, fostering a perception of a hierarchy of oppressions that aligns more with social awareness than with the actual severity or importance of the oppressions themselves (Clark-Parsons, 2018). This argument contends that while visibility is not uniformly extended to all forms of oppression, the societal focus dictates which issues are perceived as more significant, leading to a skewing of priorities that does not necessarily reflect the realities of those experiencing multiple, intersecting oppressions.

In rebuttal, it must be clarified that the visibility of certain oppressions does not equate to a hierarchy. The argument for a hierarchy based on visibility overlooks the dynamic nature of oppression and its capacity to adapt and manifest in varied contexts. Henning

(2021) offers a compelling rebuttal to this notion by suggesting that acknowledging the visibility of certain forms of oppression should not lead to a rank ordering but rather to a more nuanced understanding and combatting of oppression in all its forms. Visibility should catalyze a comprehensive response to all oppressions, rather than setting up a competitive framework. Furthermore, Lorde's (1983) stance remains particularly salient; she contended that recognizing one form of oppression without acknowledging its interconnection with others fails to grasp the complexity of the struggles faced by marginalized individuals. Such a reductionist approach would not only misrepresent the lived experiences of those impacted by multiple oppressions but also inadvertently perpetuate the divisions that intersectionality seeks to dismantle.

The concept of visibility, therefore, should serve as a call to action for inclusivity and recognition of all forms of oppression, rather than a rationale for constructing a hierarchy. This argument reinforces the thesis by underlining that while oppressions may be unequally recognized, they are all equally debilitating and worthy of equal attention and action in the pursuit of social justice.

Reason 3: Intersectional Advocacy and Collective Liberation

Asserting a universal epistemological privilege among black women is an overgeneralization that ignores the diversity of such modes of knowledge in this community. This statement fails to acknowledge the complex links between various forms of oppression that determine how individuals are affected, even among members of the same socioeconomic class or ethnic group. Following Patricia Hill Collins (2022), the monocausal way of looking at black women's oppression is criticized as the approach that takes into account the variety of intersecting forms of oppression that people face is advocated for. Collins' works on intersectionality unpack the spectrum of identity and oppression, going against the idea of a unified narrative of epistemic privileges (Collins, 2022). Black women's

experiences are shaped by multiple and intersecting systems of oppression such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. Recognizing this narrows down the idea of a universal epistemological privilege and increases its oversimplification and reductionism. For instance, health-wise and economic-wise unequal outcomes of black women provide evidence of the complex impacts of interlocking subordination. Research demonstrates that black women bear racial, gender, and socioeconomic burdens that make it challenging fully to understand such health matters as breast cancer and maternal mortality rates (DeSantis, et al., 2019).

In contrast, some may argue that black women as members of the intersection of race and gender are in an advantageous position when it comes to combating oppression as their unique standpoint (fourth category) suggests a certain form of epistemological privilege. This hypothesis that lies at the heart of standpoint epistemology asserts that marginalized groups hold a special advantage in their social positioning, primarily based on their direct contact with certain truths and insights about their experience as oppressed, which are often very difficult to perceive by the people who do not belong to their standpoint (Saint-Croix, 2020). In such a way, the personal experiences of African American women form a unique type of perspective through which they may understand, examine, and express the complexity of the interrelated nature of forms of oppression. Through this angle, we become more knowledgeable about the nature of the unequal relationships in our society and how power functions therein. In addition, it acts as an obstacle where mainstream narratives and ideologies are displaced while advancing and foregrounding the knowledge that is usually looked down on. Through this, in addition to promoting the position of black women, it also adds to the well-rounded picture to understand the systemic injustices. When utilizing their distinct ontological standpoint, black women carry the capability to bring into focus those parts of oppression that might be ignored or understood to a lesser extent which are essential

for the liberation war as a whole from the trap of power and privileges that have engulfed different sections of society.

Nevertheless, one unquestionable thing is that unique insights coming from the real-life experiences of black women should not be confused with a hierarchical advantage. Contrary, these understandings ought to be seen as part of the struggle against exploitation that is done together. The pitfall of erecting these perspectives into the form of epistemological supremacy is that it might unconsciously reinforce the very hierarchies it tries to tear down, for it focuses on some perspectives that are more valuable than others. Additionally, as mentioned by Collins (2022) and other scholars, like Crenshaw (2017), the strength of intersectionality lies in its ability to uncover and recognize multidimensionality of subjugation, which promotes the method of knowledge creation that is based on consideration of various worldviews. In sum, stop seeing black women's insights as perks but recognize them as valuable to a collective understanding of oppression which calls for a massive collective effort of society to solve the problem altogether.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay critically explores the landscape of black feminist thought within the framework of epistemology, particularly challenging the notion of a hierarchical understanding of oppression. It has been illustrated that while black women offer invaluable insights through their lived experiences, the complexity and diversity of these experiences defy any attempt at singular representation or privileging. These narratives, far from being monolithic, unravel the intricate tapestry of intersecting social identities and power dynamics. Through contemporary examples spanning the criminal justice system, healthcare, employment, and the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we witness the multifaceted ways in which oppressions intersect, underscoring the indispensable need for an intersectional lens in our analyses. The discussion has articulated a critique against the

presumed epistemological privilege of black women, cautioning against the pitfalls of oversimplification, essentialism, and further marginalization within epistemic communities. This critique is rooted in an intersectional viewpoint that emphasizes the interconnectedness and multiplicity of oppressions, advocating for non-hierarchical categorizations. The tangible manifestations of oppression, as revealed through the essay, underscore the importance of recognizing the intricate realities of various forms of oppression as a fundamental aspect of any forward-thinking feminist agenda. This approach fosters a recognition of shared struggles among marginalized groups, promoting a unified pursuit of collective liberation. Such an understanding is pivotal, emphasizing the essence of the feminist movement's diversity as it evolves towards advocating for justice that transcends individual stories in favor of a united struggle for freedom.

Essentially, the strength and influence of the feminist movement depend on the diversity it welcomes and how it handles the injustices faced by all. Through the removal of isolated stories and the promotion of collective action, feminism aims to create a world in which freedom is not merely for the selected few but common for all. This vision for a world without discrimination and with justice is the core mission of the feminist movement. The feminist movement is the voice to speak out for the rights and freedoms of all people regardless of their social, economic, or cultural backgrounds.

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