The Bias Paradox in Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology makes two claims. The thesis of epistemic privilege claims that unprivileged social positions are likely to generate perspectives that are "less partial and less distorted" than perspectives generated by other social positions. The situated knowledge thesis claims that all scientific knowledge is socially situated. The bias paradox is the tension between these two claims. Whereas the thesis of epistemic privilege relies on the assumption that a standard of impartiality enables one to judge some perspectives as better than others, the situated knowledge thesis seems to undermine this assumption by suggesting that all knowledge is partial. I argue that a contextualist theory of epistemic justification provides a solution to the bias paradox. Moreover, contextualism enables me to give empirical content to the thesis of epistemic privilege, thereby making it into a testable hypothesis.

Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology is an ambitious and controversial attempt to argue that diversity among inquirers is an epistemic advantage to a community of inquirers. According to Harding, epistemic advantage accrues not to just any kind of diversity but to diversity with respect to the social positions of inquirers and participants in their studies. Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology advances the claim that those who are unprivileged with respect to their social positions are likely to be privileged with respect to gaining knowledge of social reality. According to Harding, unprivileged social positions are likely to generate perspectives that are "less partial and less distorted" than perspectives generated by other social positions (Harding 1991, 121; see also pages 138 and 141). I call this claim the thesis of epistemic privilege. The thesis of epistemic privilege is connected to a particular conception of objectivity, "strong objectivity," which is the view that objective research starts from the lives of unprivileged groups (Harding 1991, 150; see also page 142). Diversity with respect to social positions is beneficial for knowledge-seeking communities because there are many ways of being unprivileged. As Harding explains, "the subject of feminist knowledge – the agent of these less partial and distorted descriptions and explanations – must be multiple and even contradictory" (1991, 284).

The thesis of epistemic privilege has been criticized on two grounds. One objection is that Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology does not provide any standards of epistemic justification that enable one to judge some socially grounded perspectives as better than others. Another objection is that there is no evidence in support of the thesis of epistemic privilege. These two objections are connected. As long as it is not

clear what standards of epistemic justification allow one to judge some socially grounded perspectives as better than others, it is not clear either what kind of evidence we should expect in support of the thesis of epistemic privilege. Let me explain each objection.

The first objection is raised by Louise Antony (1993) and Helen Longino (1999). They argue that the thesis of epistemic privilege is undermined by another thesis in Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology, the thesis that all scientific knowledge is socially situated (Harding 1991, 11; see also pages 119 and 142). I call this the situated knowledge thesis (see also Wylie 2003, 31). The thesis of epistemic privilege relies on the assumption that there is a standard of impartiality that enables one to judge some socially grounded perspectives as "less partial and distorted" than others. The situated knowledge thesis seems to undermine this assumption by suggesting that all knowledge claims are partial in virtue of being grounded on a particular perspective on social reality. As Helen Longino explains, in order to argue that some socially grounded perspectives are better than others, a standpoint epistemologist would have to be able to identify privileged perspectives from a non-interested position, but according to standpoint epistemology, there is no such position (1999, 338; see also Hekman 2000, 24). Louise Antony calls the tension between the thesis of epistemic privilege and the situated knowledge thesis a "bias paradox" (1993, 188-189). In claiming that all knowledge is partial, feminist standpoint epistemology challenges the very notion of impartiality. But by undermining the notion of impartiality, feminist standpoint epistemology is in danger of losing its critical edge (Antony 1993, 189).

In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (1991) Harding is aware of the bias paradox. Instead of abandoning either the thesis of epistemic privilege or the situated knowledge thesis, she tries to solve the bias paradox by introducing a distinction between cultural and epistemological relativism. She claims that "a strong notion of objectivity requires a commitment to acknowledge the historical character of every belief or set of beliefs – a commitment to cultural, sociological, historical relativism" (Harding 1991, 156). And she adds that "it also requires that judgmental or epistemological relativism be rejected" (Harding 1991, 156). However, Harding's attempt to solve the paradox is not successful because the distinction between cultural and epistemological relativism begs the question of what standards of epistemic justification enable her to reject epistemological relativism. Instead of articulating such standards, Harding insists that feminist standpoint epistemology should reject the assumption that there is a "view from nowhere" (Harding 1991, 311). Moreover, Harding is reluctant to say that the goal of scientific inquiry is truth or empirical success. Instead, she suggests that scientific inquiry should progress "away from falsity rather than toward truth" (1991, 185).

