The Logic of Feminist Standpoint Theory for Social Work Research

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This article presents feminist standpoint theory as an epistemology to move social work research and practice toward a synthesis of relevance and rigor. Feminist standpoint theory provides an alternative approach to knowledge justification and "good science." The article discusses three assumptions of positivist approaches to science and research and highlights some of the conflicts between those assumptions and the professional commitments of social work. The specific areas of conflict identified include claims of value-free scientific activity, subject–object separation, and scientific objectivity. Feminist standpoint theory is an approach to research that is more consonant with the professional values and goals of social work. The theory places the life experiences of marginalized groups at the center of the research project. It then directs the view of the researcher toward the social structures that shape the lives of the group members. The advantages of standpoint theory for social work practice and research are highlighted.

Key Words: *feminist approach; positivism; research; standpoint theory*

The dialectic of relevance and rigor symbolizes the tension between social work practitioners and researchers. Social work practitioners want professional research to be relevant, to contribute to the understanding of human behavior in the social environment, and to improve practice effectiveness. Social work researchers want professional research to be rigorous and to meet the highest standards of science. And, of course, some social workers want both. Yet definitions of "good science" seem to preclude that possibility.

During the first half of this century, social work embraced psychoanalysis and the scientific method of the natural sciences in an effort to achieve professional status and credibility. Social work research methods were adopted from the social and natural sciences. For many social workers, the predominant paradigm in the definition of knowledge building and research is descended from the logical positivism of the beginning of the 20th century (Wood, 1990). The positivist philosophy and its approach to scientific activity rest on several key philosophical assumptions. Three in particular are problematic for social work: (1) the claim of value-free scientific activity, (2) the requirement of subject–object separation, and (3) definitions of scientific objectivity. It is time that social work enact a commitment to the development of an epistemology and research consonant with its unique professional character.

This article presents feminist standpoint theory as an alternative epistemology for social work practice and research. Feminist standpoint theory provides a vehicle to move social work research and practice toward a synthesis of relevance and rigor. This theory provides an alternative approach to knowledge justification and "good science" and leads to a resolution of the seeming contradiction between the need for relevance and the commitment to rigor in professional practice and research. The following discussion builds on the work of social scientists Mary McCanney Gergen (1988), Kenneth J. Gergen (1988), Sandra Harding (1987, 1991), and Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990).

Beliefs and Conflicts

Value-Free Scientific Activity

Logical positivism asserts the possibility of value-free theory and science based on the use of the senses and reason. Knowledge for knowledge's sake is believed to be both desirable and possible. But in the 1960s, critics of science discovered that those in charge of the neutral sciences were overwhelmingly white, male, and privileged occupants of positions in advanced industrialized society (Rose, 1983). The sciences are inextricably part of the social order that supports them. Hubbard (1988) called our attention to the political, value-laden nature of scientific activity in her assertion that "the pretense that science is apolitical and value neutral is profoundly political because it obscures the political role that science and technology play in underwriting the existing distribution of power in society. . . . Science and technology always operate in somebody's interest" (p. 13). In societies where power is organized hierarchically (by class, culture, or gender), there is no possibility of an impartial, disinterested, value-neutral perspective.

Social work's commitment to value-directed actions stands in contrast to positivist commitments to value-free endeavors. A profession that prides itself on a humanitarian value base cannot rely on a research grounded in the assertion that its methods can and should strip values from its work and findings. From its inception, social work research has been an applied research. The profession's commitment to practical ends requires that social work researchers possess an acute awareness of the value-laden potentials of the process and products of our science. Social work practitioners more readily become involved with research activities that honor the profession's commitment to client empowerment and social transformation. In both the planning and implementation of research activities, researchers need to attend to the policy implications of their inquiries (Cook & Fonow, 1990).

Subject–Object Separation

Logical positivism builds on the epistemological assumption of the possibility of separation of the observer from the observed, the knower from the known (Lincoln & Guba, cited in Wood, 1990). This thinking requires that the subject and object of research activities be treated as separate, noninteracting entities. The scientist is viewed as an independent observer who minimizes any relationship between the self and the subject of study. The actions of the researcher are constructed so that they do not infect or alter objective truth. However, it now appears that both the observer and the observed occupy the same causal plane. Both are influenced by the same sociocultural factors. The objects of our research are, in fact, gazing back at us (Harding, 1991).

