CHAPTER 2

A Feminist Epistemology

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1. INTRODUCTION

The tradition of Western science is built on positivism an epistemology of the fact. For both natural and social science, the world of experience is generally believed to be an objective world, governed by underlying regularities, even natural laws. Facts are empirical observations, outcroppings of these underlying regularities. If, and only if, we systematically and dispassionately observe the data of the empirical world can we detect the patterns of which they are evidence. August Comte had such confidence in the principles of positivism that he believed it was not only possible but also desirable to build a science of society, sociology, upon them.

Positivism is the hegemonic epistemology in scientific discourse, so that its specific way of connecting beliefs about knowing with research practices appears seamless: we often fail to see any distinctions among epistemology, methodology, and method. Harding's (1987) distinctions are useful in disaggregating the issues. Epistemology, Harding says, is a theory about knowledge, about who can know what and under what circumstances. A method, Harding notes, is a technique for gathering and analyzing information, for example, forms of listening, watching, or examining records. A methodology is an argument about how these two are linked, that is, about the implications of an epistemology for the practice of research.

Every epistemology, Genova (1983) says, involves assumptions about the points of a triad: the knower, the known, and the process of knowing. He describes the history of Western philosophical debates about epistemology as focused on one or another of the

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points on this triad. Ring (1987) identifies the same three elements, but in her representation we are drawn to their connection. Epistemologies, for Ring, are accounts of the knowing subject, the object of study, and the relationship between them. An epistemology directs us in how to approach an understanding of a phenomenon. The basic issue it resolves is the grounds for choosing one theory, or account of that phenomenon, over another (Alcoff, 1989).

At the heart of positivist epistemology is the focus on objectivity. Positivism assumes that truth comes from eliminating the role of subjective judgments and interpretations, thus sharply enforcing the dichotomy between the knower and the known (Ring, 1987). According to positivist epistemology, subjectivity is an obstacle to knowledge: the observer's personality and feelings introduce errors in observation. The practices of research are designed to minimize and hopefully erase any impact of the researcher's subjectivity from the data. Observations are made through a process of objective measurement, which circumvents the subjectivity of the observer, allows for the application of statistical analyses, and makes data collection and interpretation open to replication and testing by others.

Positivism offered some clear advantages over the epistemology that prevailed prior to it, an epistemology based on faith and revelation, an authority based on tradition (Lovibond, 1989). The reliance on evidence and clear, replicatable procedures for collecting and interpreting it, open up the production of knowledge to many more than a chosen few. The emphasis on systematic procedures presents knowledge claims in a context that is open to critique, argument, even refutation. Positivist epistemology has generated methods with democratic potential.

However, positivism has its problems, as has been shown by scholars from Mannheim (1936) to contemporary social constructionists who have argued that official knowing, as we have inherited it, is not the objective, unbiased, apolitical process it represents itself to be. Rather, scholarly paradigms, like other forms of human consciousness, are the expression of specific world views.

For example, the goal of removing subjectivities has never been met. All observations are "theory-laden;" that is, making any observation requires the acceptance of background assumptions—a system of beliefs to interpret what it is that we are seeing. Holding background assumptions thwarts the ideal of knowing pure facts outside of theory (see Bechtel, 1988). Furthermore, when testing any one hypothesis, a scientist is also testing a set of auxiliary hypotheses—all the background assumptions contributing to the world view that supports the hypothesis in the first place. If a test of the hypothesis fails to achieve the predicted results, the scientist does not necessarily reject the hypothesis but can tinker with the background assumptions, arriving at a way to make sense of the data and maintaining the original thought. This process, discussed as the Quine–Duhem thesis in the philosophy of science literature, portends negatively for a pure test of scientific ideas.

Extending this line of criticism, Longino (1989) identifies another major flaw of positivist logic: the assumption that the data directly support hypotheses. She argues that the data do not say what hypothesis they are evidence for. In fact, the same data can be used to support contradictory hypotheses and which connection gets made depends on the background assumptions being made (Longino, 1989; cf. Alcoff, 1989). Because these background assumptions are based in values, science cannot be value neutral (Alcoff, 1989). Moreover, as we will show, the values that pervade the background assumptions support the continued hegemony of privileged white men. Positivism has become the epistemology of the fathers.

The primary contender to positivist epistemology has been radical constructivism (see Jussim, 1991). If positivism is the epistemology of fact, radical constructivism is an epistemology of fiction. From this perspective, reality is created through discourse about it (Weedon, 1987). Thus, the object of knowledge, the truth, is the outcome of the process that "discovers" it (Alcoff, 1989; Foucault, 1972; Fraser, 1989; Haraway, 1988). Knowledge is a narrative, a text, even an act of faith based on cult membership (Haraway, 1988).

Postmodernists have gone so far as to argue that in contemporary Western society knowledge and social domination are the same thing. Foucault (1972) maintains that modern knowledge amounts to intensive surveillance of individuals and groups of people, creating official standards of normality, and prompting us to monitor and discipline ourselves to try to conform to those standards (see Fraser, 1989). Our subjectivity is a social construction; our values and even our sense of having a self are aspects of the way modern power works. Thus there is no basis for rationally choosing between one theory and another. In terms of the relationship between subject and object, radical constructivism dissolves the object into the subject.

