Situated Knowledge

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The concept of "situated knowledge" is a major epistemological tool in feminist and antiracist theory. It presents an alternative to positivist notions of objectivity on the one hand and relativism on the other. The term itself goes back to an article by Donna Haraway first published in 1988 in the journal *Feminist Studies* and titled "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (Haraway, 1991 [1988]). In keeping with Haraway's characteristically provocative use of language, the very title of the article contains two challenges to conventional epistemology and the sociology of knowledge: the pluralization of the word "knowledge" as soon as it is understood as "situated," and the notion that partiality of perspective can be a privilege, when common sense would suggest that "partiality" points to a lack and that a privileged perspective is one that is all-seeing and all-knowing. The latter – the ideal observer–knower–speaker situation as imagined by more traditional epistemologies – is famously lampooned by Haraway as "the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (1991 [1988]: 189).

Although the term "situated knowledge" can be credited to Haraway, the more general idea that knowledge emerges from some particular place in society and history and is somehow shaped by its context has been one of the major themes of modern western philosophy – especially of its post-Kantian and post-Hegelian strands – as well as of the early twentieth-century sociology of knowledge that derived from these strands (Mannheim, 1998 [1936]). Haraway points to the feminist writers Sandra Harding (1986) and Nancy Hartsock (1983, 1985): they, along with others, were crucial to the debate on "feminist standpoint theory" – which was one of the key theoretical disputes in Anglophone feminism of the 1980s and early 1990s – and to the sociology of science, in particular "feminist science studies," of which Haraway herself was a key protagonist. "Knowledge" can in this context refer to scientific knowledge, the knowledge of social actors in general, and that of social movement actors in particular. In recent years situated knowledge has been used in various fields of study, from education to management to interculturalism (Eglash, 2013; Flower, 2003; Gahegan and Pike, 2006; Leino, 2012; Nazarea, 2003; Richardson-Ngwenya, 2013). The discussion on situated knowledges has also crucially informed the wider debate on the intersectionality of social divisions that began, in different ways, to dominate feminist theory from the early 1990s onward, so that a more comprehensive discussion of the concept would need to examine also the now much more voluminous literature on intersectionality (Tanesini, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Lykke, 2012: chs 2 and 8).

Haraway (1991 [1988]) pivots her argument on the observation made by the sociology of science that actual scientists – in the natural as well as in the human sciences – neither

believe nor act on "the ideological doctrines of disembodied scientific objectivity" as found in student textbooks (1991 [1988]: 184). She argues that feminist theory needs to find a way "to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims … *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world" that can be reformed such as to "have a chance for a future" (1991 [1988]: 187). She sees as central to such a theory the concept of "embodied objectivity" (1991 [1988]: 188). "Only partial perspective promises objective vision" (1991 [1988]: 190), since accounting for partiality means that "we might become answerable," that is, responsible, "for what we learn how to see." Haraway agrees with feminist theorists who believe that vision is better from "the peripheries and the depths" (1991 [1988]: 191) but warns that the "standpoints of the subjugated are not 'innocent' positions": rather, because they proclaim their partiality, they are less likely to refuse critical interrogation. They produce "embodied objectivity" – as opposed to a relativism that claims that any perspective was just as valid as any other – because "partial, locatable, critical knowledges" sustain "the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (1991 [1988]: 191). Haraway links this notion to the demand for a "commitment to mobile positioning and to passionate detachment" (1991 [1988]: 192), which is incompatible with "innocent 'identity' politics and epistemologies." The "situated knowledges" do not follow from what one *is*, as they are always constructed by systems of vision that are in turn informed by power relations.

Haraway argues that this points to the birth of "non-isomorphic subjects, agents and territories" rather than to the Nietzschean–postmodern "death of the subject" (1991 [1988]: 192). While the self-identical, self-satisfied vision is that of the conquering master subject, the "split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history" (1991 [1988]: 193; see also Eglash, 2013). Vision results from having instruments of vision – eyes, at a minimum – that need to be produced first of all, and from positioning these instruments, which requires "optics," that is, a "politics of positioning." The politics of positioning is not arbitrary, though: "Positioning implies responsibility" which points to an ethical dimension (Haraway, 1991 [1988]: 193).

The insight that one's knowledge, values, goals, and, with them, one's political practices and involvements are not independent of one's positioning in society has now become a commonplace view after a long struggle about how to theorize the ways we produce knowledge, which has always been of strategic importance for various social movements. Issues of contention include the extent to which positionality and standpoint are bound up with each other; whether individuals or social groupings are the basis of situated knowledges; whether some social positionings provide a privileged access to truth over against others; and whether or to what degree the knowledges that can be won at different locations are incommensurable.

