

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory is a specific formulation of the broader standpoint theory. All formulations of standpoint theory contend that a standpoint arises when an individual recognizes and challenges cultural values and power relations that contribute to subordination or oppression of particular groups. For instance, a person could understand and reject racist values and power discrepancies between races, knowing that those undergird the subordination of minorities. The specific foci of feminist standpoint theory are (a) identifying cultural values and power dynamics that account for the subordination of girls and women and (b) highlighting the distinct knowledge cultivated by activities that are typically assigned to females.

Feminist standpoint theory calls attention to the knowledge that arises from conditions and experiences that are common to girls and women. This focus on experiences draws on Marxist theory's claim that the work we do—the concrete activity in which we engage—shapes what we know and how we behave. Thus, feminist standpoint theory is interested in skills and knowledge that are cultivated by typically female activities such as domestic work and caregiving. For example, feminist standpoint theorists claim that caring for others allows girls and women to develop knowledge of what others need and how to meet those needs.

Feminist standpoint theory rejects the notion that knowledge is a straightforward outcome of essential characteristics of group members (for instance, an XX chromosomal structure or having ovaries). Instead, feminist standpoint theory emphasizes social ideologies (e.g., sexism and the gender roles it authorizes) that explain why girls and women are assigned to certain activities and why those activities are less valued than activities typically assigned to boys and men. Feminist standpoint hinges on realizing that the conditions and experiences common to girls and women are not natural, but are a result from social and political forces.

For this reason, although girls' and women's circumstances and activities may shape their perspectives, they do not automatically confer a feminist standpoint. To develop a feminist standpoint, individuals must engage in an intellectual struggle to recognize, analyze, and contest broad power relations that account for the subordinate status of girls and women and the activities they are expected to pursue. For instance, many girls and women understand that assertive females are sometimes labeled *bitches*. That understanding is shaped by seeing girls and women who act assertively called bitches, but this understanding itself is not a feminist standpoint. A person who holds a feminist standpoint realizes that social expectations for females to be nice, defer to others, and not be pushy underlie derogatory treatment of assertive girls and women, including calling them bitches, whereas assertive men are admired for their confidence and leadership.

A feminist standpoint disputes privileging of men and men's interests while devaluing, marginalizing, and otherwise harming girls and women and their interests. In short, a standpoint is an intellectual achievement that reflects—and necessarily entails—political consciousness. This means, as Donna Haraway has noted, that standpoints are never innocent.

Key Claims of Feminist Standpoint Theory

Like all standpoint theories, feminist standpoint theory begins with the assumption that society is structured by power relations that generate unequal social locations; one location is occupied by members of the dominant group, and other locations are inhabited by members of subordinate groups. According to feminist standpoint

theory, women's lives, in general, differ systematically and structurally from men's lives. Women and men are expected to engage in distinct activities, and the two groups are accorded different rights and opportunities. For instance, females are expected to take primary responsibility for homemaking, parenting, and kin keeping, and females are expected to defer to and please others.

Extending the foregoing premise is the second claim: The different social locations that women and men occupy cultivate distinct kinds of knowledge. Sara Ruddick, for instance, asserts that nurturing skill results not from a maternal instinct, but from the fact that girls and women, far more often than boys and men, are assigned caregiving roles and, thus, they develop competence in providing care. It is performing the role of caregiver—rather than being female—that cultivates knowledge of how to care. Also, being involved in caregiving promotes awareness of the importance and value of this activity; those who do not engage in caring for others are unlikely to develop nurturing skills or an appreciation of what is required to care well for others.

Some feminist standpoint theorists assert that knowledge from subordinated social locations is more complete than knowledge from dominant social locations. They believe that members of subordinated groups are likely to understand both their own group's perspective and the perspective of members of the dominant group, but that members of the dominant group are not as likely to understand—or have a motive to understand—the perspective of members of subordinate groups. This reasoning leads to the conclusion that members of dominant groups have less complete knowledge of the social world than members of subordinate groups. However, not all feminist standpoint theorists accept this claim. Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, expresses skepticism that some knowledge is more complete or accurate than others.

Studying subordinated locations and the knowledge they foster not only provides insight into the lives of members of subordinated groups, but also casts light on dominant group practices, especially those that create and reproduce inequality. This explains why feminist standpoint theorists claim that, while it is easier for women than men to achieve a feminist standpoint, it is possible for men to do so if they engage in the intellectual struggle to recognize and reject established power relations, including male privilege.

In sum, individuals hold a standpoint when they (a) grasp the arbitrary and unfair nature of power relations that structure social life and (b) are critical of the uneven consequences of those power relations for members of different groups. A feminist standpoint grows out of encountering oppositional knowledge—through readings, attending talks and workshops, reflection, and/or participating in groups such as the consciousness-raising groups that were instrumental to the second wave of feminism in the United States. Feminist standpoint theory is inherently and unapologetically political because it aims to identify and challenge established social hierarchies and their consequences.

—Julia T. Wood

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