Of course, it is curious that just when women and ethnic minorities have begun to demand a voice in creating knowledge, an epistemology emerges claiming there is no truth to be known. Haraway's term for this impact is "epistemological electro-shock therapy" (1988, p. 578). It is easy to imagine the effects of such a stance on struggles to overcome oppression. If uniting people across diversity requires a shared world view of mutual interests, the potential for creating bonds across people evaporates when analyses of experiences are considered mere texts or subjectivities (Fraser & Nicholson, 1988; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, & Cohen, 1989). Thus, we might consider radical constructivism the epistemology of the sons. But these are not our only choices.

2. FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY

Standpoint theorists begin by rejecting positivism's pretentions of creating a view from nowhere in favor of the postulate that each subject is specific, located in a particular time and place. Thus a knower has a particular perspective on the object. At the same time, this locatedness gives access to the concrete world; knowing is not relative, as radical constructivists maintain, rather it is partial (Haraway, 1988; Hartsock, 1983). In most versions of standpoint theory there are certain social positions that allow for developing better understandings. Marxist epistemology generally privileges the standpoint of the working class because their role in process allows one to understand the social and relational character of production (Bar On, 1993; Lukacs, 1971). In feminist standpoint theory, epistemic privilege is often accorded to the standpoint of women and/or other oppressed people. We outline the arguments of Hartsock (1983, 1985), Haraway (1978, 1988, 1990, 1993), Smith (1979, 1987, 1990), and Collins (1986, 1989, 1990).

Hartsock (1983, 1985), a political scientist who pioneered the notion of standpoint, carefully distinguished a standpoint from the spontaneous subjectivity of social actors. A standpoint, she says, is "achieved rather than obvious, a mediated rather than immediate understanding" (1985, p. 132). Capitalists and workers experience the same immediate reality and may even interpret it in similar ways. The difference between their standpoints is that the workers have the potential to get beneath the surface through analysis and struggle, to get a different, deeper understanding. Hartsock uses the example of varying ways to understand power. Capitalists, she argues can know power only as a commod-

ity. However, if workers engage in class struggle and reflect on their position, they can begin to understand power as a relationship of domination.

Hartsock builds her analysis on a critique of Marxist epistemology, which, she maintains, errs in the application of its own logic. She is convinced by the logic of historical materialism that to understand people you have to start with the circumstances under which they meet their daily needs for food, clothing, and shelter. However, in privileging the standpoint of the worker, Marxist epistemology ignores the most fundamental site of production, those places where the satisfaction of people's needs is directly produced, particularly the domestic setting. Both in wage work and in the home, women's work keeps them involved in a world of directly meeting needs "in concrete, many-qualitied, changing material processes" (1985, p. 235). This standpoint—the one of meeting human needs, the standpoint of women—is the one that Hartsock privileges. From this standpoint, she argues, we are able to understand power as potentially nonhierarchical, as a capacity.

As Hartsock faults Marxism for violating its own assumptions, Haraway (1978, 1988, 1990, 1993), an anthropologist, makes a similar critique of positivism. Haraway notes that positivism is based on the primacy of data, that is, information that is directly detectable through the senses. Positivist epistemology is, then, logically grounded in the materiality of people's bodies. Yet, positivism denies the presence of these bodies in making its claims to validity. For example, those dominating the production of knowledge in the Western tradition have, for the most part, been upper-class, white, and male, and surely their observations are shaped by their specific experience. Haraway agrees with Positivist arguments that it is through our sensory experience, our bodies, that we have access to the world, but that very grounding is both the basis of valid knowledge and a limit on it. She coined the term "embodied vision" to emphasize that our vision is located in some specific place, that our knowledge is "situated" and thus partial.

How can we compensate for the partiality of any perspective? Haraway says the best way to gain a critical perspective on one's situated view is to know how things look from a different position. Access to two ways of looking at a phenomenon reveals the limits and constructedness of each. Because each of us experiences life and our selves in multiple facets that are "stitched together imperfectly" (1988, p. 586), empathy is possible and, through it, two knowers in distinct situations can make a partial connection. By translating across distinct perspectives and connecting ever-shifting situated knowledges, we can rationally build some collective, if provisional, agreement on the whole.

Women cross boundaries between perspectives as a matter of daily life, Smith notes (1987, 1990). The sexual division of labor, both within sociology and between professional and domestic work, creates a breach between the means by which we develop our understandings of social life and the concrete work of keeping social life going. Thus, the standpoint of women in sociology offers leverage to integrate two perspectives. It gives us the opportunity to see sociology as a masculine institution that plays a role in the broader practices by which we are all organized and managed, what Smith calls "the relations of ruling."

The organization of professional work has caused men to focus on the conceptual world while ignoring their bodily existence. This has been possible only because women have been providing for their human needs and for those of their children. Similarly, at work women provide the material forms to men's conceptual work—clerical work, interviewing, taking care of patients, and so on. It is as though these men live in an ephemeral

world of abstract ideas. Never does the mundane reality of physical existence impede their thoughts; their thoughts stay lofty and disconnected from reality. Women transverse the divide between this ephemeral world and the actual world of human practices, attending to these men's inevitable material needs. The better the women are at their work, the more it is invisible to men, who can thus take it for granted and have their own authority bolstered in the process.