Let me turn to the second objection, the claim that there is no evidence to support the thesis of epistemic privilege. This objection is raised by Cassandra Pinnick (1994 and 2005). Pinnick suggests that the thesis of epistemic privilege should be understood as an empirical hypothesis and she claims that feminist literature "describes no effort to accumulate the kind of empirical data that could easily resolve matters in favor of the feminists" (Pinnick 1994, 653; see also Hekman 2000, 23). Ten years after the publication of her critical paper in *Philosophy of Science*, Pinnick (2005) claims that the thesis of epistemic privilege still remains without evidence to support it.

It is not fair to claim that there is no effort to argue for the thesis of epistemic privilege in Harding's *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* Harding presents seven claims in support of the thesis of epistemic privilege: (1) Women's lives have been devalued and neglected as starting points for scientific research and as the generators of evidence for or against knowledge claims (Harding 1991, 121). (2) Women are "strangers" to the social order (Harding 1991, 124). (3) Women's oppression gives them fewer interests in ignorance about the social order (Harding 1991, 125). (4) Women can come to understand hidden aspects of social relations between the genders and the institutions that support these relations by means of struggles to change them (Harding 1991, 127). (5) Women's perspective is from everyday life (Harding 1991, 128). (6) Women's perspective comes from mediating ideological dualisms: nature versus culture (Harding 1991, 130). (7) Women researchers are "outsiders within" (Harding 1991, 131).

However, Harding's arguments fail to be convincing for two reasons. One reason is that the universal extension of her claims about women undermines their plausibility. Certainly, we can think of counter-examples to each claim, for example, women whose lives have not been devalued, women who are not strangers to the social order, or women who have an interest in ignorance about social order, and so on. But even if the extension of Harding's claims about women is narrowed down, her arguments fail to be convincing for another reason. The reason is that it is not clear how these seven claims support the thesis of epistemic privilege, the claim that women's social positions, insofar as they are unprivileged, are likely to generate better perspectives on social reality than other social positions. More specifically, it is not clear what is meant by a perspective in feminist standpoint epistemology. As long as it is not clear what a socially grounded perspective is and what the relevant alternatives are, the thesis of epistemic privilege lacks empirical content.

In this paper I propose a solution to the bias paradox as it concerns feminist standpoint epistemology. In the first section I argue that a contextualist theory of epistemic justification dissolves the bias paradox because it enables one to assess the relative merits of socially grounded perspectives without evoking the image of a "view from nowhere." In the second section I argue that contextualism provides an answer to the question of what kind of evidence we should expect in support of the thesis of epistemic privilege. I show that it is possible to give empirical content to the thesis of epistemic privilege by identifying an assumption or a set of assumptions that manifests a socially grounded perspective in scientific inquiry. Given the scope of the paper, it is not possible to settle the case in favor or against the thesis of epistemic privilege. My aim is rather to illustrate by means of an example what kind of evidence is relevant for the thesis of epistemic privilege.

A CONTEXTUALIST THEORY OF EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

In this section, I argue that the bias paradox is generated by a foundationalist theory of epistemic justification and it dissolves as soon as we adopt a contextualist theory of epistemic justification. First, I explain what a contextualist theory of epistemic justification is and how it differs from a foundationalist theory of epistemic justification. Second, I

argue that the bias paradox is rooted in a foundationalist theory of epistemic justification. Third, I argue that the bias paradox dissolves as soon as we adopt a contextualist theory of epistemic justification because a contextualist theory of epistemic justification enables one to assess the relative merits of socially grounded perspectives without evoking the image of a "view from nowhere."

