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Comment on Hekman's "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited": Where's the Power?

Patricia Hill Collins

MY READING OF STANDPOINT THEORY sees it as an interpretive framework dedicated to explicating how knowledge remains central to maintaining and changing unjust systems of power. While the main arguments in Susan Hekman's article (in this issue) contain surface validity, because standpoint theory never was designed to be argued as a theory of truth or method, Hekman's article simply misses the point of standpoint theory overall. By decontextualizing standpoint theory from its initial moorings in a knowledge/power framework while simultaneously recontextualizing it in an apolitical discussion of feminist truth and method, Hekman essentially depoliticizes the potentially radical content of standpoint theory.

First, the notion of a standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences. Groups have a degree of permanence over time such that group realities transcend individual experiences. For example, African Americans as a stigmatized racial group existed long before I was born and will probably continue long after I die. While my individual experiences with institutionalized racism will be unique, the types of opportunities and constraints that I encounter on a daily basis will resemble those confronting African Americans as a group. Arguing that Blacks as a group come into being or disappear on the basis of my participation seems narcissistic, egocentric, and archetypally postmodern. In contrast, standpoint theory places less emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups than on the social conditions that construct such groups.

I stress this difference between the individual and the group as units of analysis because using these two constructs as if they were interchangeable clouds understanding of a host of topics, in this case, the very notion of a group-based standpoint. Individualism continues as a taproot in Western theorizing, including feminist versions. Whether bourgeois liberalism positing notions of individual rights or postmodern social theory's celebration of human differences, market-based choice models grounded in individualism argue that freedom exists via the absence of constraints of all sorts, including those of mandatory group membership. Freedom occurs when individuals have rights of mobility in and out of groups, much as we join clubs and other voluntary associations.
But the individual as proxy for the group becomes particularly problematic because standpoint theory’s treatment of the group is not synonymous with a “family resemblance” of individual choice expanded to the level of voluntary group association. The notion of standpoint refers to groups having shared histories based on their shared location in relations of power—standpoints arise neither from crowds of individuals nor from groups analytically created by scholars or bureaucrats. Take, for example, the commonality of experiences that emerges from long-standing patterns of racial segregation in the United States. The degree of racial segregation between Blacks and Whites as groups is routinely underestimated. Blacks and Whites live in racially segregated neighborhoods, and this basic feature generates distinctive experiences in schools, recreational facilities, shopping areas, health-care systems, and occupational opportunities. Moreover, middle-class Blacks have not been exempt from the effects of diminished opportunities that accompany racial segregation and group discrimination. It is common location within hierarchical power relations that creates groups, not the results of collective decision making of the individuals within the groups. Race, gender, social class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality are not descriptive categories of identity applied to individuals. Instead, these elements of social structure emerge as fundamental devices that foster inequality resulting in groups.

To ignore power relations is simply to misread standpoint theory—its raison d’être, its continuing salience, and its ability to explain social inequality. Hekman’s treatment of groups as an accumulation of individuals and not as entities with their own reality allows her to do just this. Note the slippage between individual and group standpoint in the following passage: “If we take the multiplicity of feminist standpoints to its logical conclusion, coherent analysis becomes impossible because we have too many axes of analysis. Ultimately, every woman is unique; if we analyze each in her uniqueness, systemic analysis is obviated. So is feminist politics: we lose the ability even to speak for certain categories of women” (359). Hekman clearly identifies the very construct of standpoint with the idea of individual perspective or point of view. This assumption allows her to collapse the individual and group as units of analysis and proceed to reason that individuals and collectivities undergo similar processes. But because she remains focused on the individual as proxy for the group, it becomes difficult to construct the group from such “unique” individuals. Arriving at the dead end of the impossibility of systemic analysis that leads to systemic change appears as the result. By omitting a discussion of group-based realities grounded in an equally central notion of group-based oppression, we move into the sterile ground of a discussion of how effectively standpoint theory serves as an epistemology of truth.

