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Redirecting Feminist Critiques of Science

Martha Mccaughey

ABSTRACT: Reviews and discusses Sandra Harding's tripartite model of feminist critiques of science. Relationship between scientific inquiry, objectivity, and values; Application of Donna Haraway's and Helen Longino's insights; Feminist scientists as postmodern; Standpoints of postmodern feminists; Redirection of feminist critiques of science.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist scholarship is largely made up of critique, a portion of which focuses on the taken-for-granted knowledge of scientists.¹ Focusing on the biases in scientific knowledge claims, the institutionalized segregation of the scientific community, and the dangerous things that scientists have produced in the twentieth century, feminist critiques have exposed, alongside other critiques in the philosophy and sociology of science, that one's perspective influences what one questions about the world, how one goes about answering those questions, how one applies those answers, and how one gives an account of

how one knows what one knows.

In this paper, I discuss the various epistemological positions that have both informed and sprung from feminist critiques of science and clarify the assumptions regarding science and knowledge which underlie these positions. Sandra Harding (1986a) has categorized feminist critics of science into three groups: the feminist empiricist group, the feminist standpoint group, and the postmodern feminist group. I suggest that this tripartite model, now the authoritative classification scheme informing feminist critics' perceptions of themselves and other critics of science, is based on misconceptions about scientific inquiry and its relationship to politics. The work of Donna Haraway (1989, 1991) and Helen Longino (1989, 1990) offers important ways to reconceptualize science, values and objectivity. A simplistic division between scientific objectivism and interpretationism (two sides of the same modernist coin) and other misconceptions about scientific inquiry have led some standpoint and postmodern feminists to see feminist science as a contradiction in terms and some feminist scientists and standpoint theorists to see postmodern feminism as a contradiction in terms. In what follows, I review Harding's three groups in turn, with the aim of discarding the tripartite model and suggesting some ways in which feminist critiques of science can be redirected.

"FEMINIST EMPIRICISTS"

One set of feminist critics of science, mainly scientists themselves, are interested in creating a new science. Harding (1986a) calls this group "feminist empiricists," and among them are Sarah Hrdy (1981), Ruth Hubbard (1988), Marcia Millman, and Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1975). They hold that there is not enough good science being done: If science were done properly and if more women were in science, we would see fewer sexist knowledge claims.

While many feminist theorists see feminist science as effective to the extent that women are beating scientists at their own game, fitting themselves into already authoritative methods of knowledge production,² they assume this to be the most conservative of the feminist knowledge seeking projects. The reason for this assumption has to do with many feminists' skepticism about science and rationality. Those who assume that the problem *is* science—that science, when done properly, is domination—thus believe that no greater amount of adherence to science could make it better, let alone more feminist. For instance, MacKinnon states:

In the Western philosophical tradition, method has sought authority: how to produce an account of knowledge which is certain, which ends speculation and precludes skepticism, which has power that no one else can as powerfully contest Its thrust has been to end diversity of viewpoint, so that there can be no valid disagreement over what knowing is right knowing. Its history is the history of an attempt to exert such

power over reality as comes from methodological hegemony over the means of knowing, validating only those ways of proceeding which advance the project of producing what it regards as requisite certainty. Objectivity has been its answer, its standard, its holy grail. (MacKinnon 1989, 107)

There is a problematic assumption behind this skepticism about science, however. MacKinnon is not discussing science, but the absolutism of positivism, which assumes that a truth of matters exists and that theoretical claims and assumptions of a program follow from, rather than play a role in determining and interpreting, the accumulated data (Longino 1990, 179). Because science is seen as the positivism that most sophisticated scientists have rejected quite a while ago, MacKinnon criticizes rationality, the ability to reason (Longino, 1989), by critiquing positivism. While these criticisms are relevant to the myth of science in our culture that many laypeople and some scientists invoke to justify their claims, the positivist account does not accurately describe the logic of inquiry and the practice of science. As Longino (1989, 262) points out, the positivists got rationality wrong. Until feminists realize this, they will get science, and feminist scientists, wrong.

