

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 686

April 28, 2022

Hearing—Really Hearing—New Voices

Back in February I wrote about the amazing journalist Azmat Khan and her reporting on the civilian victims of US airstrikes in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the more remarkable things she did was to travel to the places that were bombed and talk to the people living there, people whose voices are so rarely heard in this country. In that context I remarked that “Every journalist who dares to go beyond talking to those who drop the bombs and talk to those on whom the bombs fall faces immense challenges.”

And those challenges go beyond the obvious challenge of exposing very powerful people to charges of war crimes or worse. Perhaps the most immense challenge is the challenge that those voices present to the Dominant Thought System in this country. Such a challenge goes beyond having a “different take” or (as journalists like to say) a “different angle.” In a socially-stratified culture like that of the US, to really hear the voices of the oppressed has the power to call into question the very nature of what we are constantly told is our shared reality. To see the world from the standpoint of the weak—the people on whom the bombs fall—is to present what academics might call an epistemological challenge to the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge.

When I talk about “really hearing” the voices of the voiceless I’m thinking of something that Patricia Hill Collins said in her landmark 1990 manifesto, **Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment**. She said that “Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups.”

This is what I always talk about in these pages: The multi-layered power of a Thought System to perpetuate itself. I said it in the previous issue of Nygaard Notes, in fact. I said, “A Thought System is not some sort of brainwashing conspiracy. Rather, it is a self-perpetuating system that functions to maintain the dominance of certain ideas and ways of perceiving the world by working at a deep level to normalize not only certain ideas, but also certain *ways of thinking*, or “thought styles,” that support those ideas.” (The wording there is mine, but the basic idea is not. In fact, feminists of all colors have been articulating the idea for decades, and more eloquently than I. It shouldn’t surprise anyone that a white male like me would be several decades behind. In fact, the feminist theorists that I cite in this issue of the Notes explain exactly why this is no surprise.)

What I’m talking about in this issue, in part, is the deep polarization in this country, the social conflicts that are playing out in recent years at school board meetings, libraries, zoning commission meetings, local/state/federal legislatures, courtrooms, and on the streets of your town and my town. Things really are changing, and more and more people are coming to understand that things are changing. Some people want it to stop and think that it can be stopped, by banning certain books and by forbidding certain thoughts. Some people think that it can’t be stopped and don’t want it to stop.

I’m in the latter group. I want to keep asking questions like “What kind of world is this? What kind of town is this? And who gets to decide, not only what kind of world we have, but what kind of world we *will* have?”

The place to start thinking about this is to get as clear a picture as possible as to the nature of the world as it is. Let’s start with the ABCs. And the XYZs. ♦

Greetings,

There's a building I pass by every day on my way to work, a building that was burned two years ago in the uprising that followed the murder of George Floyd. It was burned along with the 3rd Precinct Station of the Minneapolis Police Department across the street, the station for the precinct where Mr. Floyd was killed. Every day I notice the plaintive question spray-painted on the side of this building: "Can you hear us *now*?"

As this issue of Nygaard Notes attempts to show, if we really want to understand the nature of our society—if we want to *change* our society—it's crucially important that we do hear these voices, the voices of the dispossessed, the marginalized, the alienated.

This is what I consider to be one of the main points of Feminist Standpoint Theory, which is the theory that is the focus of this issue of the Notes. But it goes even deeper than that, asking "How do we know anything?"

The answer to this question falls in the realm of social epistemology, although one needn't use big words to talk about it. In fact, a big part of the reason I talk about it in this issue of the Notes is because it's the core idea behind all of the cultural discussions in the news in recent years, discussion about "fake news," misinformation, disinformation, free speech, school curriculum arguments, and on and on. Where to find the "truth"? Who to believe? Looking for "the facts" presented by "objective" reporters.

It's quite confusing, isn't it?

