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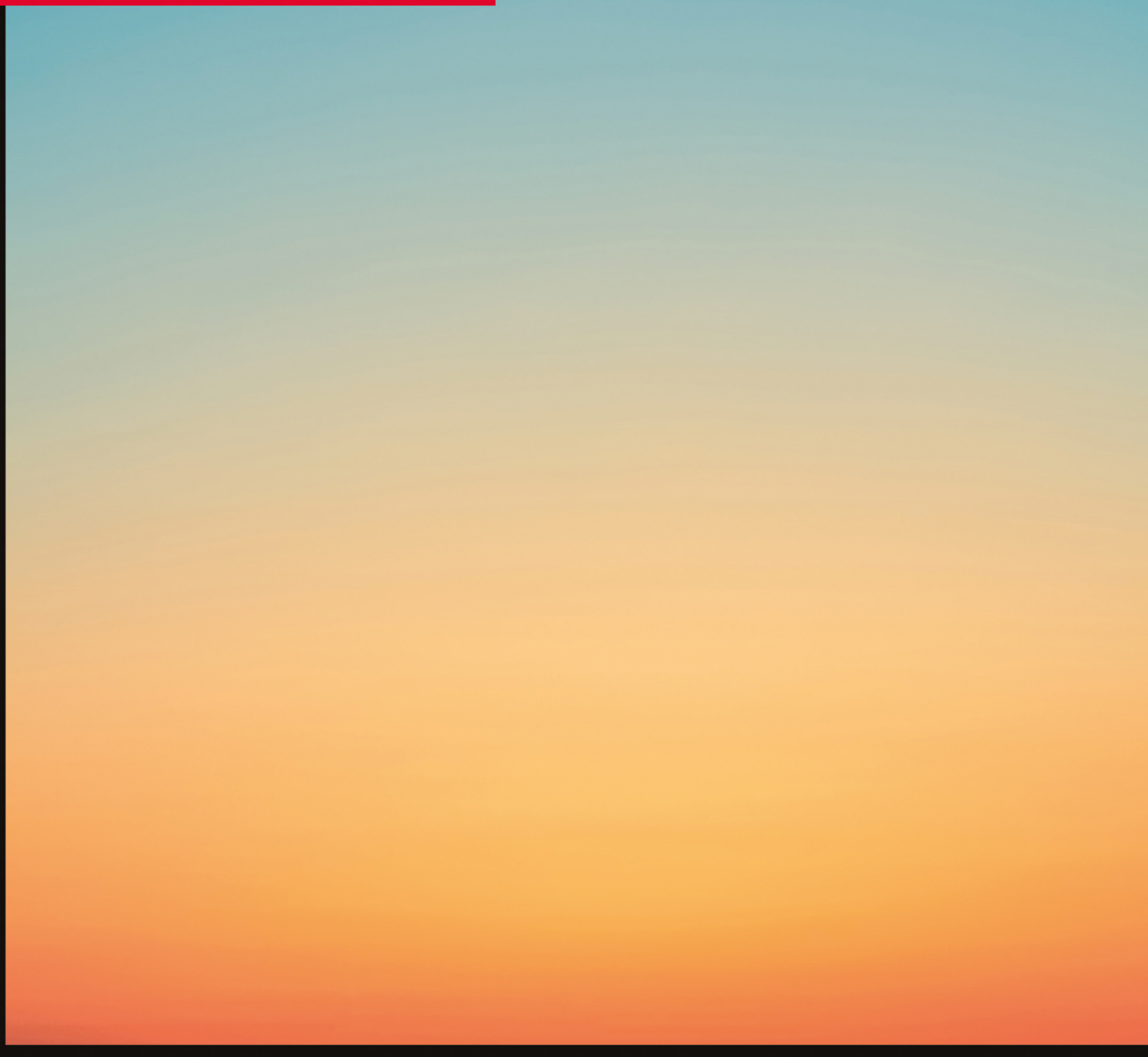

The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Philosophy of Science

Sharon Crasnow and Kristen Intemann

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SITUATED KNOWLEDGE AND OBJECTIVITY

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Introduction

Situated knowledge, broadly understood, is the view that the social location of the inquirer is of epistemic importance. However, not just any kind of social location is of interest to feminist philosophers of science. Feminist philosophers focus on those social locations that track systemic relations of power in the society. Systemic relations of power involve the ability of members of one social group, the dominant group, to constrain the choices available to members of another social group, the subordinate group. Systemic relations of power function as vehicles of domination when they constrain choices in ways that are harmful for members of the subordinate group. Like other social epistemologists, feminist philosophers of science draw attention to the social location of the inquirer, but they differ from others by focusing on the question of how relations of power and domination interact with knowledge.