As Michael Williams defines it, a contextualist theory of epistemic justification is the view that epistemic justification takes place in a context of assumptions that function as default entitlements (2001, 226-227). A contextualist theory of epistemic justification includes two further assumptions. One assumption is that default entitlements can be articulated and challenged, but only by a recontextualization that involves assumptions of its own (Williams 2001, 227). Another assumption is that recontextualization can go on indefinitely. As Williams explains, this is the open-endedness of inquiry, not a vicious regress of justification (2001, 227).

At first glance, contextualism may appear to be a form of epistemic relativism, which holds that epistemic justification is relative to some framework of assumptions. I call this form of epistemic relativism "framework-relativism." However, contextualism is not framework-relativism because default entitlements are not plain assumptions. Default entitlements are adopted with a commitment to defend them when they are challenged with contrary evidence or other arguments. As Williams explains, contextualism implies a default and challenge model of epistemic justification (2001, 25). In a default and challenge model, an entitlement to one's belief is the default position but one has a duty to defend or revise one's belief as soon as it is challenged with appropriate arguments (Williams 2001, 25 and 149). So, whereas both contextualism and framework-relativism hold the view that epistemic justification is relative to some context, only framework-relativism holds the view that contexts are "frameworks of ultimate commitments" (2001, 224-225). In contextualism, no context includes ultimate commitments that are beyond criticism (Williams 2001, 226-227). When someone challenges an assumption that functions as a default entitlement, an inquiry is shifted to another context where the challenged assumption is either defended, modified, or abandoned (Williams 2001, 227). The person who challenges a default entitlement has a duty to carry the burden of proof. This means that she has to refer to another context of default entitlements. This is the process of recontextualization.

Foundationalism is the view that a belief is justified if and only if it is either itself basic or inferentially connected (in some appropriate way) to other justified beliefs (Williams 2001, 164). Foundationalism makes two further assumptions. The first assumption is that there are basic beliefs, that is, beliefs that are in some sense justifiably held without resting on further evidence (Williams 2001, 164). The second assumption is that there are beliefs that in virtue of their content are fitted to play the role of basic beliefs (Williams 2001, 164). Contextualism is consistent with the first assumption, the view that there are beliefs that are justified without resting on further evidence. However, contextualism rejects the second assumption, the view that some beliefs are basic beliefs in virtue of their content alone. In contextualism, those beliefs that are justified without resting on further evidence have this epistemic status in virtue of functioning as default entitlements, not in virtue of their content alone. Therefore, these beliefs are more appropriately called default

entitlements than basic beliefs. Moreover, whereas basic beliefs in foundationalism are assumed to be basic in every context of inquiry, default entitlements in contextualism are not assumed to have this epistemic status in every context. Some default entitlements may be cross-contextual but their epistemic status is nevertheless context-dependent.

Let me turn to the question of how the bias paradox is related to a foundationalist theory of epistemic justification. Recall that the bias paradox is the tension between the thesis of epistemic privilege and the situated knowledge thesis. The thesis of epistemic privilege relies on the assumption that there is a standard of impartiality which enables one to claim that some socially grounded perspectives are better than others. The situated knowledge thesis seems to undermine this assumption by suggesting that all knowledge claims are partial. I argue that there is a contradiction between the thesis of epistemic privilege and the situated knowledge thesis if a standard of impartiality is understood in accordance with a foundationalist theory of epistemic justification. By this I mean that a standard of impartiality is understood to involve basic beliefs. Clearly, the basic beliefs of foundationalism are not situated knowledge claims because they are basic in virtue of their content and they have this epistemic status in every context of inquiry. They are non-situated knowledge claims. Thus, it is impossible to reconcile the view that there are basic beliefs with the claim that all knowledge is situated. And therefore, if we adopt foundationalism, there is a contradiction between the thesis of epistemic privilege and the situated knowledge thesis.

However, if we adopt contextualism, then the bias paradox dissolves. In contextualism, a standard of impartiality is provided by some context of default entitlements. Default entitlements cannot be identified on the basis of their content alone. They may be empirical beliefs which have not been contested so far. Or they may be epistemic values such empirical adequacy, internal coherence, consistency with well-established bodies of knowledge, and explanatory power. Or they may be moral and social values which are relevant for epistemic justification. Moral and social values can be relevant for epistemic justification insofar as they give a reason to consider certain kinds of evidence as relevant for a hypothesis or a theory (Longino 1990; Anderson 1995 and 2004). The crucial thing is that default assumptions are adopted with a commitment to defend them when they are challenged with contrary evidence or other arguments. Even though some default assumptions may be cross-contextual, they are not assumed to function as default entitlements in every context of inquiry. Thus, they are situated knowledge claims. And therefore, if we adopt contextualism, there is no contradiction between the thesis of epistemic privilege and the situated knowledge thesis.