Feminist scientists are not logical positivists who assume that value claims are subordinate to allegedly value-free observationally verifiable claims (Longino, 1990, 177). However, due to the conflation of science and positivism, other feminists such as Di Stefano (1990), Hawkesworth (1989), and Harding (1986a, 1990) make the mistake of assuming that feminist scientists

maintain assumptions resembling positivism simply because they have not rejected science. For those who see science as positivism, feminist science looks pretty silly. Feminist scientists are trying to correct "bad science," but this does not imply that "good science" is objectivist, value free science. For instance, Hubbard states:

What feminists have to contribute is the insistence that subjectivity and context cannot be stripped away, that they must be acknowledged if we want to understand nature and use the knowledge we gain without abusing it. . . . [W]e can try to understand the world, so to speak, from inside instead of pretending to be objective outsiders looking in. (Hubbard 1988, 10, 13)

Indeed, there is little evidence that feminist scientists insist that a better account of the world should be gained through objectivist science rather than through discussions of radical historical contingency and constructivism. Thus it is not the case that feminist scientists think that the appropriate method for producing knowledge about the world involves controlling the subjectivity of the observer in an attempt to reach some Archimedean point-of-viewlessness.³ If any of them did, their case would surely be quite shallow. More likely, the suspicion that feminist scientists are contradictory conservatives is based on fundamental misunderstandings of science and rationality.

The supposition that there could and should be a privileged correct description

of the world from an externalist perspective, or that such a privileged perspective is necessary for deciding between competing claims, could very well be due to the structures of domination which feminists criticize. Indeed, some scientists and many laypeople believe that social interests and values do not play any legitimate role in inquiry and that sexism, racism, and classism are either flawed add-ons or unpleasant facts that just happen to have been discovered by a neutral scientific observer (Longino, 1989). Feminist criticism, then, would better be directed toward those who pull what Haraway (1991) calls the "god-trick." An examination of some people's commingling of science and positivism would be a fruitful way to refocus feminist criticism.

Feminist scientists, as I see them, are not repeating the errors of positivism. By connecting issues of domination with the positivist myth of science, they challenge those scientists who still cling to the positivist vision. Feminist scientists do not conclude that there is something wrong with rationality because the social context in which rationality has been carried out has been characterized by structures of domination. Although they have been historically associated, rationality is not inherently a masculine or white enterprise. Rationality, then, isn't the master's tool and feminist scientists are not engaged in a naive attempt to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. It is positivism, not rationality, which assumed that scientific objectivity meant point-of-viewlessness. These misguided views of science and rationality have moved some feminist critics to see "feminist science" as a contradiction in terms and to develop a second model for a feminist theory of knowledge. It is this model I consider next.

"STANDPOINT THEORISTS"

The second group of theorists, categorized by Harding (1986a) as "standpoint theorists" and exemplified by the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1989), Christine Di Stefano (1990), Nancy Hartsock (1983), Hilary Rose (1983), and Dorothy Smith (1987), has focused on the distortedness of the oppressor's viewpoint. It is the oppressed, they argue, that have a privileged epistemological position. Harding characterizes this position: "The oppressed are indeed damaged by their social experience, but what is a disadvantage in terms of their oppression can become an advantage in terms of science" (1990, 98). The standpoint(s) of the oppressed is(are) not privileged on moral or political grounds, but on empirical grounds, in a way that undercuts the distinction between the political and the empirical without ever acknowledging it. Feminist standpoint theorists use the Marxist and Enlightenment assumptions that there is a reality out there to which the oppressed have privileged access by virtue of the conditions of their oppression. They say that these politically achieved privileged standpoints provide less distorted vision (Hartsock 1983). They say that the oppressed can see reality better because the view(s) of the oppressed is(are) not as partial and perverse as those of oppressors. For instance, Hartsock states:

Women's lives, like men's, are structured by social relations which manifest the experience of the dominant gender and

class. The ability to go beneath the surface of appearances to reveal the real but concealed social relations requires both theoretical and political activity. Feminist theorists must demand that feminist theorizing be grounded in women's material activity and must as well be part of the political struggle necessary to develop areas of social life modeled on this activity. (Hartsock 1983, 304)