Part of the reason we're fighting so much is that some of the basic questions about what kind of society we have—what kind of society we *want* to have—are being called into question, are being debated. Of course, members of oppressed groups have always called into question the nature of the society that raises some people up and pushes others down. But those voices are louder now than they have been for a long time. This issue of the Notes seeks to amplify them, to echo in solidarity the wisdom that they represent. May it inspire you to do the same.

As always, I'd love to hear what you think of this extra-long issue. You know where to find me.

Always listening,
Nygaard

Knowing our ABCs... AND our XYZs

In her 1991 book "Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives," Sandra Harding states that, "[In] a society structured by gender hierarchy, 'starting thought from women's lives' increases the objectivity of the results of research by bringing scientific observation and the perception of the need for explanation to bear on assumptions and practices that appear natural or unremarkable from the perspective of the lives of men in the dominant groups. Thinking from the perspective of women's lives makes strange what had appeared familiar, which is the beginning of any scientific inquiry."

Members of different social groups tend to see things differently. Consider the following examples offered by Terri Elliot in her famous essay "Making Strange What Had Appeared Familiar":

"Person A approaches a building and enters it unproblematically. As she approaches she sees something perfectly familiar which, if asked, she might call The Entrance. Person X approaches the same building and sees a great stack of stairs and the glaring lack of a ramp for his wheelchair.

"Person B arrives at the first meeting of yet another literature class in a familiar building where he is accustomed to taking notes on The Professor's interpretation of various well-known books [of the literary canon]. Person Y finds herself in a room full of white people listening to one white person tell them what he thinks all these dead white people were trying to say when they wrote these books. ↗ ↗ ↗

→→ “Person C attends an interesting colloquium on the philosophy of religion in which he hears theorizing about the creative powers of That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought. Person Z hears a whirring buzz of all-too-familiar words: ‘He’ and ‘Him’ and ‘His nature’ and ‘His freedom’ and ‘His power.’”

“The perspectives of the lives of persons X, Y and Z make strange what had appeared familiar in each case. Persons A, B and C do not see what X, Y and Z do. We might say X, Y and Z are epistemically privileged.” [That’s how an academic says that X, Y and Z probably have access to some stuff, or to some insights, that A, B and C do not.]

“We might say, alternatively, that A, B and C have the privilege of ignorance... [and] we’ll ask: Why the difference? What do X, Y and Z have that A, B and C do not? Do they gain these insights as a result of their experiences? Are these insights unattainable for A, B and C?”

Elliot’s academic examples may not resonate well with the more than half of US Americans (including Nygaard!) who do not have a college degree, so here is an example from my life:

There was a fight underway on East Lake Street, near my home, and a mixed crowd of people saw a police car arrive on the scene. Some people’s (A, B and C’s) response was “Oh good! The police are here!” Other people’s (X, Y and Z’s) response was “Oh no! The police are here!” When Elliot and other feminist thinkers talk about things seeming “strange” or “familiar” the point they are making is that, in a culture that is stratified by race, gender, class, age, able-bodied status, and so forth, the lived experiences of people assigned to certain groups is going to be different than the lived experiences of people assigned to other groups.

And it’s not random. That is, since one’s point of view is shaped by one’s experience, then the standpoint from which one sees things will tend to reflect one’s place in the social hierarchy. And that’s almost the definition of “standpoint,” which my dictionary defines as “an attitude to or outlook on issues, typically arising from one’s circumstances or beliefs.”

Take the previous paragraph, for example. It’s likely that the “circumstances or beliefs” of people reading this essay will tend to make the logic of that paragraph either obvious or nearly incomprehensible. How to explain this? The place to start is a sociological set of ideas known as Feminist Standpoint Theory. Let’s go there now. ♦

Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Construction of Knowledge

This essay will attempt to explain the basics of Feminist Standpoint Theory, or FST, what it is and why it is so important for anyone trying to understand how the world works. I’ll quote a number of philosophers along the way, which makes me want to cite the famous comment by Karl Marx: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.” The brilliant women I’ll be quoting would certainly agree.

