Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory formally originated with Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács and his elaboration of the concept of "proletarian standpoint". Lukács drew his conception of proletarian standpoint from Marx's discussion of how different economic classes experience alienation from labor and capitalist production in very different ways. Workers who produce commodities are not allowed control over their own labor, nor are they allowed to get the full value of what they produce; whereas conversely, capitalists control the labor process and profit from the workers' labor. These different relationships to capitalism would, as Lukács suggests, create very different experiences and perspectives on capitalism itself. Thus, if we wanted to understand capitalism, we would need to take into account how these differences would produce very dissimilar interpretations of how it works.

In the 1970s and '80s, critical and Marxist-feminist scholars drew on Lukács's concept of proletarian standpoint to challenge both masculinist norms and regressive gender politics found in scientific research. Perhaps most prominently, one can cite the work of Laura Mulvey, whose 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has been a touchstone for feminist film theory and a key text in the development of the concept of the "masculinist gaze." Mulvey's essay, which argues that the traditional cinematic narrative has a masculinist bias, is widely recognized as one of the most influential works in feminist theory. Mulvey's analysis of cinema as a "male-dominated" form of entertainment and her critique of the "phallic" and "paternal" structures of representation in film have been influential in the development of feminist and queer theory. Mulvey's work has been widely read and cited, and has contributed to the development of new forms of film analysis and criticism.

**First**, standpoint theory asserts that our experiences with material reality—which includes our social relations—structure how we understand the world in ways that both limit and enable what we can learn and come to "know" about that world. That is, our social location enables us to see and understand the world more clearly with respect to our positions and places limits on our ability to immediately understand the world beyond that same position.

**Second**, because our experiences and material conditions are structured by, and embedded in, power relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other categories of difference, the worldviews and understandings of groups in power generally contradict and run counter to the worldviews and understandings of less powerful groups. To put it more straightforwardly, the rule of the world will in many ways be oppositional to that of the ruled because of their different experiences.

**Third**, differences in power mean that the perspectives of those in power are made functional in the lives of everyone regardless of social location, because "the ruling group can be expected to structure the material relations in which all people are forced to participate." As "all are forced to live in social structures and institutions designed to serve the oppressors' understandings of self and society," this point speaks directly to Gramsci's conception of hegemony and how the ruling capitalist class maintains control: their skewed understanding of the world is imposed institutionally and constructs a view of reality that may contradict the reality facing the oppressed. We might say that the unequal distribution of power leads to the unequal distribution of worldviews, where those with more power can exert stronger influence on our commonsense understandings of the world, even if such commonsense understandings fundamentally operate as distorted conceptions of material reality.

**Fourth**, and as an extension of the previous, a standpoint always

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Comes out of a struggle against the commonsense, hegemonic worldviews of those in power. In this sense, a standpoint is an achievement that arises from active, conscious work against the reigning, institutionalized commonsense understandings that generally justify and support status quo inequalities. Subsequently, a standpoint must be struggled for against the apparent realities made "natural" and "obvious" by dominant institutions, the activity of which "requires both systematic analysis and the education that can only grow from political struggle to change those relations." This is in complete alignment with both Vygotsky's and Feier's discussion of consciousness from the previous chapters.

An important outgrowth of this is that we can never assume that a standpoint is simply given by one's social location. Just because someone comes from a marginalized social location does not mean that they have automatically taken up a specific standpoint; people from marginalized or less powerful groups can and do maintain forms of consciousness that are repressive and function to support their own oppression, just as people from dominant groups can also develop forms of consciousness that are progressive and actively challenge their own power and privilege. Rather, a standpoint arises from conscious, resistant struggle against the prevailing and hegemonic forms of consciousness that are aligned with status quo inequalities.