The requirement of subject–object separation stands as a significant barrier to social work practitioner involvement in the research process. This separation casts the practitioner in the role of an observer and reporter of reality, rather than as its cocreator and interpreter with the client (Witkin, 1991). A scientific approach that recognizes the social bond and the reciprocal nature of interactions between people in social contexts would be more consistent with the assumptions of social work practice.

Objectivity

Logical positivism builds on the ontological assumption of a single, tangible reality "out there" (Lincoln & Guba, cited in Wood, 1990). Positivist approaches to science assume that there is an objective world of facts and universal laws, independent of scientists and their community, waiting to be known. The assumption that the social world is knowable through observation and recording of objective reality by an independent researcher leads to the assertion that all people using the proper scientific method will come to the same conclusion. In this approach to scientific activity, bias is identified and eliminated from research activities through techniques such as randomiza-

tion and control groups. This approach to objectivity views facts as independent of, and unaffected by, the cultural assumptions of the scientists who discover them. This approach to objectivity and the related search for universal laws that apply across cultures and times also strips the context from the products of science.

A profession whose hallmark is a commitment to enhancing clients' dignity and worth must question approaches to research in which activities reduce clients to mere objects of observation or manipulation. The profession's dual focus on the individual in a social context and the inclusion of diversity as integral to understanding human behavior stand in contrast to narrow definitions of objectivity that "decontextualize" research activities.

Harding (1991) deemed this objective approach inadequate because the methods of the scientific approach as applied are incapable of identifying or extracting sociocultural values and interests shared by the community of scientists. The scientific methods based on the assumptions of positivism allow for the detection of bias in individual scientists, but those methods do not detect commonly held assumptions or biases. Biases shared by the community of scientists are embedded in sociocultural values that are entrenched in the statement of the problem and in the choice of concepts included in the hypotheses to be tested. Language, values, and perceptions are all shaped by culture. Scientists cannot simply suspend the influences of their culture. Our best beliefs, as well as our least defensible ones, have social causes (Harding, 1991). Harding challenged scientists to a stronger objective approach that examines social and cultural influences.

Social work practitioners and researchers are human observers with particular personal and social backgrounds who need to recognize the role investigations play in creating rather than merely discovering social phenomena (Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988). Social work's commitment to working with individuals as they interact in society requires an emphasis on contexts, perhaps more than any other profession (Wood, 1990). Social welfare research cannot engage in context stripping and the resulting diminished relevance for the sake of operational rigor. Such research needs to embrace the strongest possible definition of objectivity, one that requires systematic identification of both individual and cultural assumptions as they shape research efforts and simultaneously preserve the contextual richness and meaning of scientific findings.

An Alternative Approach

Social work's approach to knowledge must rigorously affirm that we live in a scientific society. The technology developed by science has improved the quality of life for many individuals. Empirical practices are part of the fabric of our social consciousness. To convince others of our views, we need facts, observations, and data to support our arguments. Social work researchers need to redefine the criteria we employ to justify the validation of views as facts. The definition of acceptable empirical activity needs to be more, not less, rigorous than the positivist approach, building on the same value foundation as our practice. Social work research must be grounded in an epistemology that honors all of our professional commitments. Feminist standpoint theory offers one such opportunity.

The parallels between social work and feminist commitments have been noted by a number of authors (B. G. Collins, 1986; Cummerton, 1986; Morell, 1987; Nes & Iadicola, 1989; Wetzel, 1986). There are multiple theories of both social work and feminism. However, within the context of diversity and debate, Wetzel (1986) found the following shared characteristics in both the social work and feminist worldviews:

- the development of all human beings through service
- the intrinsic worth and dignity of all human beings
- the intrinsic importance of active participation in society
- the necessity for removing obstacles to self-realization
- the prevention and elimination of discrimination in services, work, employment, and common human needs.

B. G. Collins (1986) noted the commonality of perspective embodied in the social worker's person-in-environment and the feminists' "personal is political" commitments. Both feminist and social work values assert that people best realize their humanity through effective social functioning.

