

Feminist epistemology

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Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science

E Anderson, "Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Characterization (Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science)

"Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science studies the ways in which gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification. It identifies ways in which dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage women and other subordinated groups, and strives to reform these conceptions and practices so that they serve the interests of these groups." (from the abstract)

Furthermore, feminist epistemology aims at

- explaining why and how entry of female researchers into sciences (particularly biological and social sciences) has generated new questions, theories, and methods
- showing how gender has in fact played a causal role in these transformations
- “defending these changes as cognitive, not just social, advances” (ibid.)

Feminism and science: main idea

Thesis (Feminism on science)

Science is part of the structure that perpetuates inequalities between man and woman. This has political as well as epistemic consequences.

Remedies:

- inclusion of more women in science, affirmative action
- encouragement of female “voice” in science
- dethrone science from its preeminent position in Western culture

Political v. epistemic implications

Note: political demands arising in feminism such as affirmative action, equal opportunities etc **have per se no implication for philosophy of science or epistemology**

Feminist **philosophical** ideas about science:

- (i) fem analysis of history of ideas/sci
- (ii) fem analysis of specific sci disciplines (mostly social and biomedical sci)
- (iii) fem epistemology: rationality/knowledge from fem point of view

Sex and gender

Definition (Sex: a biological concept)

Sex is the biological difference between males and females, it is "either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures."
(From merriam-webster.com)

Definition (Gender: a social concept)

"Gender is what societies make of sexual differences: the different roles, norms, and meanings they assign to men and women and the things associated with them on account of their real or imagined sexual characteristic." (Anderson, Sec. 1.3)

Androcentric and gynocentric representations

Definition (Andocentric representation)

An androcentric representation “depicts the world in relation to male or masculine interests, emotions, attitudes or values.” (ibid., Sec. 1.4)

Definition (Gynocentric representation)

A gynocentric representation “depicts the world in relation to female or feminine interests, emotions, attitudes of values.” (ibid.)

Gendered knowledge

general account of situated knowledge + account of gender as social situation → “gendered knowledge”

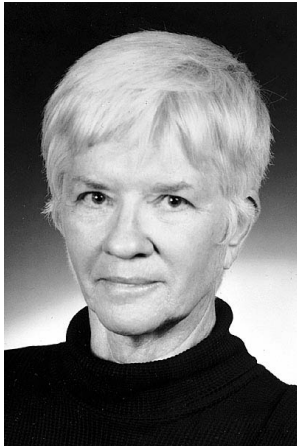
- To what extent have dominant perspectives (particularly concerning body and mind) seemed compelling **because they conform to male or masculine perception, interests, values?**
- Do dominant practices and conceptions in philosophy and in science reflect an androcentric perspective?
- Could these be changed, improved if they reflected women's standpoints and interests?

What feminist epistemology is not: relativism

- While fem epi stresses the situatedness and perspective-relativity of much knowledge, it doesn't reduce to relativism (or at least not all forms of it do).
 - I.e. it doesn't claim that all perspectives are equally valuable, or that they can't be externally evaluated.
 - It also doesn't claim that there is no objective perspective, or that such perspective would not be desirable.
- ⇒ What's the relation bw objective and gendered perspectives?
What's objectivity?

Sandra Harding (*1935), UCLA

Three views in feminist epistemology



- *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986)
- *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives* (1991)
- contributions to standpoint theory
- notorious for quote that "Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* is a 'rape manual' because 'science is a male rape of female nature' " (*Science Question*, 264)
- influential categorization of feminist epistemology

Harding's categorization

- 1 **Feminist empiricism**: espouses value-neutrality of sci, androcentric bias sign of “bad” science, studies, in a naturalistic framework, how different perspectives can be harnessed to advance knowledge
- 2 **Standpoint epistemology**: stresses role of “situatedness” of epistemic agent; oppressed or marginalized standpoints are epistemically superior in their ability to criticize basics
- 3 **Feminist postmodernism**: embraces full-blown relativism and epistemological anarchism; idea of “true” neutral description of world is harmful illusion; contingency and instability of social identity of knowers is emphasized

(1) Feminist standpoint theory

- being particularly situated within society gives epistemically privileged perspective to women
- i.e. women are better knowers **because they are women**
- oppressed have interest and ability to represent the world from both the oppressed and the oppressor's viewpoint and are thus epistemically superior
- standpoint of oppressed women correctly exposes dominant androcentric view as socially contingent
- inspiration from **Hegel, Marxism**
- group membership is defined **subjectively**, making membership is both necessary and sufficient for access to group's perspective (if membership were objectively defined, it would be neither)

Criticisms of standpoint theory

- What contextual beliefs might women have that gives them principled epistemic superiority?
- Helen Longino (1993): standpoint theory cannot provide **non-circular** basis for establishing female standpoint as privileged
- gender relations cannot be universalized: there is not unique or typical female standpoint (feminist standpoint theorists are almost exclusively white, middle-class academics—hardly constituting the most oppressed class or offering **typical** female perspective)