In contrast to Hekman’s view that attention to multiplicity fosters in-
coherence, current attention to the theme of intersectionality situated within assumptions of group-based power relations reveals a growing understanding of the complexity of the processes both of generating groups and accompanying standpoints. Initially examining only one dimension of power relations, namely, that of social class, Marx posited that, however unarticulated and inchoate, oppressed groups possessed a particular standpoint on inequality. In more contemporary versions, inequality has been revised to reflect a greater degree of complexity, especially that of race and gender. What we now have is increasing sophistication about how to discuss group location, not in the singular social class framework proposed by Marx, nor in the early feminist frameworks arguing the primacy of gender, but within constructs of multiplicity residing in social structures themselves and not in individual women. Fluidity does not mean that groups themselves disappear, to be replaced by an accumulation of decontextualized, unique women whose complexity erases politics. Instead, the fluidity of boundaries operates as a new lens that potentially deepens understanding of how the actual mechanisms of institutional power can change dramatically while continuing to reproduce long-standing inequalities of race, gender, and class that result in group stability. In this sense, group history and location can be seen as points of convergence within hierarchical, multiple, and changing structural power relations.

A second feature of standpoint theory concerns the commonality of experiences and perspectives that emerge for groups differentially arrayed within hierarchical power relations. Keep in mind that if the group has been theorized away, there can be no common experiences or perspectives. Standpoint theory argues that groups who share common placement in hierarchical power relations also share common experiences in such power relations. Such shared angles of vision lead those in similar social locations to be predisposed to interpret these experiences in a comparable fashion. The existence of the group as the unit of analysis neither means that all individuals within the group have the same experiences nor that they interpret them in the same way. Using the group as the focal point provides space for individual agency. While these themes remain meritorious, they simply do not lie at the center of standpoint theory as a theory of group power and the knowledges that group location and power generate.

Unfortunately, the much-deserved attention to issues of individual agency and diversity often overshadow investigating the continued salience of group-based experiences. But group-based experience, especially that of race and/or social class, continues to matter. For example, African-American male rates of incarceration in American jails and prisons remain the highest in the world, exceeding even those of South Africa.
Transcending social class, region of residence, command of English, ethnic background, or other markers of difference, all Black men must in some way grapple with the actual or potential treatment by the criminal justice system. Moreover, as mothers, daughters, wives, and lovers of Black men, Black women also participate in this common experience. Similarly, children from poor communities and homeless families are unlikely to attend college, not because they lack talent, but because they lack opportunity. Whatever their racial/ethnic classification, poor people as a group confront similar barriers for issues of basic survival. In this sense, standpoint theory seems especially suited to explaining relations of race and/or social class because these systems of power share similar institutional structures. Given the high degree of residential and occupational segregation separating Black and/or working-class groups from White middle-class realities, it becomes plausible to generate arguments about working-class and/or Black culture that emerge from long-standing shared experiences. For both class and race, a much clearer case of a group standpoint can be constructed. Whether individuals from or associated with these groups accept or reject these histories, they recognize the saliency of the notion of group standpoint.

But gender raises different issues, for women are distributed across these other groups. In contrast to standpoints that must learn to accommodate differences within, feminist standpoints must be constructed across differences such as these. Thus, gender represents a distinctly different intellectual and political project within standpoint theory. How effectively can a standpoint theory that was originally developed to explain the wage exploitation and subsequent impoverishment of European, working-class populations be applied to the extremely heterogeneous population of women in the contemporary United States, let alone globally? For example, Black women and White women do not live in racially integrated women's communities, separated from men and children by processes such as gender steering into such communities, experience bank redlining that results in refusal to lend money to women's communities, attend inferior schools as a result of men moving to all-male suburban areas, and the like. Instead, Black and White women live in racially segregated communities, and the experiences they garner in such communities reflect the racial politics operating overall. Moreover, proximity in physical space is not necessarily the same as occupying a common location in the space of hierarchical power relations. For example, Black women and women of color routinely share academic office space with middle-class and/or White women academics. It is quite common for women of color to clean the office of the feminist academic writing the latest treatise on standpoint theory. While these women occupy the same physical space—this is why proximity should not be confused with group solidarity—they
occupy fundamentally different locations in hierarchical power relations. These women did not just enter this space in a random fashion. An entire arsenal of social institutions collectively created paths in which the individuals assigned to one group received better housing, health care, education, and recreational facilities, while those relegated to the other group did with worse or did without. The accumulation of these different experiences led the two groups of women to that same academic space. The actual individuals matter less than the accumulation of social structures that lead to these outcomes. In this sense, developing a political theory for women involves confronting a different and more complex set of issues than that facing race theories or class-based theories because women’s inequality is structured differently.