There are many explanations of the connection between gender and epistemological stances. An incomplete list includes: the gender division of labor which for women unifies manual, mental and emotional labors; the experience of mothering; menstruation cycles; differing experiences of embodiment between women and men; the experience of vaginal penetration; birthing; nursing; child-rearing and nurturing activities, which mediate the modes of knowing, one located in the body and the other passing beyond it; getting socialized in the family differently (girls seeking connectedness and boys seeking autonomy); getting socialized to prioritize contextual rules over abstract principles; and gender differences in separation and individuation as a result of being reared by females (see Collins 1989; Daly 1978; Keller 1985, in Collins 1989, 765; Hawkesworth 1987; Rose 1983; Smith 1985). These theories attempt to accommodate the privileged female subject, explain why women are better knowers, and, thus, why women's standpoints should be privileged. The main objections to standpoint theories revolve around their essentialist and objectivist assumptions.

Why should women be privileged knowers? Afrocentric ways of knowing,

contrasted with Western ways of knowing, parallel standpoint theorists' contrast of women's and men's ways of knowing (Harding 1986a; Gergen 1988).

Afrocentric and feminist claims to epistemological advantage are both based on the ethic of care and experience-based knowledge (Collins 1989). Western women's participation in colonization practices alongside Western men makes Western women's ways of knowing arguably more similar to Western men's than to Third World women's. The goal of developing a "women's account" of the world in feminist theory subverts meaningful difference in the category "women." King (1988, 57) criticizes this goal: "The assertion of commonality, indeed of the universality and primacy of female oppression, denies the other structured inequalities of race, class, religion, and nationality, as well as denying the diverse cultural heritages that affect the lives of many women." Even if an unintended consequence, any tendency toward universality in feminism is in danger of reproducing the kind of social structure that it is attempting to change.

While acknowledging that there is no *one* way of accounting for women's and men's specific ways of knowing, since there are many ways of coming to be different from oppressors, the goal of standpoint theorists has been to make women privileged subjects. But a critique that rejects a man-centered epistemology because it provides a distorted view must also reject a woman-centered one for the same reason (Hekman 1990). Once any possible essentialism is abandoned in the standpoint epistemology, its goal of using women's viewpoints to gain the truth is undermined. In other words, the logical conclusion of the perspectivism of the standpoint theory leaves us rejecting the very

possibility of a truth about reality (Hawkesworth 1989, 330).

Often used terms such as "less partial" and "less distorted" to describe the knowledge of the oppressed reveal an objectivist commitment to a reality which can be more, or less, accurately reflected. The assumption that feminist standpoints are special and less distorted also reveals an assumption that the oppressed are innocent and pure of power and that victimhood is the only ground for insight (Haraway 1991, 157). Brown criticizes this premise: "This desire for knowledge accounts that are innocent of power, that position us outside power, is rooted in the need to make power answer to reason/morality and to prohibit demands for accountability in the opposite direction" (Brown 1991, 76).

Longino (1989, 262) points out that while feminist standpoint theorists have identified the interest-laden content of scientific theories, they have condemned the methodology because of its results. This leaves feminists without common and conclusion-independent ways of evaluating competing knowledge claims and persuading others. Standpoint theorists have proposed a new methodology, privileging subjectivity, intuition, or a feminine way of knowing as a way to get new results. In other words, feminist standpoint theorists have opposed as androcentric the idea that ahistorical principles of inquiry (which they suppose science to be about) can insure ever more perfect representations of the world (Harding 1990, 97) but they end up asserting that radically historical, contingent subjects and principles of inquiry can insure ever more perfect, or at least ever less false, representations of the world. This

view combines radical contingency with a touch of objectivism to say that a culturally and historically contingent subject could provide, by virtue of that subjectivity, an empirically better view of the world. Flax refutes this notion: "We cannot simultaneously claim (1) that the mind, the self, and knowledge are socially constituted and that what we can know depends upon our social practices and contexts and (2) that feminist theory can uncover the Truth of the whole once and for all" (Flax 1987, 633). Assumptions that feminist claims are pure, innocent, truer or that feminists have "the answer" to clear everything up follow the modernist logic of realism and humanism (Haraway 1991; Hawkesworth 1989).

