

# Situated knowledge & feminist critiques of science

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# Feminist perspectives on knowledge are questioning:

- Dominant knowledge practices (social organization of knowledge)
- Dominant notions of valid knowledge (science at the epistemic level)
- Dominant notions of legitimate knowledge production (e.g. methodologies)



# Biochimica et Biophysica Acta (BBA) - Molecular Basis of Disease

Volume 1866, Issue 6, 1 June 2020, 165767



Review

## Diet, inflammation and the gut microbiome: Mechanisms for obesity-associated cognitive impairment

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Review

Diet, inflammation  
microbiome: M  
associated cog

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**Whose  
Science?  
Whose  
Knowledge?**

**Sandra  
Harding**

*Thinking  
from  
Women's  
Lives*

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Sandra Harding  
“Standpoint theory”



Donna Haraway  
“Situated knowledge”



Patricia Hill-Collins  
“Outsider/within”

# “Situated knowledge”

- Feminist epistemologies in general are **social** epistemologies
- Feminist theorists in general focus on privilege/oppression (**systemic** relations of power in society between groups)
- Key tenet #1: **all** knowledge is situated (**≠ objectivism**).
- Key tenet #2: the **social location** of the inquirer is of epistemic importance.
- Not all social locations have equal epistemic standing (**≠ relativism**).

“Social location” = “being somewhere”  
(as opposed to “being nowhere”)

### “Objectivism”

- “Truth”, independent of the inquirer
- *The god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere* (Haraway)

= Being nowhere

### Relativism

- «Truths», relative to the inquirer
- *A way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally* (Haraway)

= Being nowhere

# Vision, as a metaphor for knowledge

- Embodied,  
technologically mediated,  
**always partial**
- Infinite vision is an  
illusion: «to play the god  
trick», «a conquering gaze  
from nowhere» (Haraway)





# “Standpoint theory” (Harding)

- Standpoint more than a mere social location or perspective
- Standpoint = building an epistemic, critical, socially-located community
  - Critical awareness
  - Collective project
  - An achievement
- Social underprivilege = epistemic advantage
- “Strong” objectivity (vs. traditional, “weak” understanding of scholarly objectivity): “Starting thought from women ´s lives”

[Sci Adv.](#) 2019 Oct; 5(10): eaaw7238.

PMCID: PMC6785250

Published online 2019 Oct 9. doi: [10.1126/sciadv.aaw7238](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aaw7238)

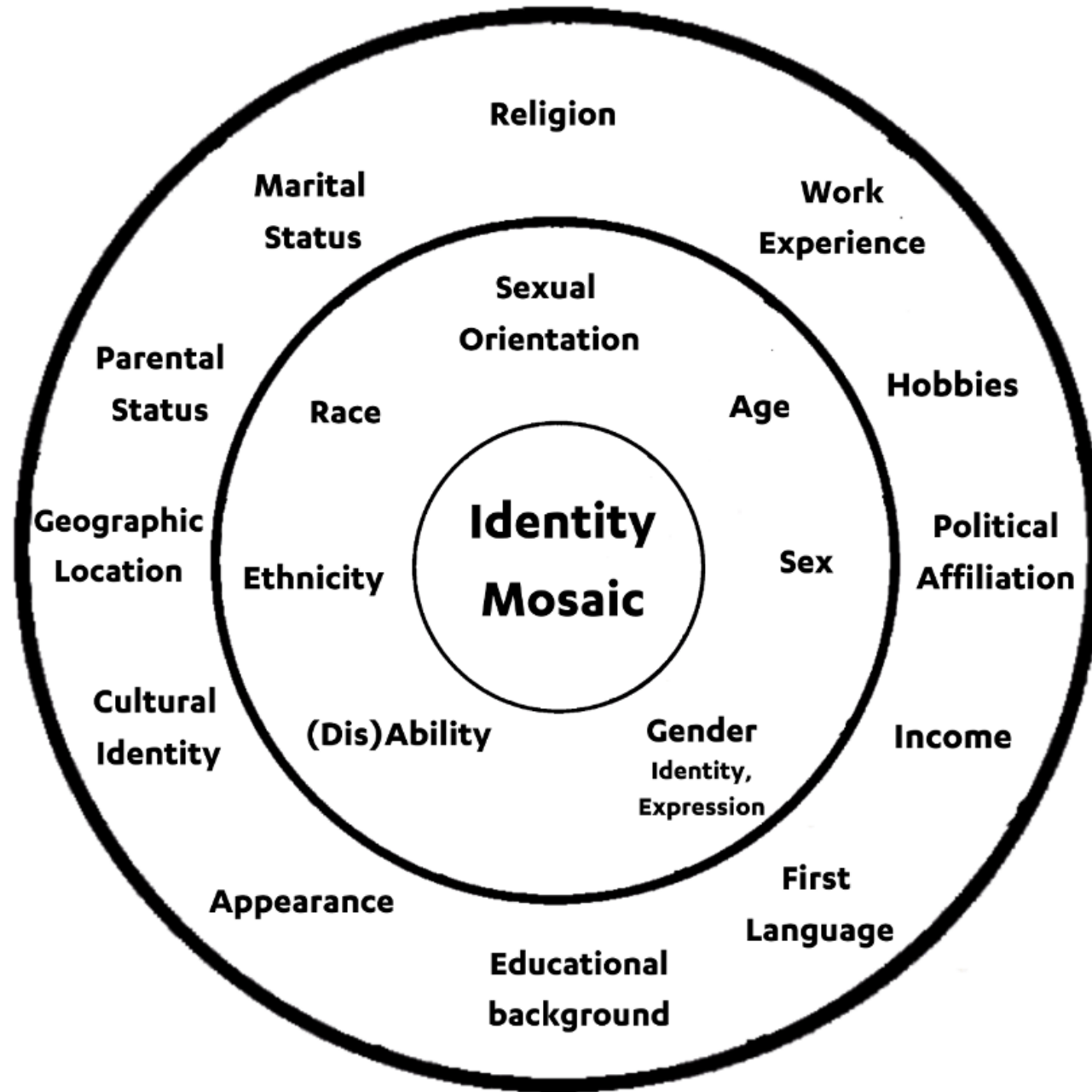
PMID: [31633016](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31633016/)

