



Feminist standpoint theory and its importance in feminist research

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ABSTRACT: Feminist research does not adhere to the set rules of looking at the world. This type of research is rather concerned with how knowledge can be produced or obtained from the oppressed section of the society in order to unveil the sufferings based on the lived experiences. The feminist standpoint model brings to light the vivid versions and solutions from the viewpoint of the participants by understanding how they view the world. The marginalization of femininity from the point of view of the lives of women can only be understood through the help of standpoint theory that places the lived experiences of the oppressed groups as a vital part of the research. Feminist research aims to provide solutions to the experiences that have never been heard earlier by paving ways for empowerment, removal of inequalities and improved social guidelines. The paper digs into the pertinency of standpoint theory within the aspect of feminist research.

Keywords: feminist research, feminist standpoint, self-reflexivity



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Introduction

Women are often regarded as the imprisoned bird devoid of liberty in any field of their life. The patriarchal structure often considers women as the 'other' or 'an' object where they constitute half of the human race, but they are bound to occupy an inferior position in society.

In order to remove such inequalities and biases of the traditional knowledge system, feminist research aims to create consciousness amongst the women by defining, describing and establishing themselves as to who they are without any relation to men. Feminist research helps women to speak or write only for themselves. In order to understand the issues women deal with,

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feminists have employed alternative ways of thinking and appreciating the nature of the social world.

To project the lives and activities of women and to understand the concrete experiences from their viewpoints, it is necessary to adopt a feminist standpoint perspective that will interpret the behaviour of women in a particular social context.

What feminism is all about

Feminism is concerned with promoting equality among men and women in the socio-economic and political spheres since women are exploited based on their sex and the dominant ideology of patriarchy. Botting and Houser (2006) are of the view that it is difficult to define feminism, but the general idea takes into consideration women and men performing, communicating and writing on the issues and rights of women and identifying the social injustice faced by women in all respects.

Feminism is represented by the beliefs and theories that emphasize the position of the women in the existing society and culture that aims to set right the social disadvantages that are specific to women. The position of women in society has always been unequal in relation to men since the society is in favour of men in all aspects. In order to bring out the various discriminations faced by women almost in all fronts, feminism strives to make the experiences of women public by removing the various barriers in their life, thereby ensuring a better future. Feminism evaluates women by critically analyzing their past to understand how patriarchal society devalued them by formulating new understandings that transform the existing practices based on the contribution, values and experiences of women in society.

Tamney et al. (1992) believe that women tend to favour feminism, mainly because of the nuisances they have experienced in the process of being a woman. Men never understand the various frustrations women go through since they do not encounter such discrimination or suffer from economic hardship. The varied experience of the prevailing injustice and the subjugation faced by women makes them feminists.

Feminism is regarded as a socio-political movement that argues for equal rights and opportunities for women all over the world in order to understand how an unequal gender status comes into being in the presence of the patriarchal structure. Feminist takes into account how knowledge has been produced not only from a male-centric point of view but also from the dominant position in society (Offen, 2005).

WHY FEMINIST RESEARCH?

Feminist research helps in the presentation of reality from the experiences of women helping in reconstructing the domain of research by using a variety of qualitative methods such as participatory observation, in-depth interviews, documentation of oral narratives and testimonies, and photography. This helps women to look into their consciousness and bring out their sense of self. Since feminist research has more qualitative methods, at times, it becomes difficult to obtain the standardized ideals of objectivity at the cost of subjectivity (Anandhi S, 2010). Interviews help the researcher become friends with the participants, which will make them feel valued as an individual rather than data providers, making them hear the multiple voices which were never heard. With the back and forth process of data collection, interviews will be far more diverse than the initial ones. In-depth interviews help in understanding how a woman develops her ideas.

Feminist research attempts to bring to light the narratives of women as a part of their everyday experiences, which hardly found space in the dominant society earlier. It aims to capture the raw voices of women considering their experiences, which are often taken for granted, thereby making it an important part of the research.

