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Main Article:

Why Feminism? How Feminist Methodologies Can Aid Our Efforts to ‘Give Back’ Through Research

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Abstract

In this thematic section, the authors take a critical stance to the notion of giving back. They emphasize that giving back should be a model of solidarity and movement building, not charity. They push us to consider the ways in which the framework of giving back may actually reinforce hierarchical relationships between the researcher and the researched. In doing so, they offer new ways of thinking about the relationship between researchers and their communities of subjects. The strategies employed by these authors resonate with work from feminist activists and scholars whose approaches bring us alternative theories and methods through which to address the potentially dangerous effects of speaking for others through research. Examined alongside the giving back pieces in this section, these feminist contributions illuminate ways that we can give back by advancing the anti-oppression agendas of marginalized subjects through our research.

Index Terms: research ethics; feminism; research practice; social theory; science studies

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The notion of *solidarity* as a feminist rallying cry was seriously called into question in August last year, when Mikki Kendall, a writer and pop-culture analyst, introduced the hashtag on twitter, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen (Kendall, 2013). In less than a week, the tag erupted as a social media platform for women to share their previously scattered and silenced accounts of racial and class privilege found in media representations of

women's struggles today. A highly cited post from Rania Khalek, for example, states, “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen when convos [sic] about the gender pay gap ignore that white women earn higher wages than black, Latino and Native men” (Khalek, 2013). Another twitter user writes, “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen means telling women to “Lean In” when most don't have a seat at the table” (Hipster, 2013). The tag's popularity highlights the profound diversity of women's struggles today. It also illuminates the contradictions found between the potential political gains of speaking about the shared experiences of a marginalized group, and the impacts of the erasures that speaking for those in that group inevitably entails.

Academic research also involves speaking for others from a position of privilege. Research, while potentially liberatory, can also have dangerous consequences. These include the effects resulting from research claims that erase diversity in others' experiences, and the potential to marginalize those about whom the research is conducted by positioning the researcher as knowing expert in contrast to a less knowledgeable subject.

How to articulate disparate accounts of struggle for political mobilization, while simultaneously maintaining the diversity of these accounts, is an on-going point of debate for feminist scholars, and a central concern for the authors in this section, titled, “Giving Back in Solidarity.” Researching topics ranging from city planning to human DNA, their pieces reveal that anxiety about privilege and speaking for others are not just concerns faced by those advocating against gendered forms of oppression. Gautam Bhan, Jia-Ching Chen, Harmony Goldberg, and Kimberly TallBear all share the view that the extent to which their research “gives back” is dependent on how the knowledge they produce from their work pushes anti-oppression debates and struggles forward. These authors, however, are all highly aware that the historically sedimented privileges associated with academic institutions and scientific forms of knowledge mean that even well-intentioned research agendas aimed at advancing the struggles of those in marginalized positions do not always correspond to democratic or liberatory knowledge production. They all, therefore, take as their starting point for giving back an explicit re-working of the inequalities found in the embedded hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. To do this, their critiques variously contribute to a growing body of feminist scholarship that aims to democratize scientific knowledge production.

In this piece, I explore how feminist theoretical and methodological approaches to research can help us move the concept of giving back forward, in light of the discussions presented in this section. First, I define what I mean by feminism and show how this definition complements these authors' conceptions of giving back. I then present a brief history of feminist debates on how to research people in marginalized positions. Next, I examine how feminist *standpoint methodologies* can help us identify the oppressive effects of implicating people in seemingly universal categories of difference. In the last section, I explore how Donna Haraway's proposal to *situate knowledges* expands concerns identified by feminist standpoint theorists to all forms of scientific knowledge production, and I highlight how the authors in this section situate their research as part of their approach to giving back.

1. Defining Feminism

In my examination of the relationship between giving back and feminist approaches to research, I discuss feminism as a fluid category that describes those scholars and activists whose work seeks to destabilize hierarchical categories of difference. Ordered categories are problematic because they inevitably, through perhaps indirectly, give rise to inequalities in how humans and non-humans are treated. This occurs both formally, through the establishment of laws and policies, and informally, through social practices. Research approaches I describe as feminist are not solely those which engage with issues related to gender, but rather include a range of inquiries into the ways beings of all kinds become “other-ed” through binary ordering categories that are inevitably hierarchical. Dichotomous binaries the authors in this section seek to destabilize include those between the researcher and the researched, men and women, pre-modern and modern, slum and development, and immigrant and citizen. These ordering categories, based on differences, correspond to oppressive effects when they encourage and legitimize various forms of differential treatment and marginalize how the voices enrolled in these categories are heard, impacts currently exemplified in the debates around solidarity stemming from Kendall’s hashtag.

