

Standpoint Epistemology

History

[...] Standpoint Epistemology initially developed in the social sciences, primarily in work by Nancy Hartsock (1998) in political science and by Dorothy Smith in sociology. As a methodology for the social sciences, it emphasizes the ways in which socially and politically marginalized groups are in a position of epistemic privilege vis-à-vis social structures. Drawing on Hegel and Marx, feminist standpoint theorists in the social sciences argue that those on the “outside” of dominant social and political groups must learn not only how to get along in their own world, but also how to get along in the dominant society. Thus, they have an “outsider” status with respect to dominant groups that allows them to see things about social structures and how they function that members of the dominant group cannot see.¹

Epistemic Advantage

[According to Standpoint Epistemology] there is a cognitive asymmetry between the standpoint of the oppressed and the standpoint of the privileged that gives an advantage to the former over the latter. [That is], the perspectives from the lives of the less powerful can offer a more objective view of the social world, a view based on their experiences of being underprivileged that captures real disparities, instead of a view that ignores (or even erases) experiences of oppression and is more likely to be oblivious or blind to disparities and insensitive to injustice.²

Standpoints as Achievements

A standpoint can not be thought of as an ascribed position with its different perspective that oppressed groups can claim automatically. Rather, a standpoint is an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle, something that requires both science and politics, as Nancy Hartsock put the point. Here the term becomes a technical one in the sense that it is no longer simply another word for viewpoint or perspective, but rather makes visible a different, somewhat hidden phenomenon that we must work to grasp.³

Standup Comedy Commentary - A transcript from SNL of Bill Burr applying standpoint:

Let's talk white women here, shall we? White women are amazing. Amazing your accomplishments over the last few years. The way white women somehow hijacked the woke movement... generals around the world should be analyzing this. Just to refresh your memory, the woke movement was supposed to be about people of color. Not getting opportunities. Finally making that happen it was about that, for about eight seconds. Then somehow, white women swung their Gucci-booted feet over the fence of oppression and stuck themselves at the front of the line. I don't know how they did it! I've never heard so much complaining in my life from white women. I'm hurt with my SUV and heated seats. You have no idea what it's like to be me!⁴

¹ Janack, Marianne. “Feminist Epistemology.” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2004, <https://iep.utm.edu/fem-epis/>. Accessed 13 June 2025.

² Medina, José. The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination. Oxford University Press, 2013, p.197.

³ Harding, Sandra. The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies. New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 7–8.

⁴ Burr, Bill. “Bill Burr: SNL Monologue (2020) – Transcript.” Scraps from the Loft, originally aired 10 Oct. 2020, scrapsfromtheloft.com/comedy/bill-burr-snl-monologue-2020-transcript/. Accessed 13 June 2025.