(2) Feminist postmodernism

- “discursively constructed” reality
- Heraclitean version of historicism (“You can’t step into the same stream of thoughts twice”)
- idea of “totalizing”, extra-linguistic reality is dangerous fiction
- not that existence of external world is denied, but that “world does not dictate the categories we use to describe it” (Sec. 3.1)
- gender is socially or discursively “constructed”, i.e. nurture rather than nature
- gender identity is not universal, transhistorical, necessary category
- scepticism about universality and unity of category “woman” ⇒ proliferation of perspectives

Criticisms of feminist postmodernism

- opposition to generalizations about women undercuts feminist critiques of dominant social forces that disadvantage women
- impossible to criticize sci for androcentric bias on relativist basis since it eschews all normative judgments
- dissolves all groups, thus ironically reproducing the individualism of standard epistemology that it repudiates

(3) Feminist empiricism

- feminist empiricism supports typical C20 empiricist hypotheses: (1) observation is theory-laden; (2) naturalized epistemology, i.e. epist as project in sci to elucidate our practices of inquiry, not offering an extrascientific foundation for sci
- espouses value-neutrality of sci
- androcentric bias sign of “bad” science
- studies how different perspectives can be harnessed to advance knowledge
- **paradox of bias**: how can bias be bad (if androcentric) and good (if gynocentric)? Fem emp needs to reconcile this
- **paradox of social construction**: fem emp criticizes negative influence of social factors in sci inquiry, yet they stress the social construction of all knowledge

Criticisms of feminist empiricism

- if non-cognitive factors cannot be eliminated, then value-neutrality not convincing
- IOW, there's a sense in which fem emp tries to have the cake and eat it too: be objective, yet criticize objectivity (as can be seen from the two paradoxes)

Feminism and science

- Many of the feminist arguments in epistemology equally apply to the study of science as practice of inquiry, but some additional points merit attention.
- many of the points particularly concern sciences that deal with human subjects (e.g. social science, psychology, biomedical research)
- “Feminist science critics focus on identifying androcentric and sexist biases in the actual practice of science.” (Sec. 5)

A few examples:

- knowledge of others in gendered relationships: research based on personal contact bw researcher and subject may be influenced by gendered relations
- gendered background beliefs and worldviews: unexamined androcentric background beliefs of scientists may lead to sexist theories about women
- androcentric research agenda and methods may disadvantage women's interests

Feminist science criticism: bias as error

Criticism of this type takes different forms: includes studies of how...

- 1 “...the exclusion or marginalization of women scientists impair scientific progress...”
- 2 “...the applications of science and technology disadvantage women and other vulnerable groups...”
- 3 “...science has ignored women and gender, and how turning attention to these issues may require revision of accepted theories...”
- 4 “...biases toward working with ‘masculine’ cognitive styles... have impaired scientific understanding...”
- 5 “...research into sex differences and women’s and men’s ‘natures’ taht reinforces sex stereotypes and sexist practices fail to live up to standards of good science...” (Sec. 5.1)

Case study: Primatology

Thesis

There are cases in which science benefits from inclusion of women in field.

Observation in study of social behaviour in nonhuman primates:
coincidence bw significant influx of female scientists into primatology
with emergence of more sophisticated picture of sexual behaviour of
female primates
often interpreted as causal relationship

Kathleen Okruhlik

Kathleen Okruhlik, "Gender and the biological sciences," *Biology and Society*, Suppl. vol. 20 (1994): 21-42

- 1 Non-cognitive factors influence the generation of theories.
- 2 Theory choice in science, even if perfectly rational and uncontaminated by non-cognitive factors, is irreducibly comparative, i.e. only operative among extant rival theories.
- 3 The number of actually available contenders in each choice is finite. [Okruhlik: two]
- 4 By (2) and (3), theory choice only identifies the theory which is epistemically superior over a finite number of extant rivals.
- 5 By (1) and (4), nothing in the appraisal machinery will completely "purify" the victorious theory from non-cognitive elements.
- 6 In particular, if all of the contenders for a particular choice, or set of choices, suffer from an androcentric bias, then the content of science as a whole suffers from an androcentric bias even if the mechanisms of theory choice are fully rational.

The limiting effect of bias

- bias is **limiting** and leads to **partial** understanding, but does **not imply error**
- biases are often legitimate: scientific inquiry cannot be conducted in complete absences of non-cognitive factors that are subject to biases
- The real problem arises if some (androcentric) biases are permitted to dominate scientific inquiry “**to the exclusion of other generative biases that would generate rival theories possessing a different range of important empirical successes.**” (Sec. 5.1)

Feminist science criticism: bias as resource

- feminists often stress that feminist science should not exclude other ways of doing science
 - but it should be included as legitimate and fully equal choice available to scientists
- ⇒ irreducibly pluralist and realist understanding of science