[R][5th] and finally, the taking up of a standpoint by the less powerful carries the potential for liberation because it "makes visible the inhumanity of relations among human beings," emphasizing that, in a very Marxist sense, an oppressed group must become a group "for itself," not just "in itself" in order for it to see the importance of engaging in political and scientific struggles to see the world from the perspective of its own lives. In this way the development of a standpoint requires the development of "oppositional consciousness," since those with less power create transformative ways of knowing as part of their struggle against the power relations responsible for their own oppression. Indeed, this liberatory potential of standpoint makes it dangerous to the prevailing social order—as we saw with Feier and his treatment by the Brazilian government, for instance—and therefore gives cause for the more powerful to actively seek to discredit such positions. [M]

Standpoint and "Strong Objectivity"

Because of its focus on positionality and social location, standpoint theory provides a foundation for understanding how the world works. From the perspective of standpoint theory, the experiences of systematically oppressed or marginalized groups can provide the best "starting off points" for generating "illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from the dominant group lives." As Hardt explains,

[[@][The criteria for privileging some knowledge over others are ethical and political as well as purely "epistemological." . . . Marx made an important claim that knowledge that takes its starting point from the lives of those who have suffered from exploitation produces better accounts of the world than that starting from the lives of dominant groups. . . . The view from the margins (defined in more heterogeneous terms) is clearer and better.]

As an orientation on understanding the world, standpoint theory openly acknowledges that the social location of the oppressed and marginalized (as defined by historical, social, cultural, and institutional contexts) is the best vantage point for understanding society because it can provide a clearer, more truthful view of how society functions. Additionally, it is important to note that standpoint theory does not singularly focus on women or gender to the exclusion of other aspects of power and identity. Rather, Harding explains that standpoint theory thus invites a recognition of personhood and one's equality, which means that by definition it must contend with issues of power and oppression in ways that recognize how, for instance, class is expressed in material ways that are raced and gendered.

However, we have to be clear that, despite its focus on positionality and social location, standpoint theory does not argue for total relativism of viewpoints; every individual, socially located standpoint is equally strong for understanding reality. Rather, consistent with Marxist dialectical materialism, standpoint emphasizes the facts that as individuals, we are expressions of social relations and that, as such, we are tied historically, culturally, politically, and materially to institutions. Thus, the point is not to say that "all standpoints are equal," but instead that the position of the oppressed creates a stronger standpoint for better understanding the material reality of society.

The movement to make #BlackLivesMatter in the face of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and police violence provides a perfect example of this. Many liberals and conservatives have argued that "all lives matter," but of fundamentally racist feelings that somehow their views and experiences are being excluded or demeaned—that all experiences and viewpoints should matter equally, and that we shouldn't be focusing on Black people specifically. Conversely, and consistent with standpoint theory, #BlackLivesMatter activists and supporters argue that, because the police seem to get away with killing Black people with little to no provocation or accountability, and because this is an issue that affects Black people disproportionately, the best way to understand how racism and white supremacy function in the United States is through the standpoint of Black people and Blackness.

The movement to make Black lives matter does not deny that racism exists for other nonwhite peoples, nor does it say that white people don't matter. Rather, the #BlackLivesMatter movement points out that the experiences of Black people with the police in the United States provides the sharpest and clearest view for understanding how racism and white supremacy operate institutionally and in our day-to-day experiences. To put it a bit differently, if we want to understand the realities of racism and police violence, the relatively privileged and shielded perspectives of white people will yield us less sharp, less clear, and less truthful perspectives on how the police operate to support institutionalized racism and white supremacy. In this way, rather than a call for a form of relativism, a standpoint is perhaps better conceived as a tool that allows, following Hardt, for
By employing strong objectivity we gain better, clearer, and more truthful—more strongly objective—knowledge of social and material realities of the world from the achievement of a standpoint because we critically examine the process of understanding something as much as we critically examine the thing itself. Again, taking the same #BlackLivesMatter example as discussed above: if we are trying to understand how racism, white supremacy, and police violence function in the United States, then to be strongly objective in that context means to critically analyze how we approach our learning about racism, white supremacy, and police violence—being conscious of the process of learning as much as the thing we are learning about. In this view, where we look for information, who we ask for information, who is asking or looking for information, and what kinds of questions we decide to ask to get information are just as important as the information itself—again, working under the presumption that asking white people about police violence would yield very different information than asking Black people (just as it would generate different information between rich and poor people).