Given the interest in power and domination, feminist philosophers of science have examined the epistemic significance of the inquirer's gender, ethnic identity, race, class, sexual identity, and (dis)ability. These attributes are morally and politically significant because in many national and cultural contexts they mark social locations divided by socio-economic inequalities or other ways in which social locations can be privileged or not privileged. As Alison Wylie explains, in feminist philosophy of science the situatedness of epistemic agents is construed in structural terms rather than as a matter of individual perspective or idiosyncratic skills and talents (2011: 162). Wylie emphasizes that the epistemically interesting features of social locations are not to be understood as essential properties of particular social groups. It is a matter of empirical inquiry to find out how the social location of the inquirer shapes her social experience in a particular context and how her social experience is relevant to specific research projects (Wylie 2003: 32).

In 1980s and 1990s, the idea of situated knowledge was advanced as a criticism of the myth-like understanding of objectivity as "the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway 1991: 189). Feminist historian of science Donna Haraway insisted that all knowledge claims, including scientific knowledge claims, are situated, and their situatedness is a key to understanding who is accountable for them (1991: 191). She argued that knowledge claims provide merely a partial perspective on the object of inquiry, and therefore, the ideal of objectivity as impartiality is no longer plausible. In addition to questioning the "god-trick" version of objectivity, Haraway also questioned a version of relativism. According to Haraway, "Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally" (1991: 191). In her view, both objectivity as "god-trick" and relativism as its "mirror twin" obscure the epistemic importance of social location, the

former by denying that knowledge claims are made in particular social locations, and the latter by denying that social locations can either impede or promote knowledge-seeking. While relativists grant equal epistemic standing to all social locations, Haraway, like many feminist philosophers, suggests that some social locations are better than others from an epistemic point of view.

In this chapter I discuss two questions that are motivated by the idea of situated knowledge. First, if the epistemic importance of social locations is contingent as many feminist philosophers suggest, how do social locations come to have epistemically interesting consequences, if not always, at least under some circumstances? Second, if relativism as epistemic equality of all social locations is problematic and if objectivity as freedom from social locations and partial perspectives is not a plausible alternative, how should the ideal of objectivity be redefined?

Local Knowledge and Social Experience

Social locations are thought to matter epistemically because they give rise to local knowledge and social experiences that are specific to the social location in question. Local knowledge is knowledge about a particular cultural, economic, or social practice and its circumstances, and it is best acquired by participating in the practice. Social experiences are social in two senses: they arise in particular social locations and they are shared with other people inhabiting similar social locations. The more complex societies are in terms of the division of labor and the more unequal citizens are in terms of their economic resources, education, and health, the more radically different the social experiences of citizens are likely to be. Moreover, the more pluralistic societies are in terms of political values and religious affiliations and the more multicultural they are in terms of ethnic identities and languages, the more likely it is that the social experiences of citizens will diverge. As Wylie explains, "social location systematically shapes and limits what we know, including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit understanding, what we take knowledge to be as well as specific epistemic content" (2003: 31).

In scientific research, the social experience of the inquirer can be a source of criticism and creativity. Patricia Hill Collins argues that scientists and scholars who are "outsiders within" occupy an epistemically fruitful social location due to their first-hand experience of marginal or subordinate social locations in the society and access to the insider's perspective on academic knowledge production (2004: 103). Their unique social location enables them to assume a critical posture toward research that either ignores or distorts the reality of marginal or subordinate social locations. In virtue of the "creative tension of outsider within status" they are well positioned to identify anomalies in dominant scientific paradigms (2004: 122).

The idea of situated knowledge can highlight not only the social experience of the inquirer but also the social experiences of research participants and collaborators, that is, people who are studied and who can participate in the study in different ways, from agreeing to be observed and interviewed to contributing to the design of the study. With appropriate methods of participation, observation, and interview, scientists can do justice to local knowledge and the social experiences of research participants and collaborators. Sometimes scientists need to be engaged in social and political activism in order to earn the trust of research participants and collaborators. Relations of trust are of epistemic importance especially when the position of the scientist, on the one hand, and the positions of research participants and collaborators, on the other hand, are so unequal that they threaten to undermine the research process (Crasnow 2008: 1103).