Standpoint theorists might argue that they do not depend upon a belief in a reality "out there." The simple fact that men as a group oppress women as a group means that women's and men's claims are not equal. But on what grounds are they not equal? Are women's claims privileged over men's on political grounds or empirical grounds? As soon as the political aspect is made explicit, the standpoint theorist is embracing the "relativist" position she was trying to avoid. How can anyone have a reliable view of "nature" and social events if meaning and observation are theory-laden and theories are value-laden? Aren't we left with radical subjectivism and, hence, an inability to make any knowledge claims at all? How would we decide between competing claims? When we acknowledge the differences among women, as Harding (1991) has recently done more adamantly, we realize that we will produce conflicting, multiple knowledge accounts. The problem constructed by the standpoint theorists, then, that of how to decide between competing claims, is never

resolved. The final group I consider seems less worried about competing claims.

"POSTMODERN FEMINISTS"

Feminists critical of Enlightenment and humanist assumptions, such as Wendy Brown (1991), Jane Flax (1987), Donna Haraway (1991), and Susan Hekman (1990), often referred to as "postmodern feminists," question the very existence of a "ready-made world that is out there for the reflecting" (Harding 1986b, 655) and also the ability of the mind to reflect this alleged world perfectly.⁴ They argue that, while it may be tempting to say the way things *really* are to those in power, feminists would do better to challenge the plausibility of claims that any perspective on the world could escape partiality (Flax 1987) or that any certain person or group's partiality is better in any apolitical way.

The standpoint theorist's aversion to postmodern theories rests on the assumption that the postmodern feminist position leaves no room for persuasion or deciding between competing claims. For instance, Di Stefano (1990, 77) asserts that postmodernism disallows judgement. Standpoint theorists worry that under the postmodern framework women will not be able to make any knowledge claims at all. Di Stefano states this feminist aversion to postmodernism:

The postmodernist project, if seriously adopted by feminists,

would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible. To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely, women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centered inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency. (Di Stefano 1990, 76)

If the transcendental subject is denied altogether, how will women constitute themselves as subjects? Hartsock argues that postmodernism critiques modernist theories without putting anything in their place:

For those of us who want to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodernist theories at their best give little guidance At worst, postmodernist theories can recapitulate the effects of Enlightenment theories which deny the right to participate in defining the terms of interaction. (Hartsock 1990, 159-60)

Since theorists of postmodernity have criticized Enlightenment visions of knowledge, those who hear the criticisms with modernist ears associate postmodernism with relativism. Indeed, misconceptions about the relationship between knowledge and politics have lead some feminist scientists and standpoint theorists to see feminists using postmodern approaches as politically disengaged. But the postmodern philosophy does not make knowledge claims

or judgment impossible. It simply disallows absolutist or irresponsible claims.

I have already shown that the standpoint epistemology offers no solution to their "problem" of how to resolve conflicting accounts. Brown (1991, 77)

states that modernity "bequeaths to us a preference for *deriving* norms epistemologically over *deciding* on them politically." Foundationalism is not necessary to privilege a particular perspective. Ergo, the standpoint theorists do not need to fear postmodernism as relativism.⁵

The feminist arguments about rationality seem to be displaced arguments about perspectives. Two arguments can be completely rational and yet opposed if they are based on different background assumptions. For example, some men's rights literature argues that women oppress men because men aren't getting as much sex as they want and feel they deserve. Warren Farrell (1986) argues that women have power over men because men are constantly frustrated by women's sexual power over them and that this oppression is just as great as the oppression women experience by living in a rape culture. Women are routinely forced to submit to unwanted sex in committed relationships and that is oppressive; but equally oppressive, in this view, is the fact that men are forced to commit to women in monogamous relationships when they would rather be sleeping with lots of women, uncommitted. Feminists would disagree with this position but not necessarily with the data (the given state of affairs), only the hypotheses for which that data is taken as evidence. The background assumption behind Farrell's position—that men not getting enough sex or men being forced to marry in order to get enough sex is morally equivalent to women being forced to have sex in order to stay alive—is disagreeable to feminists.