The result is a sociology that is alienated from social life. Typical scientific practice only superficially overcomes the split between official knowledge and concrete existence. Smith's imagery is powerful: she says we reach out through our conceptual frameworks to pluck bits of the empirical world and retreat to our office to organize the data to fit our frameworks. The pictures we end up with are more likely to correspond to official organizational charts than to the daily experience of the front line actors whose practices are the stuff of social institutions. Sociological practices "convert what people experience directly in their everyday/everynight world into forms of knowledge in which people as subjects disappear and in which their perspectives on their own experience are transposed and subdued by the magisterial forms of objectifying discourse" (1990, p. 4). Sociology becomes an aspect of the relations of ruling.

Smith disagrees with those who say there is no difference between science and ideology, following Marx's argument that what is real is people's concerted action to address material imperatives. Creating knowledge is revealing the ways practical activity to meet human needs is shaped and constrained by social relations of domination, particularly those that go beyond the immediate context. Making ideology is letting concepts and abstractions dominate and obscure those material relations (1990, p. 34). We need to peer behind facts and abstractions and ask how they are the outcome of the concerted activity of specific people in concrete circumstances. For example, saying that technology is propelling us into a future outside of human control is ideology; showing how powerful elites promote specific technologies to maximize their social control is not.

Women sociologists, especially those with children, dwell in both the conceptual and the practical realms; they experience on a daily basis the concrete work of meeting human needs, coordinating with child care and schools, etc., and how these conflict with the work of sociology. The standpoint of women within sociology means we can and must work to transform its practices away from its role of supporting the relations of ruling.

Beginning from a marginalized standpoint, one that integrates the perspectives of black feminists as academic outsiders and other black women, Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1989, 1990) develops a black feminist epistemology that exposes the systematic and particular character of hegemonic sociology at the same time it offers an alternative. Collins identifies four parameters of Black feminist epistemology (1990, pp. 203–218). First concrete experience and the wisdom developed out of everyday experience is valued in evaluating knowledge claims. Second, knowledge claims are not hierarchically imposed by an elite but rather worked out through dialogue with everyday social actors. Third, emotions such as empathy and attachment are incorporated into the notion of intellect. Finally, part of the assessment of an idea is via what is known about the character and biography of the person advancing it.

With this understanding of standpoint theory, we can turn a critical eye to sociology. One of our first observations is that mainstream sociology flows from the standpoint of privileged men. Before elaborating on the impact of this particular standpoint for sociology, we first describe the specifics of a privileged male standpoint.

3. THE STANDPOINT OF PRIVILEGED MEN

There are a variety of accounts of the ways that the experience of privileged men in the social organization of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society has prompted the development of a distinct form of consciousness. The analyses of Chodorow (1978, 1991) and O'Brien (1981, 1989) operate within distinct theoretical traditions, yet display a remarkably strong degree of consensus about the parameters of hegemonic male consciousness.

Drawing on interview material from her clinical practice as a psychotherapist, Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1991) deconstructs traditional psychoanalysis to identify gendered dynamics. Chodorow argues that gender differences in structures of consciousness are the outcome of the child's development of self in gendered social arrangements: men are absent from nurturing in a culture in which gender is employed as an important organizer of social relations. Distinctions in boys' and girls' early experiences lead to development of gender differences in sense of self and relationship to others: men develop a highly individuated sense of self in opposition to others and an abstract orientation to the world; connection represents a threat of loss of identity. Women develop a connected sense of self embedded in concrete relationships.

Chodorow's analysis, like many in feminist theory, gives little attention to the dynamics of class. Her clinical data is heavily biased toward the affluent and highly educated clientele of psychoanalysis, which no doubt explains her analytic focus on the male breadwinner/female housewife nuclear family form (see Fraser & Nicholson, 1988 and Lorber, Coser, Rossi, & Chodorow, 1981, for critiques). Although the limits of her analysis imply caution should be used in extending it beyond the relatively privileged, those same biases make Chodorow's work particularly useful for identifying the consciousness of the privileged. Work in the literature on class and consciousness uses words such as individualistic and abstract to refer to the world view of capitalists, in contrast with a more collective and concrete orientation in the working class (e.g., Bulmer, 1975; Mann, 1973; Mueller, 1973; Oilman, 1972). Integrating these two perspectives, we see an argument that the consciousness of economically privileged, European–American men is more likely to be abstract and individuated than the world views of men from less privileged classes and most women.

Mary O'Brien (1981, 1989) uses a historical materialist approach to argue that differences in consciousness are the product of differences in the ways men and women have historically taken intentional action regarding the material imperative to reproduce. To assert social control over a process in which they are marginalized, men in the European traditions she is describing have historically dominated it from outside by creating and controlling the public sphere. Men's flight from involvement in the work of reproduction poses a challenge to the legitimacy of their control over the process, a challenge that is addressed by according the male role as much social significance as possible. This, O'Brien argues, is why the dominant patriarchal world view of reproduction emphasizes intercourse and male potency and overlooks the value of reproductive labor.

