

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Clancy Ratliff

University of Minnesota, USA

INTRODUCTION

Feminist standpoint theory is an epistemological view set forth in the late 1970s and early 1980s described as “an engaged vision of the world opposed and superior to dominant ways of thinking” (Ruddick, 1995, p. 129). Its development was influenced by Marxist thought, specifically the idea that the worldview of the ruling class is compromised by its vested interest in upholding the current class structure. The proletariat, who has no such interest, is able to interpret reality from the standpoint of its own experience as well as that of the ruling class because the ruling class’ ideas are widely inculcated and presented as “objective,” advancing the view that social conditions are as they are, and they cannot be otherwise. This naturalization of the ruling class’ ideas bolsters and affirms its privilege. The proletariat can inhabit both its own and the dominant perspectives, putting it at a more ideal epistemological and political vantage point.

Drawing upon this line of Marxist thought, feminist standpoint theory holds that women’s social development and experiences are different from men’s, and these experiences, taken with the sexual division of labor and women’s portion of this work, including mothering, homemaking, and other emotional and relational labor such as nursing and social work (Hartsock 1983, 2004), enable women to interpret the material world from a unique standpoint. Implicit in this postulate is the assumption that men are the ruling class, and the dominant worldview is masculine. The feminist standpoint, its proponents argued, could be used as a methodology to make more accurate, holistic, and socially responsible knowledge. At the heart of feminist standpoint theory, Braidotti (2003) argues, is the emphasis on the difference between men and women and the focus on women’s experiences as a means to knowledge production. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), Chodorow (1978), and Gilligan (1982) extended the feminist standpoint project by studying

women’s epistemological, psychological, and moral development, respectively, and the theories that emerged from their studies in particular have had considerable influence on early work in gender and information technology.

BACKGROUND

In the late 1970s and the 1980s, feminist standpoint theorists in psychology and education worked to correct what they perceived as male bias in theories of development and, in general, the “dominant intellectual ethos” of the time (Belenky et al., 1986, p. ix). In response to influential theorists such as Freud and Piaget, these researchers built theory that was grounded in women’s experience. Chodorow (1978) theorizes women’s development from a psychological perspective. She describes the “reproduction of mothering” as a built-in facet of girls’ and women’s personalities; because girls are mothered by women, they see their mothers as role models and, in turn, themselves desire to mother. Chodorow argues that the reproduction of mothering is a social psychological process that helps to keep gender hierarchy in place as long as women are the ones expected to care for children. That children are mothered by women has strong implications for the personality and development of girls. Girls take a much longer time to separate from the mother than do boys and therefore see themselves as more continuous with their mothers. Chodorow points out that due to the continuity and identification with their mothers,

girls emerge from [childhood] with a basis for “empathy” built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another’s needs or feelings as one’s own (or of thinking that one is so experiencing another’s needs and feelings). (p. 167)

Because a girl is mothered by a woman who anticipated her needs as an infant and child, she in turn learns to anticipate and meet others' needs.

Gilligan (1982) explores women's development with attention to ethics and morality. Based on her interviews with children and women, Gilligan argues that the tacit prescription that women should care for others and prioritize others' needs and desires before their own emphasizes "the concepts of responsibility and care in women's construction of the moral domain" and a "close tie in women's thinking between conceptions of the self and of morality" (p. 105). Gilligan theorizes that if women think of ethics and morals in terms of rights, or what they are themselves entitled to, they can balance ethics and morality between the needs of the self and the needs of others, going from "the paralyzing injunction not to hurt others to an injunction to act responsively toward self and others and thus to sustain connection" (p. 149). She argues that if women do not see moral decisions in terms of what they are entitled to, the problem she identifies will continue. First, women will, when making moral decisions, continue to sacrifice their own needs and wants for their perceived obligations and responsibilities, and continue to see their actions primarily in terms of how they will affect others. Second, masculine bias will continue in theories of development if researchers fail to take into account women's perspectives and experiences, or women's "voice," resulting in theories of human experience that lack the appropriate complexity (Gilligan, 1982, pp. 173-174).

Belenky et al. (1986), after noticing that "women often feel alienated in academic settings and experience 'formal' education as either peripheral or irrelevant to their central interests and development" (p. 4), studied the way women acquire knowledge and experience knowing. They found a continuum in women's epistemological development that goes from silence, a metaphor taken from Olsen's (1978) study of the history of women writers, which they define as "an extreme in denial of self and in dependence on external authority for direction" (p. 24); to received knowledge, or listening to authorities and accepting their explanations as definitive; to subjective knowledge, in which women start to develop an inner voice and gain some authority as knowers. The next category is procedural knowledge, which they divide into separate knowing

and connected knowing. Separate knowers have "procedures for making meaning [that] are strictly impersonal. Feelings and personal beliefs are rigorously excluded" (p. 109). Connected knowers, the most highly developed knowers in their taxonomy, see themselves as authoritative and as having a personal stake in knowledge. They value the personal and emotional and bring them to what they seek to understand. Connected knowers understand that they play a part in shaping knowledge. Belenky et al. argue that a pedagogical approach geared toward collaborative learning and experiential knowledge, an approach that stresses "connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate" (p. 229), is best suited to women's learning styles, and that educators can and should include women's experiences and learning styles in pedagogical theory, curriculum design, and teaching practice.

FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY AND COMPUTER CULTURE

Wajcman (1991) claims that "technology is more than a set of physical objects or artefacts. It also fundamentally embodies a culture or set of social relations made up of certain sorts of knowledge, beliefs, desires, and practices" (p. 149). Much of the feminist work in information technology has been concerned with technology as culture, or, as Lay (1996) terms it, computer culture. Feminist researchers have synthesized the insights offered by feminist standpoint theorists, especially those reviewed above, with men's and women's attitudes toward computing and experiences with information technology in educational, domestic, and occupational settings. They described values and practices often associated with computer culture—competition, individualism, and hierarchy—as masculine, and they criticized the exclusion of the values of connection, relationality, and collaboration found to be common among women. The association of computing with masculinity goes back to childhood for many women, when girls often have more responsibilities at home, and "girls' extracurricular activities are generally much more restricted than boys'" (Wajcman, p. 154). Girls are not encouraged to play computer games, participate in computer camps, and engage

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