The image of a "view from nowhere" is also a reflection of foundationalism since a "view from nowhere" is best thought of as a set of basic beliefs, beliefs that have this epistemic status in every context of inquiry. Thus, foundationalism gives rise to a dilemma which suggests that we have to choose between two alternatives, either framework-relativism (the view that epistemic justification is relative to some framework of assumptions) or a "view from nowhere." This is the dilemma that Harding struggles with when she aims to reject both epistemological relativism (Harding 1991, 156) and a "view from nowhere" (Harding 1991, 311). Contextualism reveals that this dilemma is false. We do not have to choose between these two alternatives because there is a third alternative. A third alternative

is the view that epistemic justification is relative to a context of default entitlements. A context of default entitlements provides some standards of epistemic justification which enable one to assess the relative merits of two or more socially grounded perspectives. A context of default entitlements is not just another framework of assumptions. The reason for this is that default entitlements are adopted with a commitment to defend or revise them when they are challenged with contrary evidence or other arguments. A context of default assumptions is not a "view from nowhere" either. The reason for this is that default assumptions are not the basic beliefs of foundationalism. Therefore, contextualism enables one to assess the relative merits of socially grounded perspectives without referring to a "view from nowhere." The bias paradox is not a paradox at all.

THE QUESTION OF EVIDENCE

Next, I turn to the question of what counts as evidence in support of the thesis of epistemic privilege. The thesis of epistemic privilege claims that unprivileged social positions are likely to generate better perspectives on social reality than other social positions. In order to give empirical content to this thesis we have to specify what a socially grounded perspective is and what the relevant alternatives are to which we compare it. In this section I introduce a case study to argue that we can identify an assumption that manifests inquirers' perspective on a subject matter of inquiry as well as a relevant alternative against which we can assess the relative merits of a socially grounded perspective. Also, I argue that the perspective chosen in my example is better than the alternative perspective and I present a contextualist analysis of my argument.

My example is a study on gender discrimination in the academia. The study is authored by my colleagues Saija Katila and Susan Meriläinen at Helsinki School of Economics and it has been published in a journal *Gender, Work and Organization* in 1999. The title of the paper is "A serious researcher or just another nice girl? Doing gender in a male-dominated scientific community." The major thesis of the paper is that women academics encounter subtle forms of discrimination which maintain gender inequalities in the academia systematically if unintentionally. The authors' aim is not so much to seek extensive evidence for this general hypothesis as to give empirical content to the theoretical notion of "subtle forms of discrimination" by arguing that certain incidents they themselves have encountered fall into this category. The paper is a qualitative study that could function as a preliminary step towards a quantitative study which aims to test a general hypothesis.

In this study a socially grounded perspective is manifested in the choice of the key concept of the study, the notion of "subtle forms of discrimination." By subtle forms of gender discrimination Katila and Meriläinen refer to those forms of gender discrimination that are embedded in everyday practices and are not widely recognized as harmful (1999, 165). Yet they are forms of gender discrimination insofar as their impact on women academics' motivation and self-confidence is negative (Katila and Meriläinen 1999, 167). For example, subtle forms of gender discrimination include such phenomena as drawing attention to women's gender in an inappropriate way in a professional context and showing less respect for female scholars than male scholars (Katila and Meriläinen

1999, 167-168). The authors' choice of the concept of "subtle forms of discrimination" reflects a socially grounded perspective because the choice is motivated by their feminist values. The authors emphasize that their study is part of their attempt to reform everyday practices in academic organizations (Katila and Meriläinen 1999, 165). However, their argument for the claim that women academics face subtle forms of discrimination is based on their evidence. The authors' evidence consists of seven narratives which are constructed of incidents that have occurred to them during one academic year (Katila and Meriläinen 1999, 166). Feminist values do not determine whether there is any evidence of subtle forms of gender discrimination. Nor do they determine how much such evidence can be found. Instead, feminist values function as a reason to consider certain kind of evidence as relevant for a study on gender discrimination. This is why it is appropriate to say that feminist values ground a perspective on gender discrimination, whereas it is not appropriate to say that they ground a hypothesis on gender discrimination.