Besides being a source of criticism and evidence, social experience can inspire new theoretical perspectives, that is, ways of conceptualizing the social phenomenon under study and the social mechanisms that are thought to generate and maintain the social phenomenon. By "social mechanism" I mean a constellation of human agents and activities that are organized so that they tend to bring about certain collective outcomes. For example, when a social scientist investigates

gender-based discrimination in academia, she has to conceptualize discrimination so that she can distinguish it from non-discriminatory processes. Discrimination can be conceptualized narrowly by focusing merely on overt forms of discrimination such as not hiring women even when they have the best qualifications. A broader and more refined conceptualization of discrimination might include subtle forms of discrimination such as micro-inequities that have an impact on women scientists' motivation, confidence in their capabilities, opportunities for collaboration, and visibility (Rolin 2006; Wylie et al. 2007). A broader conceptualization of discrimination might include a more complex account of the social mechanisms that maintain discrimination. The social mechanisms can involve not merely a bias against women in hiring decisions but also social forces that undermine women's academic productivity. A social scientist who has herself experienced micro-inequities is likely to prefer the broader and more refined understanding of discrimination and its causes.

In this section, I have argued that social locations can matter epistemically by giving rise to local knowledge and social experiences which are sources of criticism, evidence, and theoretical perspectives. Moreover, the social location of the inquirer involves relations with research participants and collaborators. The ability of the inquirer to create and maintain mutual relations of trust may be crucial to her epistemic project. I have argued also that theoretical perspectives can grow out of social experiences because they highlight those aspects of natural or social reality the inquirer considers as significant. This insight is developed further in Helen Longino's critical contextual empiricism (CCE) which is the topic of the next section.

From Situation to Context

In CCE, situated knowledge is analyzed as contextual knowledge. CCE employs three different notions of context, an evidential, a specialty, and a social-cultural context. The first notion of context, an evidential context, figures in the argument that epistemic justification is relative to background assumptions because such assumptions are needed to establish the relevance of empirical evidence to a hypothesis or a theory (Longino 1990: 43). As Longino explains, "a state of affairs will only be taken to be evidence that something else is the case in light of some background belief or assumption asserting a connection between the two" (1990: 44). The second notion of context, a specialty context, plays a role in Longino's analysis of objectivity, in which she argues that objectivity is a function of a specialty community's practice rather than an individual scientist's observations and reasoning (1990: 74). The third notion of context, a social-cultural context, is employed in her analysis of the role of values in science, in which she argues that values belonging to the social and cultural context of science can enter into evidential context via background assumptions (1990: 83). Longino combines the three notions of context when she argues that we should adopt a community-based account of objectivity because values belonging to the social and cultural context of science can influence the evidential context of inquiry via background assumptions.

In CCE, the social experience of the inquirer is of epistemic interest especially when it functions as a source of value-laden background assumptions. While not all background assumptions "encode social values," many of them do (Longino 1990: 216). Value-laden background assumptions are difficult to identify when they are shared by all or most community members. In homogenous scientific communities, "they acquire an invisibility that renders them unavailable for criticism" (1990: 80). Longino argues that scientific communities benefit from heterogeneous social experiences and values because scientists are more likely to question value-laden background assumptions when the values in question differ from their own (2002: 131).

In CCE, the situatedness of scientific knowledge means also that scientific knowledge claims can *legitimately* be value-laden. Like many feminist philosophers of science, Longino (1990) rejects

the value-free ideal, the view that contextual values are not allowed to play any role in the practices where scientific theories and hypotheses are justified and evaluated epistemically. As she explains, "contextual values, interests and value-laden assumptions *can* constrain scientific practice in such a way as to affect the results of inquiry and do so without violating constitutive rules of science" (1990: 83). Moreover, she does not believe that it is possible to eliminate the influence of moral and social values on epistemic justification "without seriously truncating the explanatory ambitions of the sciences" (1990: 223). In response to the worry that value-laden background assumptions lead to "unbridled relativism" (1990: 216), Longino introduces the ideal of "social value management" (2002: 50). The ideal recommends that the role of contextual values in scientific inquiry is analyzed, criticized, and judged as either acceptable or unacceptable by a specialty community that satisfied certain conditions (see the section on objectivity).