In this group of essays, authors Goldberg and TallBear both critique the notion of giving back itself for helping to stabilize problematic dichotomies between the researcher and the researched. Goldberg explains that she prefers to describe her research relationships as playing a role in a “broader strategic division of labor,” rather than giving back, because giving back implies a transactional relationship, instead of, “joint work towards a shared political end.” Expressing similar concerns, TallBear argues that although we may not read it as such, the notion of giving back re-creates a hierarchical dualism between the researcher and the researched. TallBear encourages us to consider how feminist methodological considerations related to *standpoint theories* and *situated knowledges* can help us identify how hierarchical ordering categories are produced, in order to give back through research practices that facilitate our ability to hold people accountable for the oppressive effects of these forms.

2. Feminist Standpoints

Feminist standpoint literature spans a rich history of debates about the oppressive and liberatory effects of speaking for others through research, a piece of which I outline here. Broadly, feminist standpoint methodologies are based on the theoretical argument that in order to address structural inequalities through research, the question of what counts as research must be answered from the perspectives of marginalized peoples. This is because, as feminist standpoint theorist Sandra Harding argues, traditional research methods are in part to blame for contributing to the marginalized conditions of particular groups of people in the first place (Harding, 1987). The practices that gave rise to eugenic science are a prime example of this. Harding suggests that there is not a single research method that corresponds to the best feminist science, but rather, the research which best supports emancipatory movements is that which studies marginalized peoples from their own perspectives. The standpoint methodology that Harding advocates for is reflexive, in

that it includes an examination of the researcher's own assumptions and biases from the perspectives of marginalized peoples. This type of reflexive examination enables the researcher to identify how his or her own practices and beliefs influence his or her empirical analyses.

Harding's arguments, which she presented in the introduction to her 1987 edited volume, *Feminism and Methodology*, coalesced several decades of concerns from feminist scholars regarding the way social scientists were representing the lives of women and social relations more broadly. Included in that volume was work from Nancy Hartsock, who employed Marxist principles to advocate for a feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1987). Hartsock argued that just as the lives of proletarians provide Marxian theory with a particular vantage point from which to identify oppressive forms of capitalism, women's standpoints can also provide the basis for powerful critiques of capitalist patriarchy. Hartsock argued that we should approach our analyses from a feminist standpoint in order to identify barriers to more humane social relations. She explains that this is because various forms of sexual divisions of labor throughout history mean that women have a different perspective from men from which to identify the institutional and ideological factors that constitute oppressive relations.

Harding's and Hartsock's approaches provided theoretical tracking for ongoing debates over how to rework social science in ways that supported women's struggles. In 1983, for example, feminist scholar Barbara Du Bois had called for a specifically feminist social science derived from women's everyday lives and experiences as defined, "in their own terms" (Du Bois, 1983). Several years later, Judith Stacey warned that despite good intentions, these studies are also ridden with unequal power dynamics (Stacey, 1988). Taking ethnography as the archetypical methodology for research that accounts for marginalized perspectives, Stacey argued that the fact that the ethnographer creates a product that intervenes in the lives of others, yet is able to leave the place where these lives are played out, results in an unequal terrain between the ethnographer and those whose lives are implicated in the written product. Chandra Mohanty applied these concerns about speaking for others from a position of power to the growing body of scholarship focusing on the lives of third world women that was coming out of newly formed women's studies departments in the 1980s. Mohanty argued in her seminal piece, titled, "Under Western Eyes," that this western scholarship, despite being well-intentioned and possibly even holding explanatory potential, was instead having a colonizing effect on third world women (Mohanty, 1991). This, Mohanty argued, was because western academics were creating categories that dictated the way in which women in the so-called third world were known in terms and narratives these women did not author.

Mohanty's critique of western academics speaking for others and Harding's conception of a feminist research agenda that starts from the standpoints of the marginalized resonates with the research approaches that TallBear and Bhan employ. In her effort to identify and contest factors contributing to marginalization, TallBear describes how she starts her inquiry from the perspectives of the marginalized. This, she explains, means that the question of what constitutes a research question, a hypothesis, an interpretation,

an analysis, and a valued output is a question that must begin from the lives of marginalized peoples. She describes how her engagement with feminist standpoint methodology complements her own mother's approach to re-writing Native American history from the lives of tribal people, an approach inspired by work from Native American scholar Vine Deloria Jr. For Bhan, adherence to feminist research methodologies meant that his research team, studying the impacts of re-settlement in India, was comprised of local residents. Bhan's teammates, however, were not your traditional "research assistants," but rather their positions on the team were as investigators, "in their own right," with their own stakes in the project's output. The research practices Bhan's team engaged in included hours of training meetings in which a, "shared understanding of the changing social, cultural, and economic climate in Delhi and India," was developed that, in turn, served as the context for the research.