## Topic choice contributes to the lower rate of NIH awards to African-American/black scientists

[Travis A. Hoppe](#),<sup>1,2</sup> [Aviva Litovitz](#),<sup>1,2</sup> [Kristine A. Willis](#),<sup>3,\*</sup> [Rebecca A. Meseroll](#),<sup>1,2</sup> [Matthew J. Perkins](#),<sup>1,2</sup>  
[B. Ian Hutchins](#),<sup>1,2</sup> [Alison F. Davis](#),<sup>4</sup> [Michael S. Lauer](#),<sup>5</sup> [Hannah A. Valentine](#),<sup>4</sup> [James M. Anderson](#),<sup>2</sup> and  
[George M. Santangelo](#)<sup>1,2,†</sup>

# “Outsider/within” (Hill-Collins)

- When marginalized groups gain access to exclusionary institutions: dual positioning, decentered
- New insights, new (research) questions?
- Tension: striving to become an insider / challenging existing knowledge practices
- Presupposes “oppositional consciousness”



# Methodological implications: Accountability through reflexivity and positionality

- Reflexive transparency ≠ personal confessions
- This operation is rooted in an epistemological/theoretical tradition
- It has a specific purpose: an account of how your subjectivity shapes your inquiry (= your research questions and process)
- Your subjectivity is not something you need to silence, neutralize, apologize for
- Not an “acknowledgment of bias” – it does not make your knowledge less valuable! On the contrary, capitalize on your positioning.

# Reflecting on your social location

- Your **ascribed social identities**, linked with specific histories of privilege and oppression (gender, race, ability, class...)
- Your social relations and **roles** (affected by those **identities**)
- The social **norms** that affect you (behaviour considered appropriate for your **roles**)
- Your **subjective identities** (incorporated into your self-understandings)
- Your own attitudes toward your **ascribed social identities** and **subjective identities**

# Types of reflexivity

1. **Personal.** How are our unique perspectives influencing the research?
2. **Interpersonal.** What relationships exist and how are they influencing the research and the people involved? What power dynamics are at play?
3. **Methodological.** How are we making methodological decisions and what are their implications?
4. **Contextual.** How are aspects of context influencing the research and people involved?

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- The Science Question in Feminism, 1986.
- **Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives, 1991.**
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- Science and Social Inequality: Feminist and Postcolonial Issues, 2006.
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# Hill-Collins (selected)

- Collins, Patricia Hill 1986. Learning from the outsider within: the sociological significance of black feminist thought i *Social Problems* 33(6): 14-32
- Lethal Intersections: Race, Gender and Violence. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024
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# Haraway (selected)

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- The Haraway Reader (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- + several interviews with Haraway