By emphasizing the role of specialty communities, Longino introduces yet another meaning to the idea of situated knowledge. Knowledge claims are situated in the sense that they are addressed to particular epistemic communities. In virtue of being members of epistemic communities, scientists have epistemic responsibilities toward other community members. This means that they have an obligation to engage criticism when it is appropriate, and to defend their knowledge claims by appealing to the standards of evidence and argumentation accepted by other community members. Knowledge claims can be situated also in the sense that they are addressed to particular non-academic audiences, for example, social groups who can use the results of research in their effort to solve pressing social, environmental, or health problems.

In this section, I have argued that the social location of the inquirer involves an epistemic community where her knowledge claims are accepted, rejected, or modified. In some cases, the social location of the inquirer involves also a non-academic audience interested in the application of research results. In sum, the thesis of situated knowledge, in a broad sense, is the idea that "knowledge is local in a profound way – knowledge is knowledge for and by a particular set of socially situated knowers" (Crasnow 2014: 147). In the next section, I discuss yet another way of theorizing the social location of the inquirer and its epistemic importance.

What Is a Standpoint?

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) advances the idea that the social location of the inquirer can be developed into a standpoint that is an epistemic resource in scientific inquiry. Thus, having a standpoint is not the same thing as occupying a particular social location or viewing the world from a particular perspective. A standpoint differs from a social location and a perspective in three ways. First, developing a standpoint requires that one is critically aware of the social conditions under which scientific knowledge is produced. As Wylie explains, "Standpoint theory concerns, then, not just the epistemic effects of *social location* but the effects and the emancipatory potential of a critical *standpoint on* knowledge production" (2012: 63).

Second, the formation of a standpoint is a collective project that involves shared values and interests, and sometimes also activism. Kristen Intemann argues that a standpoint involves a political commitment to producing scientific research that challenges systems of oppression (2010: 786). Research combined with activism is one way to generate knowledge of the ways relations of power function in society. As Sandra Harding explains, "[W]e can come to understand hidden aspects of social relations between the genders and the institutions that support these relations only through struggles to change them" (1991: 127). That scientists, scholars, and activists can share values and interests makes it possible to understand how otherwise differently located individuals come together to form a standpoint. Sharon Crasnow (2013) argues that a standpoint is properly attributed to an epistemic community that is also a political community. A political community is built on shared interests (2013: 420). As Crasnow explains, "Building such a community requires

acknowledging diversity and discovering those shared interests" (2013: 420). This means that shared interests are not taken for granted but understood as an outcome of negotiation and coalition building (Crasnow 2014: 159).

The third feature of a standpoint follows from the second one. If the formation of a standpoint is a collective undertaking, then a standpoint is an achievement. As Harding explains, "A standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective, which anyone can have simply by 'opening one's eyes'" (1991: 127). This insight is called the "achievement thesis" (Crasnow 2013: 417). The term "achievement" describes both the process of building epistemic and political communities and the knowledge-generating struggles of such communities.

The concept of standpoint figures in the main thesis of FST, the thesis of epistemic advantage. This is the view that those who are unprivileged with respect to their social location are potentially privileged with respect to particular epistemic projects (Wylie 2003: 34). While subordinate and marginal social locations do not automatically give epistemic benefits to people who inhabit these locations, they can be a source of a standpoint that improves scientific research. According to Harding, the standpoint of feminist research is "less partial and less distorted than the picture of nature and social relations that emerges from conventional research" (1991: 121).

Not all feminist philosophers of science accept the thesis of epistemic advantage. The critics of FST argue that the thesis of epistemic advantage is undermined by the so called "bias paradox" (Antony 1993: 188–189; Longino 1999: 338). The bias paradox is the apparent contradiction between the thesis of epistemic advantage and the thesis of situated knowledge. Whereas the former states that some knowledge claims are less partial and less distorted than others, the latter states that all knowledge claims are situated and partial, thereby questioning the possibility of some claims being "less partial." The situated knowledge thesis threatens the epistemic advantage thesis because it suggests that there are no impartial standards that allow one to judge some situated knowledge claims as better than others. If FST wants to hold on to the thesis of epistemic advantage, the objection goes, it will have to explain what standards allow feminists to assess research conducted from a feminist standpoint as well as conventional research.

In response to the criticism, some feminist philosophers argue that the bias paradox can be dissolved by interpreting the thesis of epistemic advantage as an empirical hypothesis (Wylie 2003; Rolin 2006; Intemann 2010). While the thesis of epistemic advantage seems to rely on the assumption that there is a "view from nowhere," that is, an impartial standard that enables one to judge some situated knowledge claims as better than others, there is no need for such an assumption. In a particular context of inquiry, one can assess the relative merits of research conducted from a feminist standpoint in comparison to conventional research by applying standard epistemic values such as empirical adequacy and consistency. The key move is to specify an epistemic advantage by pinpointing a conceptual innovation, a novel body of evidence or another type of empirical success brought about by a feminist standpoint (Rolin 2006: 127).

