Standpoint Theory and the Connection with Black Feminism

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Sometimes to understand why something is the way it is, you have to change your perspective. Maybe the best way to look at a problem, situation, or group of people isn’t from the most obvious source. Maybe the way to view the subject is from the perception of those who are overlooked. This idea of viewing something from a unique and oftentimes ignored stance is called the standpoint theory. Many feminists, who feel as if their place in society is marginalized and misunderstood, adopted this theory. Originated from the thoughts of Sandra Harding (1991), feminist standpoint theory says “…that certain socio-political positions occupied by women (and by extension other groups who lack social and economic privilege) can become sites of epistemic privilege and thus productive starting points for enquiry into questions about not only those who are socially and politically marginalized, but also those who, by dint of social and political privilege, occupy the positions of oppressors,” (Bowell, n.d.). In this paper, the socially marginalized is black women. With the works of black feminist Patricia Hill Collins (1986) and Bell Hooks (2001), the perspective of black women in society can be discovered and analyzed. It is a perspective that can be used to apply the standpoint theory, however, many of the sources and research developed behind this scope and the feminist standpoint in general have a lack of methodology or quantitative research. The problem also arises that despite the common ground that advocates share—feminist beliefs—the difference in culture and race creates a divide between the two that leaves arguments opaque. So that leaves the simple question: is there enough evidence in the current literature to make a valid argument that black feminism and standpoint theory reinforce each other?
The standpoint theory is the belief that the ostracized or minority has an equally important view on matters (or more important view as it is less biased) as does the majority. This idea began with Hegel’s master vs. slave dialectic. Hegel believed “the oppressed slave can eventually reach a state of freedom of consciousness as a result of her/his realization of self-consciousness through struggles against the master,” (Bowell, n.d.). Through this oppression, Hegel argued that slaves have better insight on injustice because of their lack of freedom. This is the beginning of the standpoint theory, which later developed to have key specifications. The theory criterion claims that one must specify the following: “a.) The social location of the privileged perspective, b.) The scope of its privilege (subject it has privilege over), c.) The aspect of the social location (i.e. social role), d.) The ground of its privilege (what makes that aspect a claim to privilege), e.) The type of epistemic superiority it claims (greater accuracy, or representation of truths), f.) The other perspectives to which it claims superiority, and g.) Modes of access to that perspective” (Anderson, 2012). And this is what brings us to feminist standpoint theory today. Author Alison Wylie (2003) explains, “[the oppressed] may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience.” Men, and those who fail to acknowledge the perspective of women, oppress women in today’s society. To narrow the scope even more, black women more specifically are oppressed not only by men, but in a sense by men and women who are not of their same race and fail to realize their disregarded stance in the world.

With the background and history setting the scene, it is important to delve a little more into the ‘feminist’ beliefs of the theory. According the Encyclopedia of Communication Theory, “feminist theorists began to challenge the definition [of theory] and suggest that theory, from a
feminist perspective, required neither testable fact nor objectivity, but was instead a subjective compilation of explanations that were highly contextual, bound by the ideologies of the researcher, and deeply influenced by the social milieu from which they emerged,” (Griffin, 2009). The rule of no testable evidence in and of itself leaves a gaping hole in the support of standpoint theory. If one were to abide by this belief, no one perspective will be the same because every standpoint is different. The lack of data collection is shown in the research done behind black feminism. There is no data or testable evidence to verify the arguments of black feminism, and they will stand firm because there is no need for testable data. This is highlighted in a claim made by Collins: “No one Black feminist platform exists from which one can measure the “correctness” of a particular thinker…much of [black feminist thought] has been oral and has been produced by ordinary Black women in their roles as mothers, teachers, musicians, and preachers,” (Collins, 1986). This statement claims that there is no evidence or data behind the ideas of black feminism. Most of the backing of their beliefs comes from common life experiences and traditions passed on throughout the women in the black community. But if one is not a black woman, how can a proper understanding of this be attained if there are no polls or experiments conducted? Yes, the explanations of women such as Collins and Bell Hooks help others grasp the concepts of what being a black women is all about, but yet there is still an absence of experiment and experience. If there is no need for testable data, how can anyone (specifically oppressors) begin to understand a feminist standpoint without being a feminist? To me, the difference is the same as sympathy and empathy. It is easy to feel sorry for someone, but it is different to be able to relate and empathize. It is also difficult to say how black women are being specifically marginalized without data or experimentation. Obviously the African-American race is the minority, but in what experiences have the women of this race been
marginalized besides slavery? Is it through the job experiences, cultural experiences, media experiences or all of the above?