In order to show how this case study supports the thesis of epistemic privilege, it is necessary to compare Katila's and Meriläinen's perspective on gender discrimination to a relevant alternative. Such an alternative can be found in a classic study on gender discrimination in the academia, Jonathan Cole's book *Fair Science: Women in the Scientific Community* (1987), first published in 1979. Cole makes a distinction between two kinds of stratification process in science, a process of discrimination and a process of self-selection (1987, 13). He argues that unequal numbers of men and women in the sciences are not sufficient evidence of gender discrimination because unequal numbers can result from a process of self-selection (1987, 13). It is possible that women are underrepresented in the sciences simply because they do not pursue careers in the sciences or they are not sufficiently persistent in this pursuit. Cole defines discrimination as "residual sex inequality" (1987, 50). By this he means that discrimination is the amount of inequality that cannot be explained by gender differences in scientific education and productivity. Cole assumes that insofar as there are gender differences in scientific education and productivity, they result from processes of self-selection. This assumption functions as a default entitlement in his study since he does not present any evidence in its support. The major result in Cole's study is that unequal numbers of men and women in the sciences are for most part an outcome of self-selection rather than discrimination (1987, 86).

I argue that the perspective chosen by Katila and Meriläinen (1999) twenty years after the publication of Cole's book is superior to Cole's (1987) perspective on gender discrimination for two reasons. One reason is that the concept of "subtle forms of discrimination" extends the study of gender discrimination to social processes that fall outside the scope of Cole's study. Cole's concept of discrimination as "residual sex inequality" focuses on hiring and promotion as situations where gender discrimination can take place. It casts a shadow on those social processes that generate gender differences in scientific education and productivity by influencing women's motivation, confidence in their capabilities, opportunities for collaboration, and resources for research. Katila's and Meriläinen's choice of the concept of "subtle forms of discrimination" indicates that they do not consider the issue of gender discrimination to have been settled by the result of Cole's study, the claim that unequal numbers of men and women in the sciences are an outcome of self-selection rather than discrimination. Instead, they challenge

the assumption that gender differences in scientific education and productivity are an outcome of self-selection by arguing that they themselves have encountered subtle forms of gender discrimination. After this challenge, Cole's assumption can no longer function as a default entitlement since it is possible that gender differences in scientific education and productivity are not only an outcome of self-selection but also an outcome of subtle forms of discrimination. Thus, Katila and Meriläinen shift the debate on gender discrimination to another context where the category of relevant evidence is wider than it is in Cole's study, including not only evidence on gender differences in hiring and promotion but also evidence on those social processes that generate gender differences in scientific education and productivity.

Another reason why Katila's and Meriläinen's (1999) perspective is superior to Cole's (1987) perspective is that the former gives a more complex and accurate account of agency and responsibility than the latter. Cole's concept of discrimination as "residual sex inequality" locates agency and responsibility for gender discrimination at those who are in charge of hiring and promotion. Similarly, the concept of "self-selection" locates agency and responsibility for gender differences in scientific education and productivity in women who are assumed to lack motivation and persistence for a career in the sciences. Katila's and Meriläinen's concept of "subtle forms of discrimination" introduces a more complex distribution of agency and responsibility. "Subtle forms of discrimination" are an unintended outcome of certain actions and social arrangements, and their impact on women academics depends on how women interpret and analyze these events. Gender discrimination is understood as an outcome of a complex process of interaction where there are neither malicious agents nor helpless victims of discrimination. Insofar as there are subtle forms of gender discrimination, this complex account of agency and responsibility is more accurate than Cole's account. A complex and more accurate account of agency and responsibility is better than a simple and less accurate one because it serves better the practical goal of inquiry, in this case, the goal of applying research results to reform everyday practices in academic organizations. A complex and accurate account serves this practical goal better because it challenges all participants to reflect on their behavior without blaming a single instance for gender discrimination.