One epistemic advantage is that a feminist standpoint can remedy epistemic injustices, that is, unfair treatment of persons in their capacity as an inquirer (Wylie 2011). The notion of epistemic injustice offers yet another way to understand how the social location of the inquirer can be epistemically consequential. One form of epistemic injustice is testimonial injustice which occurs when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (Fricker 2007: 1). Another form of epistemic injustice is hermeneutical injustice which occurs when "a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience" (Fricker 2007: 1). In both cases a person is put into an epistemically unprivileged position because of social identity prejudice against her. However, according to FST, an epistemically unprivileged position is potentially a privileged one. A feminist

standpoint can generate new knowledge by restoring credibility to victims of testimonial injustice and by correcting hermeneutical injustice with novel concepts such as "micro-inequities."

A feminist standpoint has the capacity to challenge relations of power and domination because it is akin to a social movement. A feminist scientific/intellectual movement provides feminist scientists, scholars, and activists with an opportunity to receive fruitful criticism for research which may be ignored in the larger scientific community (Rolin 2016: 17). Moreover, it enables them to generate evidence under social circumstances where relations of power tend to undermine their attempts to do so (2016: 16). This is because a social movement has the capacity to empower individuals, that is, to encourage them to act and speak in spite of or in response to the power wielded on them. Whereas an isolated individual is easily trapped in stereotypical images offered by prevailing relations of power, a feminist standpoint can empower her by transforming her self-definition and self-valuation (Collins 2004: 106). Scientists, scholars, and activists are also empowered by acquiring a sense of moral and political justification for speaking and acting in novel ways (Rolin 2016: 17). For example, the slogan "the personal is political" has provided many feminist scholars with a justification to use their own professional experiences, observations, and reflections as evidence in research (see e.g. Katila and Meriläinen 1999).

In this section, I have argued that knowledge can be situated in the sense that it is achieved from a standpoint. Whether an individual inquirer works in isolation or whether she participates in a feminist scientific/intellectual movement can make a huge difference to the epistemic outcome of her inquiry. As a participant in a feminist scientific/intellectual movement she can benefit from collective critical awareness of the social condition of knowledge production and feed-back from colleagues with whom she shares feminist values and interest. Moreover, by combining the generation of evidence with empowerment, she can generate novel evidence and theoretical perspectives under oppressive social conditions that could otherwise frustrate her efforts.

Intemann (2010) argues that contemporary versions of FST have so many features in common with feminist empiricism (e.g. CCE) that they are properly called feminist standpoint empiricism (FSE). Yet, FSE differs from CCE in its emphasis on the social experience of unprivileged people and the importance of building epistemic communities based on political commitments and shared interests. In the next section, I argue that these differences are also reflected in their respective conceptions of objectivity.

Feminist Approaches to Objectivity

Feminist philosophers of science are critical of the understanding of objectivity as freedom from social locations, partial perspectives, and values. Harding (1991) argues that the conventional understanding of objectivity as value-free science is too weak to identify sexist, racist, and homophobic assumptions in scientific research. Against the "weak" notion of objectivity, she advances the ideal of "strong" objectivity that requires systematic examination of background assumptions and methods through which knowledge is produced (1991: 149). According to Harding, strong objectivity is achieved from a feminist standpoint. As she explains, "starting thought from women's lives" increases the objectivity of research results because it challenges background assumptions that appear natural from the perspective of the lives of men in the dominant groups (1991: 150). More recently, Harding argues that "researchers should start research from outside the dominant conceptual framework – namely in the daily lives of oppressed groups such as women" (2015: 30). In her view, this increases objectivity because it enables scientists to detect the values, interests, and assumptions that serve the most powerful groups in the society, and might otherwise go unquestioned because the dominant groups are unlikely to challenge them (2015: 34).

For Harding, strong objectivity means also a commitment to cultural, sociological, and historical relativism when it comes to understanding socially situated knowledge claims and a rejection of epistemological relativism when it comes to comparing socially situated knowledge claims (1991: 156). As Harding explains, strong objectivity recognizes "the value of putting the subject or agent of knowledge in the same critical, causal plane as the object of her or his inquiry" (1991: 161). By this she means that inquirers should reflect on the epistemic effects of their own social locations as well as the processes through which they acquire knowledge.