This leads to the other major shortcoming in the feminist standpoint research. Each and every source provided in this review will consist of only women. Does that leave room for one to think that there is some bias to the feminist standpoint theory? Absolutely. But is there a significant difference between men and women physically and emotionally? Definitely. The emergence of women’s studies was linked to the political movement of the 1960s, and this is where feminism began (Maynard, 2005). So when applying the standpoint theory, as said before, how can a man relate to the feminist perspective? Men throughout history have not experienced oppression because of their gender, or have not been silenced because of their anatomy. The same goes for black feminism. How can one relate to their struggle if they are not black? There is an obvious bias. Even Collins states, “while black feminist thought may be recorded by others, it is produced by black women,” (Collins, 1986). This creates a partiality for African-American women that makes their argument hard to understand and relate to. So a bias in thought is inevitable because of the simple word that is so important in standpoint theory: experience.

This leads us to the bulk of my argument. Most of the research on feminist standpoint is done from the perspective of white middle age women. Surprisingly enough, the founder herself, Sandra Harding, discovered this flaw in the standpoint theory. She questions “how can feminists create research that is for women in the sense that it provides less partial and distorted answers to questions that arise from women’s lives and are not only about those lives but also about the rest of nature and social relations,” (Harding). This is perhaps the biggest critique of how the standpoint theory is currently being researched. Early feminist standpoint theorists often had a type of ‘tunnel vision’ to only their race. Maynard explains that “crucial to the debate is an
increased awareness of the inherent racism and analyses and practices which assume white experiences to be the norm, use these as a basis from which to generate concepts and theories, and fail to acknowledge that women from different cultures and ethnicities are themselves a differentiated group,” (Maynard, 2009). This is not to downplay the problems of white women. Before the time of the feminist movement of the 1960s women were known to abide by the rule ‘be seen and not heard’. A woman in any position of authority and respect was unheard of. However, these problems for white women are not the same for women of other races.

And this is where feminist standpoint theory research and black feminism research diverge. Black women are marginalized in every sense of the word. Not only are blacks a minority in a numerical sense; their life experiences and history help make the argument that they are in a group all their own. “As a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group,” (Hook, 2001). Without testable data, we can solely rely on Hook’s testimony. She grew up in a Southern, male dominated home during the time of racial segregation. She claims that the white feminist movement to black women was nothing exciting because they (meaning blacks) had been oppressed their whole lives by not only the new white feminist, but also their fellow white men (Hook, 2001). So the conflict of perspectives here is interesting. In one perspective, white women are elated and feeling a newfound sense of power, whereas black women experienced almost a cynical view because to them being oppressed is all they knew. Another account from Collins also addresses the difference between the standpoint of white and black women. Collins argues that black women are more able to adapt to a white society and adjust to a white society because of their “experienced realities”. She argues that from the effects of slavery, black women know what it is
like to live under a white person’s rules and what they approve and disapprove. Therefore, black women are essentially ‘outsiders looking in’. I think this is a critical viewpoint from which feminist standpoint theory and black feminism repair the gap they made from racial differences. Feminist standpoint theory, made by middle to upper class white women, viewed oppression as men taking away their choices and voice in society. Black women had not only this weight, but also the weight of not being understood by white society. According to standpoint theory, the marginalized viewpoint is one that will give you not only the perspective of the downtrodden, but also a clear view of how the oppressor does his oppressing. By Collins stating that black women are the outsiders looking in, black feminism fits the epitome of what a marginalized group is by standpoint theory definition. Because by their long history with white people and oppression, they know how whites live. They understand how whites operate. And as figuratively and literally ‘black and white’ the situation may be, it is exactly what it appears to be.