Holbrook (1995) acknowledges that very often, the voices of women are excluded because the majority of the study takes into consideration the quantitative aspects that avert them from the public space. Quantitative research or scientific methods silences the voices of the oppressed section of people in the society that refuses to recognize their experiences. A detailed account of a person's life, considering a specific event, contributes to the history of the concerned individual. In order to recover the private spaces of the marginalized section of the society, feminists think it worthy of giving life to the personal testimonies and experiences of the concerned class of people who were often overlooked and whose struggles were never considered worthy. Feminist research helps the researcher to draw out his/her personal experiences in order to build a rapport with the participant so that it becomes convenient for the participant to open up and contribute to the formation of life histories.

Feminist methodologies

The social scientist was never a part of patriarchal structures that marginalized femininity that often oppressed and dominated women until the initiation of feminist studies. Both theory and praxis are inevitably tangled in feminist research, which helps in a better understanding of marginalization through the various factors that lead to subjugation. The traditional social theories have marginalized and often found the experiences of women to be insignificant. The roles of

women are always considered invisible and therefore lacks in production of knowledge, but with the help of standpoint, perspective women are seen as agents of knowledge where the concrete experiences of women become the assets of social analysis. It is, therefore, important for women to unveil their experiences no matter how grave and bitter it is. Feminist research with the help of surveys, narratives and interviews gives a wider scope in understanding the gendered realities of domination and subordination by allowing the respondent to be an active member of their social group and not portray themselves as the oppressed ones under their husbands and fathers (Rayaprol, 2016).

Presser (2005) believes that the perspectives and the experiences of women, which are often subordinated in the larger context, are considered as the starting point of feminist research that eliminates the hierarchies in the construction of knowledge. Feminist research is an in-depth study on the lives of women by women by incorporating gender and avoiding exploitation of women by empowering them. It aims to empower women by erasing the oppressive and exploitative conditions in order to provide a vision for the future. The feminist methodology emphasizes the position of women in society and negates the power of the phallus in the prevailing methodologies (Stanley & Wise, 1983).

Fonow and Cook (2005) elaborate on the guiding principles of feminist methodologies, which include the need to understand the significance of gender and the existing gender unevenness in society. Feminist methodology guiding principles also includes, raising consciousness by challenging the traditional knowledge system, the norm of objectivity that takes for granted that both the subject and object of research cannot be separated from each other and that lived realities or the grounded realities are irrational (Fonow & Cook, 2005). Feminist methodologies aim to recognize how women are exploited as objects of knowledge, and further, it lays emphasis on empowering women and transforming the dominant social institutions through the help of research.

Feminist research provides less biased and vague answers to questions evolving from the lives of women concerning the patriarchal society. Harding talks about the classification of the three positions: feminist standpoint theory, feminist empiricism and feminist postmodernism. Feminist empiricism puts emphasis not on reasoning but on the lived experiences implying that knowledge can be known from things and events that an individual is exposed to. It suggests that there is no absolute truth and that feminist theories can be independently proven through evidence. Postmodernism has emerged out of unhappiness over the systemic marginalization of

specific groups, ideas, behaviours and sexualities. The postmodernist thought emphasizes process and experiences not as something which is given but as an interaction with the outer world enabling continuous reshaping of self as well as ideas. Postmodernist theories enable feminists to challenge the hegemonic and stereotypical ideas regarding caste, race, gender and society, thereby engaging the people, institutional system and the larger world outside deconstructing the prevalent dominant ideas and realities. Feminist standpoint theory, on the other hand, brings to light that women have been historically excluded from the public arena, and it aims to add the previously excluded voices in unravelling the traditional dominant understanding of power. The standpoint perspective helps in the generation of understanding through the struggle of the depressed and the less privileged women who have experienced grave consequences due to oppression. The lived experiences of these oppressed women will help in the generation of knowledge that will bring to light the challenges posed by the dominant class of people (Harding, 1992).