Having distanced themselves from the concrete community of people who do the work of caring, O'Brien says, men have created an abstract community in the state. Alienated from the concrete history of human continuity across generations, men have constructed and sanctified a history of abstractions and ideas. The culture they have reproduced encourages a consciousness that is abstract, oppositional, and discontinuous.

O'Brien's analysis resonates with the argument that the capitalistic structuring of work leads those in privileged class locations to be more individualized and have a more abstract orientation to the world (Hartsock, 1985; Lukacs, 1971).

In summary, whether looking through the lens of psychoanalysis or historical materialism, feminist scholars identify a privileged masculine consciousness that is highly abstract, individuated, oppositional, hierarchical, oriented to control rather than nurturance. These themes resonate with Hartsock's description of a masculine orientation to dominate, Haraway's critique of disembodied knowledge, Smith's account of the abstract masculine existence, and Collins' depiction of an elitist and authoritarian epistemology. They also seem to run through the kinds of criticisms feminists have raised against mainstream sociological theory and research.

4. FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF MAINSTREAM SOCIOLOGY

Although within sociology empirical research and social theory have long been operating on separate intellectual planes, there are interesting epistemological parallels between them. Empirical research is dominated by positivist epistemology with its assumption that science is independent of the social order in which it is conducted, that knowledge is neutral, and that the observer has no particular point of view but rather merely reports empirical findings (Farganis, 1986). Ring (1987) describes the epistemology guiding classic social theory as a Hegelian empiricism with similar background assumptions. Mainstream social theory constructs knowledge as a stream of ideas handed down through generations of key thinkers who, although singled out as individuals, apparently rise above their historical circumstances of gender, race, and class to identify universal rationality (Connell, 1997; Smith, 1990; Sprague, 1997). In both theory and research, then, our attention is drawn to an objective knowledge; the contribution of the knower to the shape of the knowing is invisible (Keller, 1983; Smith, 1990).

Feminists have criticized sociological theory and empirical research to varying degrees, as is true of feminist critiques of science more generally (Keller, 1982). Some merely say that research practice has been distorted by its gender biases. Critiques in this vein point to the relative lack of women scholars, the choice of questions that address the problems of men not women, designs that exclude women, and interpretations of data from a masculine point of view (American Sociological Association, 1980). The problem from this perspective is that science has not been scientific enough. Other critiques, however, dispute the very notion of science and scholarship as a distinctive social enterprise; the claim here is that science is as socially constructed as any other element of culture (Rosser, 1988). We see these critiques expressing five kinds of concerns: (1) objectivity as process and as outcome, (2) authority in the research relationship, (3) a hierarchical ordering of the social, (4) the predominance of problematic analytic categories, and (5) the role of sociology in broader relations of social domination.

4.1. The Critique of Objectivity

Many feminists challenge the degree to which social research has succeeded in being objective and some feminists go beyond challenging whether objectivity is attainable to

questioning whether it is even desirable. Likewise, Longino (1989) argues that what we hold to be rational is variable but systematically so: "The only constant in Western philosophers' thinking about rationality and masculinity is their association (p. 263)." Contemporary notions of objectivity, and the approach to rationality it represents are, it is argued, the expression of masculine psychic needs to dissociate from allegedly feminine subjectivity and the need to control the threat of connection by connecting through domination (Haraway, 1978; Hartsock, 1985; Keller, 1982).

The first step in the practice of scientific objectivity is to carve up the continuity of lived experience to create objects, or facts, to investigate (Shiva, 1995; Smith, 1990). Thus, "facts" are the outcome of practices that strip phenomena of the processes that generate them, processes that are deeply social. For example, we see gender as the attribute of a person rather than as the outcome of institutionalized social practices (Lorber, 1994) or of a specific form of social organization (Acker, 1990; Sprague, 1991, 1996).

The processes that "uncover" these facts are then hidden from view (Latour & Woolgar, 1979). For example, experimental methods are held to be the best way to test a hypothesized causal relationship because of the way they control for threats to internal validity (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Yet, Fine and Gordon (1989) argue that another way to describe the practices of experimentalists makes them look irrational, obsessed with the need to purge their data of the messiness of real life, and of the contaminating details such as people's race, gender, and class. Similarly, social psychologists construct the impression of a self independent of context by posing questions such as the Twenty Statements Test's "Who Am I?" and treating the answers as facts—the self is what the test has created, not a constant in people's lived experience (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

4.2. Authority in Social Research

Traditional research carves a sharp distinction between investigator and investigated and creates a hierarchical relationship between the two. Several feminists criticize scientific authority as the conceptual domination of researched by researcher: investigators turn subjects, the people they are trying to understand, into objects who are not capable of enlightening scholars about social phenomena (Collins, 1989, 1990). Mies (1993) sees danger in dichotomizing subject and object: objectifying what we study can lead to justifying exploitation and abuse, for example in the development of technologies that pillage the earth of its resources and in experimentation on Jews in Nazi concentration camps.

Feminist approaches have tended to replace models of control and domination with those of connection and nurturing. An early feminist assumption was that research relationships were to be constructed as collaborations (Cook & Fonow, 1986). The researcher's goal is to give voice to women who have been denied it, to express their experiences in their terms (McCall & Wittner, 1989). Feminists in this camp maintain that establishing a relationship of mutuality between researcher and subject of research through self-revelation and emotional support produces better data and richer understanding (Oakley, 1981).