The primary difference between social work and feminism is that in their research, theory, and acts, feminists have persistently applied their philosophy, ethics, and values (Wetzel, 1986). Social workers have applied their philosophy, ethics, and values in practice but have not been as rigorous

and consistent in applying them to research and knowledge development. Feminist standpoint theory is an approach that is more consonant with the professional values and goals of social work.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

A *standpoint* is a position in society, involving a level of awareness about an individual's social location, from which certain features of reality come into prominence and from which others are obscured. Standpoint theory begins with the idea that the less powerful members of society experience a different reality as a consequence of their oppression. To survive, subordinate people must be attentive to the perspective of the dominant class as well as their own. As a result they have the potential for "double vision" or double consciousness—a knowledge of, awareness of, and sensitivity to both the dominant worldview of society and their own perspective. As a result, members of subordinate groups have the potential for a more complete view of social reality. This more complete perception should not be taken as in any way negating the serious and debilitating consequences of oppressions. On the contrary, members of oppressed groups must develop this more complete view as a survival skill to cope with oppression.

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Feminist standpoint theory is rooted in the Marxian analysis of the conditions of the working class (Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 1983). Feminist standpoint references to women have been expanded in this article to encompass social work's more inclusive commitment to the empowerment of all oppressed groups. In feminist analysis the appropriate standpoint is that of women; in social work analysis the appropriate standpoint is that of the more general "other," of oppressed and disadvantaged populations: people of color, women, gay men and lesbians, children, poor people, elderly people, and differently abled individuals. This extension is consistent with feminist bell hooks's (1984, 1989) analysis of the interlocking nature of all oppressions and her assertion that it is futile to argue about which oppression is primary. She argued that it is more fruitful to determine the links among oppressive systems and to understand their interactions.

What does this have to do with science or epistemology? Harding (1991) explained that epistemology (the theory of knowledge) is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge and with claims to knowledge and the logic of those claims. Standpoint theory, as an epistemology, states that less partial and distorted understandings of nature and social relations will result from research that begins from the standpoint of particular marginalized groups of human beings. Research grounded in standpoint theory strengthens the objectivity of understanding by refusing loyalty to the Western "native's" view of life and thought. It asserts that not just opinions but also a culture's best beliefs—what it calls knowledge—are socially situated (Harding, 1991). Standpoint theory offers an explanation of how research directed by social values and political agendas can produce empirically and theoretically preferable results.

Standpoint theory offers a less partial and distorted approach to understanding the nature and scope of knowledge to support social work's understanding of clients and practice. It recognizes that there are no perfect or universal answers (or questions). But, even in the face of these constraints, we must nonetheless struggle to understand, to ask our questions, and to listen to each other.

Tenets of Feminist Standpoint Theory

The grounds of standpoint theory discussed in this article are based on the works of P. H. Collins (1986, 1989, 1990), Harding (1987, 1991), Harding and Hintikka (1983), Hartsock (1983), Nielsen (1990), and Smith (1987).

Life experience structures one's understanding of life. Research must begin from concrete experience, rather than abstract concepts. The life experiences of members of marginalized groups have been erroneously devalued as starting points for scientific research and as generators of evidence for or against knowledge claims. Beginning from life experiences grounded in cultural diversity can decrease the partialities and distortions in the pic-

ture of nature and social life. For example, beginning research from the lives of women has made visible issues such as childbirth, housework, wife abuse, incest, rape, sexual harassment, pornography, and prostitution. These concerns are simply not visible from the life experiences of most men.

For a position to count as a standpoint, an objective location is required, such as beginning with the life experiences within a particular group. The subsequent observations and theory about nature and social relations then examine how the ruling apparatus structures that group's lives. Collins (1989), a black feminist theorist, amplified this requirement. She asserted that individuals who have lived through the experiences on which they claim to be experts are more credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences. Further, approaches to knowing must be guided by an ethic of caring and responsibility. People are accountable and responsible for the knowledge they produce and share.

Ladner's (1987) work demonstrated the power of this point. Her study of African American urban adolescent mothers began from their life experiences. Ladner's care for and connection to them allowed her to recognize the wealth of strengths and coping skills employed by these women. Traditional research using a deviance model failed to notice the coping abilities these women exercised on a daily basis.

Members of the most and the least powerful groups will potentially have opposed understandings of the world. The dominant group's view will be partial and more superficial. It is in the dominant group's interest to maintain, reinforce, and legitimate this dominance and understanding of the world, regardless of how incomplete it may be. Collins (1990) observed that "suppressing the knowledge and viewpoint of any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of an independent consciousness in the oppressed can be taken to mean that subordinated groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization" (p. 5).