Back in 2019, in Nygaard Notes #646, I discussed a remarkable essay written in 1958 by sociologist Herbert Blumer entitled **Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position**. In the very first paragraph Blumer explains the nature of the sociological approach to understanding racism (“race prejudice”). He says that we need to view racism as a *grouping and ranking process* rather than as a matter of individual emotional reactions. This different way of looking at racism, Blumer says, “shifts study and analysis from a preoccupation with feelings as lodged in individuals to a concern with the relationship of racial groups. It also shifts scholarly treatment away from individual lines of experience and focuses interest on the collective process by which a racial group comes to define and redefine another racial group.”

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FST *from page 3*

I agree with Blumer, and not only in regard to racism, but other forms of social oppression as well. Consider for instance this definition of patriarchy, offered by Sylvia Walby in 1989: “I shall define patriarchy as a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. The use of the term social structure is important here since it clearly implies rejection of both biological determinism, and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every individual woman in a subordinate one.”

This sociological idea—that one’s life experience is shaped as much by where one stands in society as by one’s individual personality or capability—is key to understanding Feminist Standpoint Theory, so keep it in mind as we proceed.

In the previous essay I cited an example of two people approaching a building where one person sees an entrance and the other sees a barrier. It is both, and the key point here is that, due to different life experiences, it is easy for one person to *see* that it is both, while it is difficult for the other to see that it is both. Understanding why this is so, and understanding the implications of this insight, is (in my mind) what FST is all about.

“What Is it About Being Oppressed?”

FST seeks to answer the question posed by philosopher Terri Elliot: “What is it about being oppressed that gives oppressed classes a privileged point of view from which to see the strangeness of the social relations in which they find themselves?” In reference to the current example, consider that an estimated 75 million people on the planet use a wheelchair. Is it not strange that so many institutions are designed in such a way as to exclude them? Not only do members of the dominant group (which I call “temporarily able-bodied,” since some unknown number of us will acquire a disability in our lifetimes) not think this strange; they don’t even *notice* it!

Similarly, men tend not to notice the massive evidence of misogyny in the culture, white people are quite often ignorant of the racism that privileges us, high earners are allowed to believe that their success is due solely to their own talent and hard work, and so forth. These are examples of the “privilege of ignorance” that Terri Elliot was talking about.

FST is all about “epistemology,” which is the study of knowledge. How do we know what we know? Standpoint theorists suggest that one’s place in a stratified social system gives one an advantage—or a disadvantage—when we try to understand how the world works.

Encyclopedia Britannica tells us that the term “Standpoint Theory” was coined by philosopher Sandra Harding “to categorize epistemologies that emphasize women’s knowledge. She argued that it is easy for those at the top of social hierarchies to lose sight of real human relations and the true nature of social reality and thus miss critical questions about the social and natural world in their academic pursuits.”

I remarked back in 2014 that “The higher one goes in a power pyramid, the harder it is to see reality, and that ignorance endangers us all.” This is what FST theorists have been talking about for decades!

Harding (as paraphrased by Elliot) notes here that: “Research is to be done from the *perspective* of women’s lives, and the theory is called ‘*feminist* standpoint theory’, not ‘women’s standpoint theory’. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy broadens the point, saying that “Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized.”



Individuals. And Groups.

Members of oppressed or marginalized groups are all individuals. At the same time, members of a given group share certain life experiences to which they are subjected not as individuals, but *due to their perceived membership in the identified group*. That's how oppression works.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy tells us, "Feminist standpoint theorists point out that, in order to survive within social structures in which one is oppressed, one is required to understand practices of oppression, to understand both oppressed and oppressor; but, this epistemic bi-polarity is neither required of, nor available to, the dominant." To put that in plain language, in order to survive, the weaker must understand the stronger. But the stronger can survive just fine without understanding the weaker. Humans don't even notice when we step on an insect. But it is dead just the same.

Shared life experiences do not magically bestow insight or wisdom upon members of oppressed groups. People with darker skin are not automatically smarter, women do not invariably have more wisdom, poor people's poverty does not bestow upon them expertise in economics. But whatever insight or wisdom one builds from the raw materials of one's life, it cannot be denied that the world as seen by the members of privileged groups is a different place than the world as seen by those lacking privilege.