More recently feminists have debated the limits of even a feminist investigator's empathic ability. Scholars of color have pointed out the degree to which our understandings of the dynamics of gender have been generalizations from the experience of economically privileged white women, evidence that investigators impose their own cultural

frameworks on the data (Dill, 1983; hooks, 1981; King, 1988). As a consequence of studying the oppressed through the lens of the privileged, oppressed people are objectified, represented not as people "like us" but rather as the "other." Minh-ha (1993) is describing anthropology as an ideology of imperialism but could be talking about social science more generally when she says that what presents itself as an attempt to learn the essence of human nature is in practice "mainly a conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them'" (1993, p. 125).

The reaction against "othering" has led some feminists to wonder if it is legitimate to study a category over which one has privilege, for men to study women or for whites to study people of color (see Edwards, 1990; Harding, 1993). Thus, although an early theme in feminist criticism of Sociology was its failure to be sensitive to the pervasiveness of gender as a social force (Cook & Fonow, 1986), more recent critiques have been reluctant to push any abstract category, including gender, very far.

4.3. The Hierarchy of the Social

One recurrent theme in feminist critiques of sociology is that we tend to employ a pattern of selective attention that creates a systematically masculine stratification of social life: what is important is what men do (e.g., see readings in Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974). O'Brien (1981), for example, observes that we have theories that address nearly all of the major aspects of our biological existence: providing for our physical needs (Marxism), sexuality (psychoanalysis), and death (theology and secular philosophy). The stark omission, O'Brien notes, is serious consideration of the social and philosophical issues concerning human reproduction. Social theory has placed a low priority on understanding the nurturance and development of people, and on emotions and intimate relationships in general (cf. Aptheker, 1989; Hillyer, 1993; hooks, 1990; Ruddick, 1980; Smith, 1987). Feminists criticize sociological accounts for essentially ignoring what Aptheker (1989) calls "the dailiness" of ordinary lives, the struggle to preserve quality of life for your family in the face of exploitation and oppression, to hold on to and nurture a positive sense of self in a culture that demeans and devalues you.

A pervasive, and much criticized, assumption in social theory is that the public and the private constitute distinct spheres of social life and that the public sphere, defined as the official economy, the polity, and related institutions, is more social than the private (cf. Fraser, 1989; Mies, 1986; Pateman, 1983; Sprague, 1997, 1988; Ward, 1993). Ironically and tellingly, the public sphere has then been constructed in such a way that it appears to be unpopulated. Interpersonal relationships at work and emotional aspects of work itself are excluded from view (Hochschild, 1983). Social analyses that address large-scale social institutions from the perspective of abstract structures are labeled "macro," and are understood as most important. Those that focus on individuals and the relationships among them, with an attention to process, are "micro," too often with the connotation of substantive and intellectual triviality and a suspicious drift toward psychology.

The dichotomous, hierarchical opposition of public to private represents relationships as if they did not occur within and were not constrained by social structures and makes the structures seem as if they had more reality than the regular relationships among people that constitute these structures (Smith, 1990).

4.4. Dominant Analytic Categories

Another line of feminist critique has been to challenge the analytic categories that dominate sociological discourse. The category that has drawn the most critiques from feminists is the logical dichotomy, the tendency to make sense of phenomena by opposing them to others in a construction that is represented as mutually exclusive and exhaustive (Jay, 1981). The pattern runs through the history of hegemonic Western European social thought: mind/body, city of God/city of man, capitalist/worker, nature/culture, nature/nurture, public/private, macro/micro, structure/agency (Alway, 1995; Harrison, 1985; hooks, 1994; O'Brien, 1981; Tuana, 1983).

The artificiality of these dichotomies is exposed when one tries to identify the line that demarcates them empirically. Rich (1976) notes that even a dichotomy that seems as basic as me/not-me is transcended in the experience of a pregnant woman in relationship to the fetus developing within her. The demarcating line between public and private is exposed as constructed when considering state-imposed policies such as those on sexuality, reproductive freedoms, and violence within marriage (Sprague, 1988). In fact, many of our most contentious political struggles can be seen as debates over where to draw the border between public and private in a particular domain of life (e.g., sexuality, parents' rights, school prayer, assisted suicide).

Another analytic approach common to social theory that has come under the criticism of feminists is what might be called abstract individuation. That is, individuals are seen in isolation from and unconnected with their interpersonal, historical, or physical contexts (Sprague, 1997). A prime instance of this abstract individuation is the tradition of representing people as instances of just one facet of the complex intersecting social relations through which they live their lives, for example, gender, or race, or class (Collins, 1989; Dill, 1983; hooks, 1981; King, 1988). In the process we tend to fall back to hegemonic categories: when we talk about class we see men, when we talk about race we see men, and when we talk about gender we see whites (King, 1988). Another example of a decontextualized individual is the model of rational man [sic], an actor who establishes priorities and sets out to achieve them, evaluating options along the way in terms of an abstract value system or their utility to goal attainment (e.g., Coleman, 1992). The image hides from us the degree to which most of us, especially women, find daily life an ongoing juggling of competing responsibilities emerging from the complex web of our most important relationships (England, 1989; Risman & Ferree, 1995; Smith, 1987).