Taking her cue from Marx's and Engels's (1977) argument in *The German Ideology*, Dorothy Smith (1990) called "ideological" the kind of thinking that simplistically reduces knowledge to its social base, rejecting the notion of an automatic correlation between social location and standpoint. She strongly emphasized the need to differentiate between social positioning and social practice: situated knowledge needs to be anchored in actual social practices (which are linked to certain social positionings but not reducible to them), rather than immediately to social positionings. This can facilitate the recognition that a variety of practices can be related to the same positioning and can provide a basis for a dialogue with people who, although

from other social positionings, share similar practices (as well as similar goals and values). Similarly, Nancy Hartsock asserted that the concept of the "feminist standpoint" had been developed in order to *oppose* the view that social groups "see … the world in a particular way" just because they exist "in a particular social location" (Hartsock, 1997: 371–472). Another facet of the debate has been "the difference between the individual and the group as units of analysis," to use Patricia Hill Collins's formulation (1997: 375). The concept of situated knowledges is neither based on "methodological individualism" (in that sense of a Weberian sociology, in which Hekman is inclined to take it: see Hekman, 1997), nor is it a form of communitarianism. It leaves the conceptual tension between "group" and "individual" unresolved.

"The social" consists of the practices of individuals who relate to one another in a variety of ways. These practical relationships constitute the situatedness, or else the particular subjectivity, of individuals as well as of groups ("communities") or categories ("classes") of individuals. The positionings of social individuals or groups are multifaceted, intersectional, shifting, and contradictory. They are also often antagonistic, which is why positioning constitutes and shapes but does not specifically, (directly) causally, and predictably determine their experiences and perceptions, identifications and normative values systems (Yuval-Davis, 2011: ch. 1). Although one aspect or dimension of the "force field" of social relations that constitutes one's "situatedness" or subjectivity might strongly push one toward one particular way of experiencing or acting, others will push in other directions and may prove stronger.

One further issue of contention has been the notion of the epistemic privilege that accrues from marginality (Bar On, 1993). Some Marxist-influenced feminists have drawn here on the notion in (early) Marx and Lukács that the "standpoint of the proletariat" (Lukács, 1971 [1923]) is a particularly good place from which one could understand modern society; but they have overlooked that this Marxist notion presupposes that the proletariat is politically marginalized, yet socially central to society and its production of wealth – in other words socially powerful. Most feminists draw on the much less specific notion that marginality in itself, especially the role of the "outsider within" (Simmel, 1971 [1908]; Merton, 1972; Park, 1928; Collins, 1986), provides opportunities to gain knowledge (Bar On, 1993: 87; Wylie, 2003: 34), although some warn against the tendency, prevalent in identity politics, to "compete" in the Oppression Olympics (Hancock, 2011) as to which category or grouping is the most oppressed. Jameson (2004: 147) also points to Du Bois's notion of double consciousness as designating specific, situated "epistemological possibilities." As an alternative to the widespread idea that marginality provides privileged access to truth because the marginalized have no interest in deception, Jameson argues that the epistemic advantage of the proletariat could be its "capacity to think in terms of process" (2004: 146), whereas bourgeois epistemology (according to Lukács) tends to organize thinking around the dichotomy individual subject–overwhelming, objective society. Jameson also mentions "the very moment of truth of ghetto life itself," namely "the helplessness of the village community before the perpetual and unpredictable imminence of the lynching or the pogrom" (2004: 148). This would be an instance of situatedness that produces a cognitive framework for which the experience of fear is constitutive rather than occasional, as for everybody else.

The rationalist argument on what is "in the interest" of the marginalized is rather dubious anyway: people do not always do what is "in their interest." The "outsider within" argument is more plausible when it relies on societal contradictions and cognitive dissonances experienced by the subject rather than on "interest" in the sense of rational choice theory.

One of the key questions, and perhaps the one least conclusively theorized, is that of how social situatedness translates into social practices, and how social practices in turn translate into situated knowledges. Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) have argued that this is impossible to understand without adding the concept of the "situated imagination." The faculty of the imagination is "creative" both of the category "society" itself and of the processes through which we perceive it and know of it (Castoriadis, 1987). Crucially, the imagination in this context is not straightforwardly a faculty of the individual but also a social faculty. Furthermore, the situated imagination encompasses Adorno's concept of fantasy that preserves the wish and the (bodily) impulses in thought and knowledge (Adorno, 1978). Experience, mediated through the faculties of the intellect and of the imagination, produces knowledge as well as imaginings, and along with them meanings, values, visions, goals, critical and creative along with reactionary and destructive potentials. Here lies rooted the possibility and the indeterminacy of (or else the freedom for) social change. Like the cognitive side of the mental process, its imaginary side is shaped by the many intersecting aspects and dimensions of society on the one hand, the individual reality of sensual and thus corporeal experience on the other hand. Or, to be more precise, it is shaped by the contradictory unity that "the social" and "the individual" form.

SEE ALSO: Epistemology; Intersectionality

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