

SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Epistemology, Philosophy of Science, Feminist Theory, Sociology of Knowledge

1. Core Definition

Situated knowledge refers to the understanding that all forms of human knowledge are necessarily embedded, constrained, and shaped by the specific historical, geographical, social, cultural, and linguistic contexts of the individual or group generating that knowledge. It radically challenges traditional Western epistemological views--particularly those associated with positivism--which aspire to achieve a "view from nowhere," or a transcendent, objective perspective devoid of personal bias or corporeal location. Situated knowledge asserts that the identity, values, and history of the knower are not external contaminants to be removed, but rather intrinsic elements that determine what can be known and how it is interpreted.

This concept posits that the universal ideals of neutral science are fundamentally impossible, a stance that arises explicitly from critiques developed within traditions such as social constructionism and **feminist philosophy**. The defining characteristic of situated knowledge is its insistence on the partiality and specificity of any claim. As the source material highlights, in situated knowledge, it is explicitly implied that social, cultural, and historical factors will constrain the process of knowledge construction, rendering any notion of monolithic, universally applicable truth suspect.

The theoretical weight of situated knowledge lies in its demand for accountability. By recognizing that the process of observation and interpretation is always filtered through a specific lens--whether that lens is disciplinary training, social class, gender identity, or cultural framework--proponents argue that knowledge claims must always be accompanied by a clear declaration of the perspective from which they originated. This approach fundamentally shifts the epistemological focus from seeking absolute truth to establishing the reliability, accountability, and ethical limitations of specific, local knowledge claims.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

While philosophical concepts emphasizing the social and contextual nature of knowledge date back to figures like Karl Mannheim in the sociology of knowledge, the term **Situated Knowledge** was formally defined and popularized by cultural historian and feminist theorist Donna Haraway. Her seminal 1988 essay, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," established the term as a crucial analytical tool for feminist philosophy of science, particularly in response to the challenges posed by postmodern critique.

Haraway developed the concept as a response to a dichotomy she observed within feminism: on one hand, the political need to make strong, evidence-based claims about gender inequality and injustice; on the other hand, the widespread postmodern critique that seemed to dissolve all truth into linguistic relativity. Situated knowledge offered a path between the extremes of total, oppressive objectivity and debilitating, unproductive relativism. It sought a form of objectivity that was robust precisely because it acknowledged its own limitations and location.

The historical impetus for the concept also came from the internal critiques within feminist epistemology, which sought to challenge how traditional science often codified male experience or Western rationality as the neutral human standard. By insisting on situatedness, theorists could expose how power relations--institutional, economic, and social--shaped scientific agendas, funding priorities, and interpretive frameworks. This development built upon earlier feminist contributions, such as standpoint theory, but moved towards recognizing multiple, potentially conflicting, partial perspectives rather than advocating for one single unified standpoint of the oppressed.

3. Relationship to Objectivity and Universalism

Situated knowledge mounts a powerful critique of the conventional notion of scientific **objectivity**, particularly the idealized model associated with Descartes or Bacon, which demands that the knower must detach themselves entirely from the subject of study. Haraway famously dubbed this detached view the "God trick," arguing that the alleged view from nowhere is actually a hidden, powerful, and unaccountable view from somewhere--typically the vantage point of the socially dominant. This false claim to universalism serves to mask the political implications and specific biases embedded in the knowledge produced.

However, situated knowledge does not abandon objectivity entirely; instead, it redefines it. Haraway argues that genuine objectivity is achieved through **partial connection** and **limited vision**. This is the "privilege of partial perspective." Knowledge is rendered objective not by becoming universal, but by being highly specific, thoroughly contextualized, and accountable to specific, materially grounded practices. The strength of the claim rests on the transparency of the lens used to generate it.

The rejection of **universal knowledge**--a concept highly emphasized by the concept's proponents--is central to this framework. Universal knowledge, if it were achievable, would risk dissolving the specific differences and local material realities that shape human experience. Situated knowledge therefore advocates for an epistemology of multiplicity, where truth is a product of dialogue and convergence among many well-defined, localized perspectives, rather than adherence to a single, monolithic standard.

4. Situated Knowledges in Feminist Epistemology

The connection between situated knowledge and radical feminism is historical and thematic. The core aim of early feminist epistemology was to demonstrate that traditional Western knowledge structures were not merely inadequate but actively complicit in maintaining patriarchal power. Situated knowledge provided the philosophical tools necessary to systematically deconstruct these structures by proving that the alleged neutrality of science and scholarship was merely the institutionalized perspective of men operating within patriarchal systems.