Competing claims can be assessed in light of background assumptions rather than their rationality. As Longino (1990) points out, evidential reasoning is context-dependent: data can only serve as evidence for a hypothesis in light of certain background assumptions. Background assumptions carry the values in scientific inquiry. Positivism would assume access to truth while this sort of contextual empiricism does not. Rationality is not connected to guarantees of truth nor is objectivity connected to exact representation (Longino 1989).

The standpoint theory need not be an essentialist, objectivist, "correspondence" theory; what saves it from relativism is its political commitment to privileging women's stories over men's, or certain women's stories over certain men's.

Objectivity can refer to collective scientific method rather than a characteristic of individual scientific practitioners. Scientific inquiry must be a social practice if it is to be objective (Longino 1989). Objectivity, then, does not mean that claims are free of value-laden background assumptions. Background assumptions can and should be up for critical scrutiny. A method of inquiry is objective, in this sense, to the extent that it permits transformative criticism, where its procedures and results respond to criticism (Longino 1990, 76). Since intellectual authority is not equally shared, the scientific community will not respond to everyone's criticism and to this extent a scientific community will not meet its goal of objectivity. Even if it did, we would not necessarily wind up with one account of the world. Two theories can be equally rational, use the same data, and yet have different background assumptions that keep them at a stand-off.

It is true that "some assumptions are not perceived as such by any members of the community. When, for instance, background assumptions are shared by all members of a community, they acquire an invisibility which renders them unavailable for criticism" (Longino 1989, 268). To positivist scientists, women's criticisms have been thought to be "interested critiques" attempting to bias science, a realm which portrays the world as it really is, regardless of how anyone wishes it were. It is therefore the context of rationality that should be the focus of feminist critique. Viewing scientific knowledge as social knowledge and objectivity as a social achievement means that a "critical discussion among a plurality of individuals about a commonly accessible phenomenon" (Longino 1990, 74) provides the possibility for objectivity. But, of course, the lack of plurality is precisely the problem. Feminists can point out how objectivity in this new sense will not be realized until the scientific community is more democratic, diverse, and responsive to criticism from non-elite groups. This is why it is the context of scientific inquiry that deserves the attention of feminist critics.

Haraway (1991 188, 193) argues for a concept of objectivity that means "situated knowledges" or "critical positioning." This view of objectivity values knowledge claims which are partial, situated, accountable, and responsible rather than "value-free," innocent, and totalizing. Rejecting the innocence of identity politics as politically irresponsible, postmodern feminists advocate claiming "what I want for us" instead of "who I am" (Brown 1991). As Haraway notes: "Politics and ethics ground struggles for the contests over what may

count as rational knowledge" (1991, 193). Such struggles are struggles over vision. In this view, the most strategic kind of feminist knowledge would be a power-sensitive positioned rationality (Haraway 1991). Brown urges us to "seize [the opening in postmodernity] to develop democratic processes for formulating collective post epistemological and post ontological judgments" (1991, 80). All discourses, feminist obviously included, can be deconstructed to reveal moral positions. Positioning is not a problem. Positioning is promising.

CONCLUSION

It may seem useful for feminists to use standpoint or objectivist epistemologies to convince modernists of their claims. But it does not look like this has been a conscious effort to trick the patriarchy. Rather, it appears to be unreflexive participation in dominant narratives about knowledge. Harding (1990) insists that *feminist* postmodernism must be somewhat modernist in order to be feminist (i.e., political) and because of this feminists will have to develop a tolerance for ambiguity and a philosophy of ambivalence (Harding 1986a, 1990). She asserts that feminists will have to tolerate the contradictions in feminist epistemologies, since, in her view, any feminist politics depends on modernism, contradictory as that is. However, the kind of ambiguity that Harding suggests that we tolerate is unnecessary.

The tolerance for ambiguity need not be over modernist assumptions.