In Bhan's account of his own role within his research team, we see how a standpoint methodology that takes the perspectives of the marginalized as the starting point for research can serve to destabilize the status of the expert scientist. Below, I explore how feminist standpoint approaches can be expanded to destabilize the hierarchies embedded in scientific knowledge production on issues that are not always read as factors contributing to oppression. Factors giving rise to oppressive relations include the power embedded in scientific accounts of the world that are presented as unbiased, a presentation that invariably obscures the privileged forms of access to institutions and resources that enable some individuals' accounts of the world to appear more truthful than others. To explore the role that our research can play in alternatively constituting or contesting oppressive forms of difference-making, I examine contributions from Donna Haraway, whose scholarship intersects with Harding's and that of other standpoint theorists, to spearhead the research field of feminist science studies, an interdisciplinary field whose scholars are linked in their efforts to achieve more democratic scientific knowledge production. Haraway's theoretical and methodological considerations, developed in part through her training as a primatologist, along with those of other feminist science studies scholars, show that feminist concerns are by no means limited to research with marginalized peoples.

3. Situating Knowledge

In "Situated Knowledges," primatologist and feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway critiques the notion of there being a singular, universal truth that scientific interrogation can unearth (Haraway, 1988). Haraway expands Harding's argument that researchers' beliefs and practices influence how marginalized peoples are represented, to argue that, in fact, the stability of all scientific knowledge claims is contingent on the situated positions of researchers and their academic institutions. Haraway argues that researchers' depictions of the world are products of particular discursive practices, material technologies, social hierarchies, data collection procedures, funding sources, and other factors that coalesce in the form of a scientific knowledge claim that is always inevitably partial. Building on Harding's call to enhance objectivity by interrogating the practices of the researcher from the perspectives of women, Haraway suggests that highlighting the ways these knowledge claims are made can actually make these claims

more truthful (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987). This enhanced truthfulness is a result of Haraway's observation that only partial perspectives are truly objective. Expanding the standpoint approach, Haraway argues that the constitution of the researcher as more objective than his or her informants is challenged when we show how the researcher's own gaze is also partial. Destabilizing this hierarchical binary between the researcher and the researched, or as TallBear describes, between "those who know," and, "those from whom the raw materials of knowledge production are extracted," is central to the giving back projects of the authors in this section.

Haraway's argument that all knowledge is partial is a direct critique of western narratives around scientific objectivity, which claim a distanced and disembodied vantage point from which to observe the world (Haraway, 1988). Haraway asserts that this notion of objectivity harbors oppressive potential because it distances the scientist from responsibility for the effects of the claims he or she makes. As Haraway explains, this distanced positioning makes it possible for the scientist to, "see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation" (p. 581), a disembodiment that makes the scientist's gaze into a conquering one. Drawing our attention to the impossibility of such disembodiment, Haraway argues that scientific claims to universal truths would require the viewer to perform impossible "god tricks" (p. 584) of speaking authoritatively about everything in the world from no particular social location or human perspective.

To show the partiality of all knowledge claims and return the responsibility for the scientific gaze to the researcher, Haraway argues that we need to embody the researcher/viewer (Haraway, 1988). Embodiment, for Haraway, is not a call for researchers to recount their personal history. Rather, embodying vision involves an identification of the social, physical, and technical factors, including the funding, instruments, regulations, laws, social and ethical norms, and privileges associated with university degrees that influence the material production of knowledge and constitute the researcher's position of privilege. Emphasizing that giving back needs to involve explicit acknowledgement of the complexities that contribute to researchers' privileged positions in relation to the communities with whom they are working, Goldberg conscientiously embodies her own position in her work. Goldberg argues that an understanding of the researcher's situatedness is crucial because even the best attempts at giving back will not erase dynamics of privilege. For Goldberg, accepting these, "uncomfortable realities, with all of their attendant guilt and discomfort," helps us better address structural inequalities and enables us to treat our research collaborators with dignity. Goldberg's account of her research experiences reveals that the extent to which our research can give back by situating knowledge to hold people accountable for the effects of oppression, ultimately rests on the importance of critical inquiry. Goldberg argues that simply providing a space for marginalized perspectives to be heard does not necessarily rework the conditions that led to this marginalization in the first place. Acknowledging that sharing stories of oppression can be a "deeply humanizing" experience, Goldberg provocatively asserts that treating your research collaborators like the "human beings they are" is more reflective of basic human decency than an example of giving back. Goldberg instead suggests we examine giving back in terms of research that empowers

communities, and not in terms of individual interactions, which risk becoming paternalistic or a form of charity.