In the book "Feminist Research Practice: A Primer" we read that "a standpoint is achieved as a consequence of analysis from a specific social actor, social group, or social location rather than available simply because one happens to be a member of an oppressed group or share a social location. Rather than view standpoints as individual possessions of disconnected actors, most standpoint theorists attempt to locate standpoint in specific community contexts with particular attention to the dynamics of race, class, and gender."

In summary, here is how the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy succinctly (if a bit academically) says what I think I've just said: "Feminist standpoint theorists make three principal claims: (1) Knowledge is socially situated. (2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized. (3) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized."

In the first essay in this issue of the Notes I said that I want to keep asking questions like What kind of world is this? And who gets to decide, not only what kind of world we have, but what kind of world we *will* have? I said that the place to start thinking about this is to get as clear a picture as possible as to the nature of the world as it is. Feminist Standpoint Theory suggests that the place to begin our research is to tune in to the hardest-to-hear voices, the voices of those for whom the current system does *not* work well, the voices of the people that society tells us are the Other.

"Can you hear us *now*?"

It used to be all but impossible in this culture to hear these voices. Now, thanks to the Internet, and changing demographics, and the endless work of activists and journalists and scholars of all stripes, we CAN hear these voices. It's up to all of us to not only listen, but to act on what we learn. ♦

Social Knowledge Tidbits

Part of the reason that this issue of Nygaard Notes took a long time to get to you (again!) is that I kept running across all of these terribly interesting things that, in various ways, shed light on a never-ending fascination of mine. Namely, the social construction of reality.

What the heck does that mean, you may ask. Here are a couple of quotations that touch on that never-ending fascination. My brain hasn't gotten clear enough on it to write a regular Notes on the subject, but I think you'll find these little tidbits interesting.

Tidbit 1: Social Epistemology

If you read between the lines of this issue of Nygaard Notes, you might think that I am saying that knowledge itself is a social construction. Well, I sort-of am saying that.

If I were more academic, my never-ending fascination could be referred to as “epistemology.” A sub-discipline is known as “social epistemology,” and when I looked it up in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) I found an interesting reference to a philosopher about whom I have written in these pages, due to his influence on the thinking of the “Founding Fathers” of the USA. That philosopher is John Locke, and here's what the SEP says:

“According to the most influential tradition in (Western) epistemology, illustrated vividly by René Descartes (1637), standard epistemology has taken the form of individual epistemology, in which the object of study is how epistemic agents, using their personal cognitive devices, can soundly investigate assorted questions. Descartes contended that the most promising way to pursue truth is by one's own reasoning. The remaining question was how, exactly, truth was to be found by suitable individualistic maneuvers, starting from one's own introspected mental contents. Another major figure in the history of the field was John Locke (1690), who insisted that knowledge be acquired through intellectual self-reliance. As he put it, “other men's opinions floating in one's brain” do not constitute genuine knowledge.”

The Encyclopedia follows that comment with this—tongue-in-cheek?—comment that illustrates why I consider myself a Social Epistemology kind of guy: “In contrast with the individualistic orientations of Descartes and Locke, social epistemology proceeds on the commonsensical idea that information can often be acquired from others.” That commonsensical idea is one that animates this issue of Nygaard Notes, I might add.

Tidbit 2: Buddhism and Social Reality

Here's a comment about how social forces—that is, human-created systems—shape our lives. I found it on page 12 of a 1998 book called *Buddhism Without Beliefs*:

“The contemporary social engagement of dharma practice is rooted in awareness of how self-centered confusion and craving can no longer be adequately understood only as psychological drives that manifest themselves in subjective states of anguish. We find these drives embodied in the very economic, military, and political structures that influence the lives of the majority of people on earth. Harnessed to industrial technologies, the impact of these drives affects the quality of the environment; the availability of natural resources and employment; the kinds of political, social, and financial institutions that govern peoples' lives. Such a socially engaged vision of dharma practice recognizes that each practitioner is obliged by an ethics of empathy to respond to the anguish of a globalized, interdependent world.”