While the advocates of FSE recognize the epistemic benefit of having a standpoint, they propose a different, more familiar conception of objectivity. According to Wylie, situated knowledge claims are objective when they satisfy widely accepted epistemic virtues such as empirical adequacy, internal and external consistency, and explanatory power (2003: 33). Intemann (2016) argues that in FSE the political and social aims of inquiry are partly constitutive of (as opposed to distinct from) the cognitive or epistemic aims of inquiry. This means that the interpretation of empirical adequacy depends on these other aims that define what type of evidence is relevant and how much evidence is needed. Crasnow (2014) proposes that "interest-based" objectivity is an appropriate ideal to both FST and FSE. Standpoints are interest-based in the sense that they are achieved by epistemic communities where scientists, scholars, and activists have common interests; yet, not only research results but also interests are subject to empirical constraints and such constraints are all that objectivity demands (2014: 157).

According to CCE, scientific knowledge is objective to the degree that a relevant community conforms to the four norms of "public venues," "uptake of criticism," "public standards," and "tempered equality of intellectual authority" (Longino 2002: 129–131, see also 1990: 76–81). Each of the four norms contributes to "transformative criticism" (1990: 76). The public venues norm requires that criticism of scientific research be given the same or nearly the same weight as original research (2002: 129). The uptake norm requires that each party to a critical exchange is ready to revise their views instead of merely "tolerating dissent" (2002: 129–130). The public standards norm requires that criticism appeals to at least some of the standards of evidence and argumentation recognized by the community (2002: 130–131). Finally, the tempered equality norm contributes to transformative criticism in two ways, by disqualifying those communities where certain perspectives dominate because of the political, social, or economic power of their adherents (1990: 78), and by making room for a diversity of perspectives which is likely to generate criticism (2002: 131).

Longino argues that a community practice constrained by the four norms advances objectivity because it forces scientists to examine critically the background assumptions that facilitate evidential reasoning as well as the moral and social values that may have motivated the choice of certain background assumptions (1990: 73). Without such a community practice, many ungrounded or even false assumptions may pass without criticism. As Longino explains, "As long as background beliefs can be articulated and subjected to criticism from the scientific community, they can be defended, modified, or abandoned in response to such criticism" (1990: 73–74). She adds that "As long as this kind of response is possible, the incorporation of hypotheses into the canon of scientific knowledge can be independent of any individual's subjective preferences" (1990: 74).

In sum, feminist philosophers of science argue that situated knowledge claims can be objective. In FST and FSE, it is a feminist standpoint that increases the objectivity of situated knowledge claims. By drawing on the social experience of unprivileged social groups in the society and the collective critical awareness of feminist scientists, scholars, and activist, a feminist standpoint is a good position to examine critically value-laden background assumptions and conventional methods of inquiry. In CCE, a larger scientific community is needed to increase the objectivity of situated knowledge claims. The scientific community should be open to criticism and inclusive of diverse perspectives, including the ones emerging from feminist standpoints.

Conclusion

The social location of the inquirer is an epistemic resource when it gives rise to local knowledge, social experience, criticism, evidence, and novel theoretical perspectives. It also situates the inquirer in a particular relation to other people, including research participants, collaborators, and potential users of knowledge. Most importantly, the inquirer is situated in particular epistemic communities. While all scientists and scholars are situated in disciplinary and specialty communities, feminist scientists and scholars are situated also in feminist research communities.

That knowledge claims are situated does not mean that they cannot be objective. Quite the contrary, feminist philosophers of science argue that the objectivity of scientific knowledge claims depends on scientific communities in which inquirers are situated. CCE holds the view that scientific knowledge is properly attributed to scientific communities and the objectivity of knowledge claims depends on how well these communities function epistemically. Ideally, an epistemically well-functioning community provides a platform for the criticism of sexist, racist, and heterosexist assumptions in research, and community members respond to criticism by revising such assumptions. The advocates of FST and FSE suggest that transformative criticism will not take place automatically as an effect of increased diversity and inclusion in scientific communities. While they agree that objectivity depends crucially on the ability of communities to detect and eliminate problematic assumptions, they emphasize the need to mobilize critical forces collectively. In their view, this involves the formation of a standpoint, an epistemic community with critical awareness, political commitments, and shared interests.

Related chapters: 6, 7, 15, 17.

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