Bhan also describes how his research team worked to situate the various perspectives each individual brought to the research team. For Bhan's team, this took place through explicit discussions about privilege in identities and locations. This process, according to Bhan, led to a team dynamic in which privilege and difference was acknowledged, but did not "overwhelm," the dynamic of the team. Bhan emphasizes the importance of this process for the team's ability to achieve its research goals, and he credits these discussions for the way they, with time, served to lessen his own anxiety about how to he could strategically use his privilege to address inequality without reinstating the dichotomies that help constitute this position of privilege in the first place.

Chen's approach to giving back involves a critical inquiry into the ways technical depictions of the world are in fact partial. Chen shows how such depictions, including those legitimizing China's green development initiatives, harbor cultural, political, and economic stakes for people and resources when wielded by governing bodies. Haraway argues that technical representations of the world are particularly important sites for feminist interrogations because their technicality makes them appear neutral (Haraway, 1991, chapter 8). Our efforts to give back are thus advanced when our practices of situating knowledges challenge celebrations of western society's technological and scientific superiority by showing the partiality embedded in those scientific advances that are represented as universal truths. This, in turn, opens space to account for the perspectives of those whose lives and histories are implicated in these narratives as being "non-modern" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581).

Identifying the particular material and semiotic practices that go into the constitution of technical depictions of the world makes it possible for us to hold people accountable for any oppressive effects of the policies and practices legitimized by these claims. Acknowledging the difficulty of revealing the partiality in seemingly universal claims, Haraway advocates that we engage feminist standpoint methodologies and start our inquiries from the perspectives of the subjugated (Haraway, 1988). Haraway argues that the subjugated, while not innocent positions, are good starting points for research because they are more likely to understand how seemingly universal claims are in fact partial. The perspectives of the subjugated, or marginalized, are preferred because, as Haraway writes, they, "have a decent chance to be on to the god trick and all its dazzling—and, therefore, blinding—illuminations" (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). Chen takes this approach in his work, situating dominant narratives around the promises of China's "green" development initiatives by starting his inquiry from the standpoints of the subjugated. Conducting his research in collaboration with the villagers dispossessed by these projects, Chen found that the government's proposed "green" development project was less "green" than were the practices of the villagers who were being displaced. This enabled Chen to develop a more nuanced representation of the villagers' situation, which better served to identify political possibilities for activist resistance strategies. For Chen, situating knowledge by taking the standpoint of the subjugated helped advance his activist research agenda.

4. Conclusion

We find in these authors' engagements with critiques of universal knowledge claims an expanded conception of the forms that giving back can take. The power of the descriptive categories scientists and policy makers use to make sense of the world mean that the stakes of giving back extend far beyond the research encounter, as the categories we use become the way through which others make sense of and respond to our collaborators' experiences. This power can also be harnessed in our attempts to give back, as exemplified, for example, in Bhan's work to describe re-settlement areas as *bastis*, and not "slums."

Examining the production of and the effects of categorical differences helps us understand why moves towards "solidarity" or "unity" do not necessarily disassemble the hierarchical frameworks the authors in this section seek to understand and transform. Feminist approaches to standpoint methodology and situated knowledge enable us to give back by destabilizing the dichotomous differences that can make it difficult to identify and understand the causes and experiences of oppression. Dichotomies form the basis for science's privileged position, and, as we see in the pieces featured in this section, the starting point for giving back through engagement, collaboration, or standing with rests on breaking down these divides. Reading through the giving back pieces from Bhan, Chen, Goldberg, and TallBear, we find that concerns about subject-making and speaking for others in our activism and scholarship do not just apply to research on social justice issues. The potential negative effects of research highlighted by these concerns, and the conditions through which they arise, are important to consider for the accuracy of all types of scientific knowledge production, knowledge that is impactful for the way it contributes to policy making and political mobilizing. Through this kind of reflective work, our research may take many new forms, in which giving back is not just about day to day interactions, but instead builds upon theoretical insights from feminist scholars to transform the impacts of our research. And, hopefully, our research will help constitute relational forms through which both human and non-human lives can flourish.

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