I highly recommend the book! It's short, only 144 pages. If you read it you'll know what “dharma practice” is, among other things. ◆

Learn About Standpoint Theory

If you want to know more about Feminist Standpoint Theory, here is a list of a few sources that I used in preparing this issue of Nygaard Notes. If you do try to look them up and have trouble finding or accessing them, I may be able to help. Just ask me.

Anderson, Elizabeth. 2011. "Feminist Standpoint Theory." *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2011. Web. June 2014.

Harding, Sandra. 1991. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking From Women's Lives*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Hartsock, Nancy C. M. 1983. "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism." In *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, edited by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, 283-310. Boston, MA: D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Hekman, Susan. "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited." *Signs* 22:2, pp. 341-365.

Intemann, Kristen. 2010. "25 Years of Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Where Are We Now?" *Hypatia* 25.4: 778-796.

Keller, Evelyn Fox. "Gender and Science." *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*. September 1978: 409-433.

Wylie, Alison. 2012. "Feminist Philosophy of Science: Standpoint Matters." Presidential Address delivered to the Pacific Division APA, in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 86.2: 47- 76. ♦

"Quote" of the Week: *"The Value of Diverse Forms of Knowledge"*

This issue's "Quote" is from the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released on February 28, 2022. On the 9th page of the 35-page "Summary for Policymakers" we read the following:

"This report recognises the value of diverse forms of knowledge such as scientific, as well as Indigenous knowledge and local knowledge in understanding and evaluating climate adaptation processes and actions to reduce risks from human-induced climate change. [This Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] highlights adaptation solutions which are effective, feasible, and conform to principles of justice. The term climate justice, while used in different ways in different contexts by different communities, generally includes three principles: *distributive justice* which refers to the allocation of burdens and benefits among individuals, nations and generations; *procedural justice* which refers to who decides and participates in decision-making; and *recognition* which entails basic respect and robust engagement with and fair consideration of diverse cultures and perspectives."

Feminist Wisdom (and I quote...)

I've really enjoyed the learning about feminist thinking that I had to do in order to create this issue of Nygaard Notes. So here, just for fun, is a list of half a dozen really smart women whose wisdom guided my process, followed by random quotations that I thought you might like. Maybe you'll Google them, or buy their books, or just enjoy the way they think.

Dorothy Smith:

“The institutionalized practices of excluding women from the ideological work of society are the reason we have a history constructed largely from the perspective of men, and largely about men. This is why we have so few women poets and why the records of those who survived the hazards of attempting poetry are so imperfect. This is why we know so little of women visionaries, thinkers, and political organizers. This is why we have an anthropology that tells us about other societies from the perspective of men and hence has so distorted the cross-cultural record that it may now be impossible to learn what we might have known about how women lived in other forms of society. This is why we have a sociology that is written from the perspective of positions in a male-dominated ruling class and is set up in terms of the relevances of the institutional power structures that constitute those positions. This is why in English literature there is a corner called “women in literature” or “women novelists” and an overall critical approach to literature that assumes it is written by men and perhaps even largely for men. This is why the assumptions of psychological research and of educational research and philosophy take for granted male experience, orientation, and concerns and treat as normative masculine modes of being.”

Nancy Hartsock:

The power of the Marxian critique of class domination stands as an implicit suggestion that feminists should consider the advantages of adopting a historical materialist approach to understanding phallogocratic domination.

Sandra Harding:

“...it is inevitable that women will be victimized by the sciences and their technologies in a society such as ours where women have little power, where almost all scientific research is technology-driven, and here political issues are posed as requiring merely technological "solutions".”

Alison Jaggar:

Historically, working-class women and women of color have been excluded from intellectual work. This exclusion must be challenged. Working-class women, women of color, and other historically silenced women must be enabled to participate as subjects as well as objects in feminist theorizing.

Donna Haraway:

“Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic.”

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