The framework is vital for revealing the epistemic privilege conferred by social location. For instance, the experience and knowledge of marginalized groups--those excluded from the dominant centers of power--often provide critical insights into how social systems function, insights that are invisible to those benefitting from the system. By validating these specific, situated experiences, feminist theory uses this concept to empower subjugated knowledges.

Moreover, situated knowledge allowed feminist scholars to critique the very tools and methodologies of research. If knowledge is inherently contextual, then the instruments used to gather data--such as linguistic categories, statistical models, or diagnostic criteria--must be recognized as situated technologies bearing the imprint of their makers' values and contexts. This critical awareness is essential for creating research that is ethically sensitive and politically aware of its own limitations and embedded biases.

5. Key Characteristics

Embodiment and Materiality: Situated knowledge insists that the production of knowledge is an embodied practice. The knower is not a disembodied consciousness but a physical being located in space and time, possessing a specific body with a particular history (gendered, racialized, disabled, etc.). This materiality dictates the possibilities and limits of knowledge access.

Partiality and Limitation: The concept embraces partiality as a virtue, not a flaw. True sight is partial sight, meaning that seeing everything simultaneously is impossible. A situated claim is strong because it acknowledges precisely what it cannot see, thereby preventing its perspective from becoming tyrannical or universalizing.

Contestation and Accountability: Situated knowledge demands that claims be open to contestation by other situated perspectives. The strength of an argument relies not on its adherence to universal laws, but on its capacity for transparent self-location and its readiness to engage in dialogue with other located knowers. It is accountable knowledge.

Mediation through Technology: Knowledge is always mediated--by language, culture, instruments (e.g., microscopes, telescopes), and disciplinary apparatuses. These mediating tools

are themselves situated products of culture and history, further complicating any claim to unmediated, universal truth.

6. Significance and Impact

The impact of situated knowledge extends far beyond feminist theory, deeply influencing the fields of Science and Technology Studies (STS), critical geography, and postcolonial studies. It provided a powerful intellectual foundation for analyzing how scientific authority is constructed and maintained, particularly in instances where Western scientific models clash with local or indigenous knowledge systems. In these contexts, indigenous knowledge is seen as highly situated--rooted in local ecology, history, and practices--and therefore crucial for solving local problems, even if it does not conform to universal scientific protocols.

Furthermore, in the philosophy of science, the concept has fueled a broader movement toward acknowledging the ethical and political responsibility inherent in scientific practice. Scientists are increasingly encouraged to view themselves not as neutral observers, but as active participants whose choices (of methodology, funding, and focus) carry moral and political weight. This realization has profoundly affected fields like public health and environmental science, where community engagement and the validation of local experience are now often deemed necessary for successful outcomes.

By linking knowledge production directly to power, situated knowledge has provided critical theory with a robust mechanism for analyzing the production of systemic inequality. It helps explain why certain narratives or interpretations become dominant while others are marginalized or dismissed as merely subjective. In essence, the concept offers a framework not just for describing how knowledge works, but for actively intervening in and democratizing the processes of knowing.

7. Debates and Criticisms

The primary philosophical criticism leveled against situated knowledge is the charge of **relativism**. Critics argue that if all knowledge is merely a partial, situated construction, then there is no objective ground left upon which to judge the veracity of competing claims. If the knowledge of a climate scientist is merely one partial perspective, how can it be deemed superior to the partial perspective of a climate change denier? This is often perceived as undermining the very possibility of rational public discourse and political action.

Haraway and other proponents strongly reject the accusation of relativism. They clarify that relativism implies that all claims are equally valid from the outset and require no struggle or justification, leading to intellectual laziness. Situated knowledge, by contrast, demands extreme effort and accountability; it requires the knower to actively struggle to connect their partial vision with others, and to defend their claims based on specific material evidence and methodology

rooted in a specific location. It demands strong objectivity, not weak subjectivity.

A separate set of criticisms focuses on the practical application of the concept in large, institutional scientific environments. Critics point out the administrative and methodological difficulty of consistently acknowledging and integrating thousands of partial perspectives, especially when large-scale standardization (e.g., clinical trials, global environmental monitoring) is necessary for reliable data collection and policy implementation. While philosophically rich, implementing situated knowledge across vast scientific enterprises remains a significant practical challenge.

Further Reading

[Situated knowledge \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Donna Haraway \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Feminist epistemology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Social constructionism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Radical feminism \(Wikipedia\)](#)