We fracture people even further into abstract attributes or personality traits. The practice has been, for example, to ask whether women are more passive or use different language than men, rather than asking whether women are more often observed in relationships in which they are relatively powerless in structural terms and are responding strategically to that structural condition (Sherif, 1979). The tendency to explain problematic social behavior by resorting to syndromes (ADHD, alcoholism, chronic fatigue) and searching for biological, even genetic sources carries the fragmentation of the human being even further (Conrad, 1975, Haraway, 1993; Szasz, 1971).

Seeing the social world through logical dichotomies and abstract individuation has generated conceptual distinctions that distort the lived experience of many people. The disciplinary division of "work" and "family" hides the work of caring for a family and the nurturing aspects of many jobs (Cancian, 1985; Cancian & Oliker, 1999; Oakley, 1974). The distinction between work and leisure is not applicable to the vast majority of women who work the double shift of paid work and unpaid domestic labor (Hartmann, 1981;

Hochschild, 1989). The distinction between paid and domestic labor is not adequate to describe the lives of many women, particularly women of color, who have historically been blocked from any waged work other than paid domestic labor and child care (Collins, 1986; Glenn, 1992).

4.5. The Role of Sociology in Social Domination

What is the relationship between knowledge producers and the larger society in which they work? In ironic contrast to Marx and Weber, who were deeply engaged in the politics of their time, the intellectual projects of contemporary theorists are typically understood as individual quests to maintain, develop, and extend the stream of ideas. The role of theorist is one of detachment, only abstractly connected, if at all, to any sense of responsibility to their communities. Sociological theory has, to say the least, not been engaged in contemporary policy debates; its ranks have provided us with few public intellectuals, particularly in the United States.

Mainstream sociological research has a better record of permeating public policy debates. Still, some feminists charge that sociological research is constructed in ways that facilitate social domination. Harding has observed that "there isn't such a thing as a problem without a person (or groups of them) who have this problem: a problem is always a problem for someone or other" (1987, p. 6). She, like Smith, argues that social scientists tend to ask questions of those whose job it is to manage people, not questions of regular folks (cf. Fine, 1994). For example, we are much more likely to ask who is likely to abuse drugs than to ask what we would need to change about social organization to make drug use less likely.

Feminists have from the beginning rejected Positivism's ideal of a "value-free" science, arguing instead that the goal of research must be to help the oppressed understand and fight against their oppression (Cancian, 1992; Cook & Fonow, 1986; Harding, 1987; Mies, 1993; Smith, 1987). Cancian (1992) argues that an important feminist methodology is to engage in participatory action research (PAR), working with feminist organizations on problems they have identified in a process they control. In addition to directly supporting feminist politics, Cancian submits, involvement in PAR actually generates better data by providing localized knowledge about a subject and incorporating quasi-experimental evidence.

Asking questions in hegemonic ways can have deadly consequences, as Treichler's (1993) analysis demonstrates. As the Center for Disease Control was collecting data on early AIDS cases, the organizing framework was based on the kind of person who got AIDS, not on the kind of practices that made one vulnerable to it. The result was the "4 H's" typology of risk: homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians. Further, in developing their list, some codes were "master," taken as more salient than others: gay or bisexual men who injected drugs were coded by their sexuality, not their intravenous drug use. The hegemonic view that sexual practices justify categorizing people and mark sexual minorities as deviant led to analyses that no doubt created a false sense of invulnerability to this deadly disease in those who were excluded from the typology, notably women.

An important aspect of knowledge as social domination is the prevalence of "studying down," rather than "studying up." Fine reports, for example, that when her graduate students wanted to study upper-class white women they could not find much literature on

them. Fine observes that these women are not surveyed by social science agencies and there is no "scholarly discourse on their dysfunctionality" (1994, p. 73). Some have argued that the powerless are aware that official knowledge, rather than serving their interests, often works against them. This makes them appropriately suspicious of, and therefore less than authentic with, researchers (Edwards, 1990; Mies, 1993).

Another way that both theoretical and empirical sociology serves the dominant interests is by communicating in a discourse that is so opaque that colleagues cannot read one another across subspecialties, much less across disciplines (Sprague, 1997; Sprague & Zimmerman 1993). By using the passive tense and speaking in high levels of abstraction, we hide the agency both of those we study and of ourselves as researchers (Hochschild, 1983; hooks, 1994). "The author's activity is displaced in methods, which act on the data for the author" (Paget, 1990, p. 158). The scientific voice also creates emotional distance. Paget (1990) notes the scholarly norm that discredits speakers who show feelings like caring, anger, or outrage in the context of scholarly communication. The text is also severed from actual human experience, distancing the reader from caring about it, much less feeling compelled to do something about it. Hochschild (1983) draws the parallel between the emotion work of creating a dispassionate text and the steps taken in an autopsy to make sure medical students will be distanced from the humanness of the corpse so as not to be disturbed by what is being done to it. The norm of disinterested discursive style, Paget (1990) notes, conflicts with the goal of communicating about knowledge, which is to persuade.