In contrast, the perspective from subordinate groups' life has the potential to be more complete. Marginalized populations have fewer interests in maintaining ignorance about how the social order actually works and fewer reasons to invest in maintaining or justifying the status quo than do dominant groups. Because they have less to lose, their perspective can more easily generate fresh, critical analyses and questions (for example, about how the current social and economic systems support capitalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other oppressions) (Nielsen, 1990). In this context, Rich's (1980) analysis of the exercise of male power to ensure "compulsory heterosexuality" emerged because of the viewpoint available to her as a lesbian, a viewpoint that is more comprehensive than that of the dominant heterosexual group.

The less-powerful group's standpoint has to be developed through education. The greater depth and comprehensiveness of the marginalized group's view cannot be taken for granted. Without conscious effort to reinterpret reality, without political consciousness, marginalized populations are likely to accept the dominant worldview.

Knowledge emerges for the oppressed through the struggles they wage against their oppressors. Knowledge production is a hands-on procedure (Harding, 1991; Rose, 1983). Researchers can understand hidden aspects of social relations between the marginalized groups and the institutions that structure their lives through their struggles to change those institutions and structures. Through such struggles social workers see the reality of how the social order is constructed and maintained.

The perspective of those outside the dominant group develops from their daily activities. These activities require them to bridge the gap between ideological dualisms such as nature versus culture, professional versus manual work, or intellectual versus emotional work. The perspective of the "other" permits various cultural irrationalities or inconsistencies to emerge into clearer view. For example, the domestic work of African American women in the homes of white upper-class families allowed them to develop a standpoint that demystified white power. Sojourner Truth, in her often quoted "Ain't I a Woman?" speech, gave her perspective as other and challenged definitions of woman as passive and frail (Collins, 1990).

The appropriate perspective for research activities is everyday life. Beginning with the everyday lives of marginalized groups reveals the ways in which the public world structures the private, everyday lives of marginalized groups in ways that are not immediately visible as those lives are lived. Such a perspective can reveal the caring and valuing of group members for each other, the prioritizing of their welfare, and the possibility of experiencing real intimacy and democratic domestic

relations that are invisible to traditional approaches to research. Smith's (1987) work about single parents demonstrated the effect of decisions made by school administrators on the allocation of time in the daily lives of single mothers.

Members of marginalized groups are valuable "strangers" to the social order. Members of marginalized groups have been excluded from the design and direction of both the social order and the production of knowledge. As strangers, they learn to see the social order from the perspective of outsiders. P. H. Collins (1986) summarized three advantages of outsider status: First, outsiders' experiences of nearness and remoteness are valuable for objectivity. Second, natives confide in strangers in ways they do not confide in each other. And finally, it is easier for strangers to see patterns of belief or behavior.

Many others are not just outsiders, but also "outsiders within." An increasing number of members of marginalized groups are achieving positions in the social sciences professions. A significant majority of social work professionals are women; many are also members of other marginalized groups. P. H. Collins (1986) demonstrated that bringing members of these groups, who share an outsider-within status, into the center of analysis may reveal views of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches. When the individual works both inside and outside, it is possible to see the relation between dominant activities and beliefs and those on the outside.

Conclusion

Standpoint theory makes it possible to ask new questions and to see new things about nature and social relations, not from the lives of those who control the ruling apparatus but from the lives of those at the margin. Centering the lives of marginalized groups in our research provides a way to identify and control both individual and sociocultural assumptions and biases, strengthening objectivity.

Standpoint theory does not rule out the insights of any group of persons. Each group contributes the distinctive knowledge emerging from its particular social situations and social structures. This theory insists that each group learn to see the world differently in an active and creative way through the theoretical and political lenses that other thinkers originally constructed to produce distinctive insights (Harding, 1991). Members of each group must work to understand the standpoint of others to construct views of our shared reality that are less partial.

Standpoint theory requires that all research specifically identify the intended beneficiaries of any project. Because social services researchers take on the role of change agents, using the findings of the research to change the lives of groups who are the study subjects, their work is compatible with the practice interests of social workers. Adaptation of this approach to research could bridge the gap between research and practice, permitting true practitioner–researchers. Research, practice, and social change can become one unified action. Standpoint theory offers social work a means to guide the profession's visions and to experiment with new ways of seeing and understanding the world predicated on transformation, renewal, and empowerment.

The research base of social work needs both passion and objectivity. Standpoint theory provides an avenue for achieving a profoundly relevant and impassioned objectivity that honors and celebrates cultural diversity with a scholarly rigor. ■

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