Self-reflexivity through feminist standpoint theory

Harstock (1983) defines standpoint feminism as a medium to bring to light all forms of domination and erase. In order to examine the various forms of oppression that devalue women, it is necessary to adopt a feminist standpoint. Feminists emphasize that the new development in feminist thought makes women a vital part of the production of knowledge through their viewpoint rather than taking into consideration the perspective of men, which makes women excluded from the knowledge system. As mentioned earlier, the knowledge stems out of the phallogocentric society where knowledge is presented from a gender-specific perspective, which is not so in the case of standpoint perspective. According to standpoint theory, it is only women who can articulate and understand their position in society since the dominant gender dictates their lives. In order to unveil the real, the researcher must be able to go underneath the surfaces of appearances. Since the experiences of women differ from men due to the dominance of exercise of power by the patriarchal society, women experience material differences in gendered conditions of life.

There are two perspectives of standpoint, one that is developed from the experiences of women, and the perspective of individuals subjugating the women for their survival. Therefore, standpoint perspective looks more into the reason why women remain subjugated almost in all communities (Brooks, 2007; Smith, 1992).

The standpoint perspective believes that all knowledge attempts are situated socially and are far better than the existing ones as a starting point for knowledge. Standpoint theories believe

in starting knowledge from the lives of the marginalized section of society. The lives and experiences of women taking into consideration their oppression provide the basis to produce knowledge. From the feminist standpoint perspective, the lives of women provide resources that are often overlooked. Through the help of standpoint theory, the marginalized section of the society starts gaining a public voice. Very often, the experiences and the lives of this section of the society have been devalued or ignored. Starting research from the lives of women will help in generating less partial and distorted accounts, not only of the lives of women but also the lives of men.

Standpoint theory thus helps in reaching goals that no other feminist approaches can achieve by bringing out new dimensions in the field of social sciences. It helps in unveiling the nature of power that keeps oppression alive and also building trust to get access to the participant's evidence. Such a perspective is essential to bring out the perspectives of women that were never studied. The concerns of the male class were always considered to be central, assuming it to be the true knowledge that portrays the subjugation of women. Standpoint perspective questions the male authority and supremacy by bringing out the experiences and perspectives of women. Thus, women are allowed to speak in order to reveal the dominant male position (Crasnow, 2009).

In the opinion of Brooks (2007), it is the feminist standpoint epistemology which helps in building knowledge and method of researching by challenging every individual to witness and be conscious of the dominant system through the vision and lived realities of the subjugated women and thereby applying such knowledge and vision to social activism resulting in social change. The reality is when it comes to the understanding of the society, it is always depicted from the perspective of men, which is considered to be pervasive, but the perspectives of women are documented less often and forgotten. Voices and the experiences of women are often omitted and excluded in several spheres. Even in male-centred theories that are quite evident in classroom teaching, it failed to consider the experiences of women. Therefore, it is of utmost necessity for women to produce the experiences of their lives, thereby constructing new models of knowledge building. This would further help in representing the lives of women to grant authentic expression that will provide alternative models of knowledge building resulting in feminist standpoint epistemology. By placing women at the center of the research process, one can consider the various lived realities of women for the initiation of knowledge by challenging the misrepresentations and exclusion of women in the subjugated forum of knowledge. The various

tasks that are performed by women daily are considered invisible, understudied and underestimated. Such tasks are regarded as actual experiences that women have nurtured by acquiring a unique set of skills, and women have no such platform to talk about their daily activities, their thoughts and feelings in a written form.

Feminist standpoint, therefore, aims to construct knowledge that helps in reflecting and representing women by considering their life experiences as the primary source of investigations, which will thereby encourage in examining the society as a whole through their experiences. It also provides grounds for understanding the world from the viewpoint of the social reality, which evolves from real experiences of women with most stories of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Such a perspective seeks to give voices to the oppressed women by unveiling the hidden knowledge from their lives that often remain on the margins. It aims to put the experiences of women into the forefront so that one can learn from the experiences, thereby helping in eliminating the oppression of women.