In summary, feminist critiques of sociological practices point to a detachment, both intellectual and emotional, from the daily work of keeping life going, from the people whose lives we study, and from popular political discourse. They take issue with the way we have organized the production of knowledge, noting that it serves more to control people than to nurture them. They challenge a reliance on dichotomy and high levels of abstraction. The terms of the feminist critique roughly parallel the description of privileged masculine consciousness. As Smith (1990) says, if sociology has a subject, it is a male subject.

5. FEMINIST ALTERNATIVES

Feminists struggling with these concerns have developed some innovative and insightful strategies. Arguing that interviewing is a hierarchical form of social relationship, feminists have worked to make that relationship more democratic. They have given interviewees control over the topics to be discussed, incorporated self-disclosure on the part of the investigator, built an interviewing relationship over time, and asked interviewees for feedback on investigators' interpretations of interviews (e.g., Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1991; Edwards, 1990; Fine, 1994). Acker and her colleagues (1991) use these techniques of connection with research subjects in strategic alternation with more detached discussions among investigators, and report that this approach leads to more nuanced understanding of respondents' experience and particularly of how people change in response to social conditions.

Traditional notions of what is and is not data have also been reformed. It has been standard practice in interviewing, for example, to attribute the interviewee's hesitations and questions such as "Do you know what I mean?" to inarticulateness. DeVault (1990) uses them as indicators that male-dominated language does not capture women's experi-

ence. She finds these breaks in fluid speech are fruitful gateways for exploration of the distinctive experiences of women.

The concept of valid data has been expanded in other directions as well. Aptheker (1989) and Collins (1990) respond to the elite selection bias of the usual documentary evidence by expanding the field of data to include the "documents" of those who are marginalized in official discourse. They analyze the messages, for example, in the lyrics of blues songs, poetry, quilts, and gardens, as well as oral histories and kitchen table conversations. These sources organize experience in the language of daily life, making it possible to generate analytic categories that come closer to everyday categories. For example, DeVault (1991) found that women's own word for what they do for their families, "feeding," combined the notions of work and love in a way that more formal terms such as "domestic labor" or "caring" could not (cf. Yeatman, 1984).

5.1. Stereotypical Feminist Ways of Knowing

By the light of accumulated stereotypes about what makes research feminist, it would be easy to conclude that feminist research involves academic feminists using qualitative methods to reveal the insights of nonacademic women. In fact, distrust of systematic measurement practices, the desire to recognize the subjectivity of those we study, and the commitment to empowering women and other oppressed people have led many feminists to doubt that feminist research could be quantitative (Cook & Fonow, 1986; Edwards, 1990; Stacey & Thorne, 1985). Reducing complex thoughts and experiences to measurable variables, these feminists argue, sacrifices any sense of the whole, objectifies those we study, and makes it likely that the investigator's interpretations will support their continued domination. The assumption is that the only way to do feminist research is to begin with the lived experience of women and that requires the use of qualitative methods (e.g., Edwards, 1990). This reliance on qualitative methods coincides with the reluctance to make strong, broad theoretical claims, which would necessarily be generalizing from the experience of a few.

However, other feminists point out the interpersonal and political problems inherent in this stereotype of feminist research. Interpersonally, there is an inescapable power imbalance between researchers and subjects of research: researchers have choices over their vulnerability to risk, can leave the situation when they want, can choose what to report and what to disregard, and have ultimate control over the final interpretation (Risman, 1993; Sprague & Zimmerman, 1989; Stacey, 1988; Thorne, 1983).

Qualitative researchers' reliance on personal contact in long, unstructured interviews tends to draw on small, homogeneous samples and is unlikely to represent people with inflexible jobs, heavy domestic responsibility, and less verbal confidence (Canon, Higgenbotham, & Leung, 1988). Qualitative researchers have also asked the questions and reported in the categories of the hegemonic elite (Fine, 1994). Quantitative methods provide some counter to both of these sources of bias through the use of representative sampling, giving respondents control over the coding of their answers, and explicit, replicable analyses (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991; Sprague & Zimmerman, 1989).

Perhaps the most negative consequence of an overreliance on qualitative methods is what academic feminists have failed to contribute to a broader political movement. The point of feminist scholarship is to end the oppression of women. The purpose of knowledge is empowerment, in the sense of enabling purposive action. Thus, we create knowl-

edge about society in order to support people's ability to work together to make the lives they want and need. This has implications for what we call an adequate understanding. Social change requires a roadmap, a theory of what is and what should be (Fraser, 1989; Sprague, 1997). Democratic social change requires some degree of consensus on that roadmap, which means that scholars need to retain criteria for establishing truthfulness that do not erode "the persuasiveness of our conclusions" (Alcoff, 1989, p. 99). Reporting the numbers can be socially empowering, indicating degrees and/or pervasiveness of inequality. Telling the stories of people's experiences can be personally empowering, supporting empathy and feelings of connection. Persuasive arguments in public discourse require both.