The sources used in this paper were critical to answering the questions raised by standpoint theory. Firstly, the work of E. Anderson in the Feminist epistemology and the philosophy of science, from 2012 were used to help determine the epistemology of standpoint theory. This work is qualitative, and is a secondary source to the feminist standpoint theory. The source explains the breakdown of feminist standpoint, criticisms and defenses for the theory. There is no test described in this work, but the subject throughout the entire context of this site is women. The source makes the argument “central concept of feminist epistemology is that of a situated knower, and hence of situated knowledge: knowledge that reflects the particular perspectives of the subject,” (Anderson, 2012). Next, T. Bowell wrote The Feminist Standpoint Theory in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy in 2002. This source is also a secondary
source that helps readers understand the basic outlines of standpoint theory. However, this source focuses more on the feminist standpoint theory. There is no study conducted by Bowell, yet he pulls research from the works of black feminist Patricia Hill Collins and feminist standpoint leader Sandra Harding. The argument made in this source is [standpoint theory is] descriptive and normative, describing and analyzing the causal effects of power structures on knowledge while also advocating a specific route for enquiry, a route that begins from standpoints emerging from shared political struggle within marginalized lives.” (Bowell, 2002). C.L Griffin’s article “Feminist Communication Theories” in the Encyclopedia of Communication Theory was also used. This article provided insight on feminist communication, and also standpoint theory. It was a qualitative, secondary source that was useful in combining all the major feminist thoughts into one. The argument made here was the intricate way women communicate and how they deal with being a marginalized group. Also, “Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” published in 1991 by Sandra Harding was used. This is a primary source written by one of the founders of feminist standpoint theory. Harding talks about the beliefs of the feminist standpoint theory and how they need to be changed to adapt to modern day culture. For example, the fact that there are more than just white, middle aged women who are marginalized. The field of intercultural study is used to make the argument that feminist standpoint theory in the past has been a narrow road, but needs to be widened to fit the new age culture. Patricia Hill Collins’s scholarly article (1986) “Learning from the outsider within: The social significance of Black Feminist Thought” was part of research. This primary, qualitative source was used to highlight black feminism and the standpoint theory. Using intercultural and interpersonal study, Collins explains the experience of black women’s lives in society and how they are a marginalized group moreso than any other demographic. The subjects, black women, are
important in her argument that the only way to understand the life of a black woman, you would have to experience it. Scholar Bell Hooks’s “Black women: Shaping feminist theory” was written in 2001. This primary, qualitative source is a vital first hand account on the life of a black woman. Hooks explains that her Southern upbringing during the times of racial segregation made her realize black women will always be of their own group. This helps reinforce the standpoint theory because black women are an ostracized group that can help bring insight to those who are not black or women. There is no test used but the firsthand experience used by Hooks provides the crucial argument that black women make up their own subcategory in feminism. Alongside this, M. Maynard contributed to research with her article “Women’s Studies” in the book A Companion to Gender Studies in 2005. This qualitative source explains in detail the studies of women and their standpoint on their stance in society. It also discusses how in feminist beliefs the overarching assumption that all women think the same, despite their differing backgrounds. The argument being made by Maynard is that this overarching assumption is wrong, and that each woman has a standpoint that is different from another. Lastly, “Why Standpoint Matters” by Alyson Wylie in 2003 was used in this research. This source helps explain why standpoint is important in understanding standpoint and feminism. The field of intercultural study was used in Wylie’s research, because she addresses the thoughts of Harding and why feminist feel so strongly about their stance. There is no test provided, but the argument being made is that feminist standpoint is very valuable.

Each of these sources highlight in some way the standpoint theory and feminism. The primary sources used are the main focus for insight on feminist standpoint theory. The secondary sources reinforce this insight by contributing input and also combining the works of these primary sources. However, it is important to note that essentially none of the sources include
testable data, because according to standpoint theorists, standpoint theory “required neither testable fact nor objectivity,” (Griffin, 2009). Most of the research gathered in this review has many experiences and testimonies, but lack experiments and data. The stories of women, and black women were both essential in explaining the standpoint theory. Although the stance of black women and white feminists may be vastly different, they both acknowledge the simple fact that everybody has a different journey and story to tell.
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Works Cited