Feminists do not need modernist assumptions to be politically engaged, to make knowledge claims, or to persuade. Perhaps more appropriate, then, is a tolerance of multiplicity which accommodates the contingency of antifoundationalism, contextual empiricism, partial perspectives, and situated knowledges. In Longino's terms, this means relinquishing the ideals of certainty and of the permanence of knowledge and developing a tolerance for theoretical pluralism (1990, 230-32). The radically redefined relationship between knowledge and power implies that escaping partiality and constructing a universalizing perspective would only make for a feminist fundamentalism.

The most recent arguments for a standpoint theory (see, e.g., Harding 1991) have stated that the experiences of marginalized people cannot provide the answers to questions but can only generate the problems for research. If this is true, though, the category "standpoint" is not distinct from the category "postmodern." Postmodern feminists have political commitments, as do feminist scientists. The postmodern perspective is not anti-science but anti-objectivist; it is not anti-judgment but anti-totalizing. Thus, postmodernists have standpoints and this is perfectly compatible with the responsible production of scientific knowledge.

There are no "epistemological paradoxes" (Di Stefano 1990, 73) in feminist science and postmodern feminists have not committed political suicide. Feminists can embrace science, not because we can trust that the facts that we "uncover" will "prove" feminist ideas (as though we'll surely find feminist

monkeys if we only look "objectively" or empathetically), but rather because knowledge claims are discourses informed by perspectives. If science involves responsible story-telling, contingent knowledge claims, and critical positioning, then those critically positioned feminists engaged in the political contest for meanings in the sciences could be considered postmodern, postmodernists could be said to have standpoints, and insidiously sexist or objectivist claims could appropriately be considered "bad science."

NOTES

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1. Feminist critiques of science are most often focused on the social and behavioral sciences, although the critiques do not distinguish between types of science. Whether one is a feminist or a sexist may be of little consequence in the actual scientific research process on DNA, for instance (although identifying the double helix is one of many possible levels of abstraction), compared to the significance these ideologies would have in the process of studying chimpanzees or people's patterns of moral reasoning. Feminist critiques of science have exposed the ways in which many social and behavioral scientists invoke a notion of objectivity, and even positivism, that would only be appropriate, if anywhere at all, in the natural sciences. This is not to say, however, that feminist criticism is not relevant to aspects of the natural sciences. Since feminist critiques of science have to do with the social and institutional settings in which scientific knowledge is produced in addition to details of research processes, relevant to feminist critics might be, for example, why Rosalind Franklin's work went relatively unacknowledged by James Watson and Francis Crick, why the preoccupation with life that set the stage for trying to find the double helix, and the ways in which Francis Crick articulated the "mad pursuit" of scientific discovery.

2. It is still true; however, that some scientists, failing to see their own interests in knowledge production, say that a feminist scientist is interested and not "objective" because she is a feminist.

3. This is one definition of "objectivity" (see Longino 1989). I distinguish this from a second way to conceive of objectivity later in the paper.

4. Flax sums up the critique of the Enlightenment. There is skepticism about the following assumptions:

The existence of a stable, coherent self.... Reason and its "science" philosophy- can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation for knowledge ... The knowledge acquired from the right use of reason will be "True".... Reason itself has transcendental and universal qualities. . . . Freedom consists in obedience to laws that conform to the necessary results of the right use of reason.... By grounding claims to authority in reason, the conflicts between truth, knowledge, and power can be overcome. Truth can serve power without distortion; in turn, by utilizing knowledge in the service of power both freedom and progress will be assured. Knowledge can be both neutral (e.g., grounded in universal reason, not particular "interests") and also socially beneficial. ... Science, as the exemplar of the right use of reason, is also the paradigm for all true knowledge. Science is neutral in its methods and contents but socially beneficial in its results.... Language is in some sense transparent.... Objects are not linguistically (or socially) constructed; they are merely made present to consciousness by naming and the right use of language. (In Harding 1990, 102)

5. For arguments against epistemology and foundationalism, see: Bernstein (1983); Derrida (1981); Gunnell (1986); Hekman (1990); Herrnstein Smith (1988); Herzog (1985); Kress (1979); Krupnick (1983); and Rorty (1989, 1991a, 1991b).

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