Hennessey (1993) states that it is a feminist standpoint theory that brings to light the perspectives of women through their gender, class, race, sexuality and their capabilities in contributing more to the prevailing knowledge system. It helps to go beyond analysis and description of the roles of the oppressed women in structuring and shaping of knowledge. Knowledge can be achieved when standpoints begin to emerge, i.e. it takes into account women who are often excluded and regarded invisible in the existing social system where they are very often oppressed and begin to find a voice.

According to Harding (1991), research with the help of a feminist standpoint helps in the process of producing more complete and less distorted knowledge. Narratives are considered as the starting point for the production of knowledge leading to various viewpoints that constitute each woman's perspectives that further helps in achieving power and control over the knowledge surrounding their lives. Women tend to become the known subjects in their rights rather than being a subjugated class by the male-dominated society. From the starting point of the lives of women, few questions arise that are very often not inquired, thereby forming sources for research leading to social change. Standpoint theory leads to an understanding that the oppressed women create their realities through their activities, which makes the world understand their lived experiences. Feminists started revaluing female experiences by taking into consideration the various experiences of women in every front of their lives.

The standpoint perspective is vital to understand how knowledge of gender is interrelated

with the experiences of women. Such a perspective emerges as a result of acknowledging and recognizing the oppressed class that occupies nearly the same viewpoint. This theory brings to light a fresh perception of the different dilemmas which are often difficult, adding to anxiety (Harding, 2004). Standpoint theorists thus help in exploring how the experiences of women in their respective lives differ from men since they live by maintaining set rules and regulations as dictated by the patriarchal society. It also tries to establish a bond between knowledge and power without giving up the trust that helps in telling stories about the lives of the oppressed. The belief that women 'speaking their truth' will help in attaining new knowledge of the gendered social lives grounded in the experiences of women is a vital subject matter of conception of feminist standpoint. Standpoint perspective helps in deconstructing the 'knowing feminist' by gaining superior knowledge of the experiences of women, which ordinary women do not have. Considering the emotions and embodiment, the feminist standpoint itself is grounded in the experiences of women (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

Sosulski (2009) reveals how social work practitioners help the participants to find a solution to the troubles they face while they live under oppressive circumstances where their concrete experiences are never observed, heard or reported. Listening to the experiences of the participants helps social work practitioners in developing empathy and building a better relationship for further institutional and policy changes. The participants reveal their sufferings during the analysis of their circumstances and, therefore, considered as the active agents of the study. Therefore, in order to bring changes in the system, the researcher must reflect, analyze and document the process by raising the consciousness. The participants have to be active in the process at the outset of telling the narratives to its analysis and thereby help in putting it into action. Through the feminist standpoint model, the researchers support the participants by helping them to look forward, providing them opportunities and to those who are facing similar situations.

Therefore, standpoint perspective helps the researcher to get an understanding of the socio-political viewpoint and how women are marginalized or silenced. The knowledge derived from the relationship of the dominant and oppressed where the standpoint theorists argue that it is the perspectives of the women that reveal the true structures of the world. In order to highlight the social values, gender ideologies and the embodied experiences that help in generating knowledge, standpoint perspective needs an appreciation.

Conclusion

Feminist research aims to fill the void between the participants and the researcher making

research accessible to people. Since the standpoint of women was still ignored and often overlooked, feminist research helps in focusing on what are the needs of women and what are the various changes they want in the patriarchal system. It also tries to bring the margin in the centre holistically. This article thus gives us an idea as to how various standpoints of women can give a platform to the voices and lived experiences that were earlier taken for granted. Therefore, in order to delve into the silenced narratives of women, whose accounts do not find space within the dominant discourse, it is essential to conduct feminist research. The experiences of women who are always regarded as ordinary and unexciting contribute to the production of knowledge that value the accounts of women equal to men. Their detailed voices are more important than mere quantifiable numbers, as they bring out the lived realities and essence of being survivors of various forms of violence and experiences. Thus the feminist standpoint perspective serves to fill the void of hitherto unrecorded lived experiences first hand which a general and pure quantitative or non-feminist approach would not have been able to garner and the life stories of women who needed to be heard would have forever been lost away into oblivion.

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