The explanations oppressed people want and need, then, are probably not about pure truth as much as they are about how to improve their lives (Harding, 1987). To understand those lives, women and other oppressed people need to be able to see how their problems are the expression of social relations of domination (Acker et al., 1991; Mies, 1993); how the irrationalities they confront are the product of the workings of "relations of ruling" that are external to their daily experience (Smith, 1987). Also, since women are of many races and classes and vary in sexuality and in physical and mental abilities, ending the oppression of women requires working against all forms of oppression (Harding, 1991). Precisely because the social organization of knowledge has been dominated by an elite few, the explanations people need are not the ones they are likely to employ spontaneously (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1989). In other words, the goal hooks (1994) proposes for feminist pedagogy is not restricted to the classroom: to help people see the connections between their daily experience and the analytic frameworks we offer.

If we need some basis for judging among competing knowledge claims, if we know that scholars are limited by their experience and their particular interests, and if we cannot blindly trust the spontaneous consciousness of any particular group, what options are open to us? We believe that a stronger, more nuanced reading of feminist standpoint epistemology suggests a way out of the trap.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF FEMINIST STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY

Feminist standpoint epistemology transforms both the subject and the object in the epistemological relation. The subject is a collective one, strategically built on diverse experience. The object is a socially constructed one: the meaningful, coordinated activity of people in daily life is what is real. The relationship between the subject and object of knowing is historically specific and dialectic. The metaphor for feminist methodology is bridging.

6.1. The Subject Is Collective

The epistemological advantage of women is that a sexist society puts them in contradictory social locations, constructing them as both subject and object. They have an "outsider within" advantage and can play on the friction created by the gap between their experience and the conceptual frameworks that are available to make sense of it (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987, 1990). But there is no single privileged standpoint. Because women exist in a wide diversity of social locations based on class, race, ethnicity,

sexuality, disability, etc., the subject of feminist knowledge is multiple and sometimes conflicting (Bar On, 1993; Bhavnani, 1993; Haraway, 1988; Herding. 1991). Further, women cannot be the only generators of feminist knowledge; men in oppressed locations need to understand themselves and contribute to our understanding of their experience from a feminist perspective (Harding, 1991).

If knowledge is grounded in experience, then we need to recognize and take into account the understandings generated by people in their daily life. However, we also need to recognize the authority that comes from the experience of having studied something, having reflected on it, and paid attention to the reflections of others. That is, those who are scholars have to take responsibility for the authority of our experience.

6.2. The Object of Knowledge Is Socially Constructed

The "thing" we are trying to know from the point of view of standpoint epistemology is more than a constructivist nuanced text but less than a positivist open book. Haraway argues that we need to see the world not as an object over which we have control but as a "coding trickster" with which we try to have conversations using the methods, or "prosthetic devices," that help us see (1988, p. 594). The world, including humanity, is socially constructed, a product of history and technology (Haraway, 1993, 1990).

To say that something is socially constructed is not to say that it is not real—merely a language game as social constructivists say—but rather that it is the product of human activity. If the grounding of knowledge is our experience in the empirical world, then practical activity, the work of supporting continued human life, is the bedrock of that knowledge. Human activity in the world is real, O'Brien (1989) submits, and so are the structures that humans devise to meet the challenges they face. If categories are used to direct human social action, those categories are real because we are making them real: race, gender, and class are real in their consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928).

Nonetheless, if something is socially constructed it is not the durable, detached web of lawlike operations that positivism conjures up. It is—and we are—historically specific and changeable. Rational knowledge is open ended because the world is open ended.

6.3. The Relation between Subject and Object Is Dialectical

Given these notions of subject and object, how are feminist scholars to work on producing knowledge? Feminist standpoint epistemology implies that the relation between knower and object of knowledge is, as Ring (1987) says, dialectical. Our methodology must center on "the dynamic between human experience and the material world" and assume "constant change, that is, human history" (Ring, 1987, p. 766). Truth, Ring (1987) argues, will be attained when we have finally eliminated the conflicts between subject and object, expressed as the oppositions of ideas to material reality, of consciousness to history, of thought to action. That is, truth is the outcome of our acting in the world freely, consciously, and intentionally. Since we are a diverse community, truth implies working consensus on practical activity.

To do this, we must strategically structure our discourse, both listening to and learning from the perspectives of diverse subjects and diverse scholars. This is why Haraway's notion of splitting—making a connection between two knowers in one self—is impor-

tant. Mies makes a similar point in calling us to "conscious partiality," balancing empathy with distancing in a "limited identification with the subjects of research" (1993, p. 38).

Because each standpoint and what can be seen from it is limited, we need to construct our discourse as critical conversations. Longino (1989) argues that we construct a context for feminist rationality by removing the obstacles to criticism. These obstacles include repetitive and unproductive debates about background assumptions, overemphasis on novelty and originality at the expense of critical work, and restriction of our communities to those who share the same background assumptions. We have to find the courage to disagree with "correct" positions and/or persons and the commitment to engage one another to work toward consensus. We must be willing to disagree and use those disagreements as an access to better understanding.

Finally, feminist standpoint epistemology implies that academics are not individual producers of texts and courses. We are in a social relationship with the rest of the community. In the social division of labor, we are cultural workers; our product is understandings. Because the community in which we live and work is organized in relations of social domination, the work we do—the questions we pursue, the strategies we use to gather and interpret evidence, and the forms and venues in which we communicate our findings—connects us in valenced ways with either the powerful or with the oppressed. If we continue to do it as it has been done before, we will connect with the powerful, not the oppressed, whether we choose to consciously or not.

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