There is a third theme of standpoint theory in which power is erased, namely, the significance of group consciousness, group self-definition, and “voice” within this entire structure of power and experience. Collapsing individual and group identity emerges here as significant because applying standpoint theory to the individual as proxy for the group becomes particularly problematic in comparing individual voice with group voice or standpoint. Typically, this process operates via imagining how individuals negotiate self-definitions and then claiming a “family resemblance” positioning that collectivities undergo a similar process. Because collectivities certainly do construct stories in framing their identity, this approach appears plausible. But can the individual stand as proxy for the group and the group for the individual? Moreover, can this particular version of the individual serve as the exemplar for collective group identity?

If an individual reasons from his or her own personal experiences by imagining that since “we are all the same under the skin, therefore, what I experience must be the same as what everybody else experiences,” then a certain perception of group narrative structure emerges. If an individual believes that his or her personal experiences in coming to voice, especially the inner voices within his or her own individual consciousness hidden from hierarchal power relations, not only reflect a common human experience but, more to the point, also serve as an exemplar for how group consciousness and decision making operate, then individual experience becomes the model for comprehending group processes. This approach minimizes the significance of conflict within groups in generating group narratives. In the model in which an individual conducts inner dialogues among various parts of his or her “self,” the process of mediating conflicting identities occurs within each individual. The individual always holds complete power or agency over the consciousness that he or she constructs in his or her own mind and the voice that she or he uses to express that consciousness.

Shifting this mode of coming to voice to the level of the small group
provides space to think of groups as collections of individuals engaged in dialogue with one another. As equal and different, the concern lies in finding rules to decide whose voice has most validity. By asking, “If we acknowledge multiple realities, multiple standpoints, how do we discriminate among them?” (359), Hekman continues the search for rules that everyone can follow in order to come to a collective “voice.” Within the scope of individuals engaged in face-to-face interaction, this seems reasonable. But does this work with the understanding of group that underlies standpoint theory?

Hekman quite rightly recognizes that multiple realities yield multiple perspectives on reality. But again, her concern with the question of who has the best, “truest,” or privileged standpoint remains grounded in ambiguous notions of group that omit group-based conflicts and how hierarchical power relations generate differences in group voice or standpoint. Bracketing the question of power and restricting argument solely to the question of truth certainly reveals the limitations of using epistemological criteria in defense of privileged standpoints. But within the reality of hierarchical power relations, the standpoints of some groups are more certainly privileged over others. The amount of privilege granted to a particular standpoint lies less in its internal criteria in being truthful, the terrain in which Hekman situates her discussion, and more in the power of a group in making its standpoint prevail over other equally plausible perspectives. Within hierarchical power relations, it seems reasonable that groups disadvantaged by systems of power might see their strength in solidarity and collective responses to their common location and subjugation. In contrast, it seems equally plausible that those privileged by these types of group placements might want to do away with notions of the group altogether, in effect obscuring the privileges they gain from group membership.

Again, gender raises some particular challenges in using standpoint theory to represent the standpoint of women. One fundamental contribution of feminist movement grounded in standpoint theory was that it aimed to bring women’s group consciousness into being. Early emphasis on women’s coming to voice via the process of consciousness-raising and claiming individual “voice” inadvertently laid the foundation for the type of conceptual ambiguity between individual and group as categories of analysis. Contemporary feminist theorizing, especially the emergence of postmodern social theory’s theme of deconstructing the subject, aggravates this long-standing commitment to bringing individual women to voice as emblematic of the collective struggle of women for “voice.” Collapsing the processes of individual and group voice and using the process of individual women coming to voice as emblematic of women’s collective coming to voice reinforces this notion that individual and collective voice
or standpoint are the same. For many contemporary feminists, voicing their discontent with oppression is sufficient—actually changing institutional power relations seems less important. Gaining voice only to lose it again to a standpoint theory that replaces the freedom of individually negotiated friendships or sisterhood with the obligations of race, class, and gender "families" seems unacceptable to those with the means to escape.

Standpoint theory argues that ideas matter in systems of power. In this sense, standpoints may be judged not only by their epistemological contributions but also by the terms of their participation in hierarchical power relations. Do they inherently explain and condone injustice, or do they challenge it? Do they participate in relations of rule via creating knowledge, or do they reject such rule by generating cultures of resistance? Extracting any claims about knowledge from the power relations in which they are embedded violates the basic premise of standpoint theory because such theory exists primarily to explicate these power relations. Thus, attempts to take the knowledge while leaving the power behind inadvertently operate within the terrain of privileged knowledge. While I respect postmodern contributions in deconstructing languages of power, standpoint theory encompasses much more than changing the "language game of politics" (363). Oppression is not a game, nor is it solely about language—for many of us, it still remains profoundly real.

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