Let me summarize the argument I have presented so far. I have argued that it is possible to identify an assumption that manifests a socially grounded perspective in scientific inquiry. However, this requires that we focus on a particular subject matter of inquiry. In my example a socially grounded perspective can be identified with the decision to prefer one concept of gender discrimination over an alternative concept. In other examples a socially grounded perspective could be manifested in other kinds of decision. But in order to make sense of socially grounded perspectives, we have to specify "perspective on what." Also, specifying a subject matter of inquiry is necessary for us to determine the set of relevant alternatives against which we can assess the relative merits of a socially grounded perspective. In my case study, I have picked up only one relevant alternative, the concept of discrimination as "residual sex inequality," to function as a contrast to the concept of "subtle forms of discrimination." Moreover, specifying a subject matter of inquiry helps one determine what ways of being unprivileged are relevant for inquiry. Academic women in Finland have many privileges but they can be unprivileged with respect to

certain resources in certain situations. Katila's and Meriläinen's (1999) perspective on gender discrimination is generated from a social position which is privileged with respect to some resources (e.g., being white and a member of a dominant ethnic group) and unprivileged with respect to other resources (e.g., not receiving recognition for one's work). Thus, in order to give empirical content to the thesis of epistemic privilege, we have to focus on a particular subject matter of inquiry.

I have also argued that the perspective chosen in my example is better than the alternative perspective. In the first part of my argument I appealed to the epistemic value of empirical adequacy. I argued that the two concepts of discrimination imply different conceptions of relevant evidence of gender discrimination in academia. The concept of discrimination as "residual sex inequality" implies that evidence on gender differences in hiring and promotion is relevant for determining whether there is gender discrimination in academia. The concept of "subtle forms of discrimination" implies a wider conception of relevant evidence, including not only evidence on hiring and promotion but also evidence on those social processes that generate gender differences in scientific education and productivity. The concept of discrimination as "residual sex inequality" with its narrow conception of relevant evidence is empirically adequate only as long as one assumes that gender differences in scientific education and productivity are an outcome of self-selection and not of discrimination. As soon as this assumption is challenged, the debate on gender discrimination shifts to another context of epistemic justification where a wider conception of relevant evidence is empirically more adequate than a narrow one.

In the second part of my argument I appealed to moral and social values. I argued that the concept of subtle forms of discrimination is better than the alternative concept because it enables inquirers to give a more complex and accurate account of agency and responsibility than the alternative concept. Consequently, it serves better the practical goal of reforming everyday practices in academic organizations. In this part of the argument, the moral and social values are equality and the idea that social scientific research should be useful for social reform. These values are shared not only by Katila and Meriläinen (1999) but also by Cole (1987).

The argument I have presented in this section is an illustration of how contextualism can be used to define what counts as evidence for the thesis of epistemic privilege. In the previous section I argued that contextualism liberates us from the assumption that we have to evoke "a view from nowhere" in order to be able to compare two or more socially grounded perspectives. In order to compare socially grounded perspectives, we have to specify a context of epistemic justification, not to pretend that our arguments reflect "a view from nowhere." This is precisely what I have done in this section. First, I have specified a context of epistemic justification by focusing on a particular subject matter of inquiry, gender discrimination in the academia. This move enables me to give empirical content to the thesis of epistemic privilege. Second, I have specified a context of epistemic justification further by appealing to certain values in my argument, the epistemic value of empirical adequacy, the moral value of equality, and the idea that social scientific research should serve social reform. These three values function as default entitlements in my argument for the claim that the perspective chosen in my example is better than

the alternative perspective. These values could be defended or revised in case they are challenged with appropriate arguments. Therefore, my argument is consistent with contextualism. In contextualism, the relative merits of socially grounded perspectives are necessarily evaluated in some context of default entitlements. No one is expected to defend the thesis of epistemic privilege in all contexts of epistemic justification.

The controversy on feminist standpoint epistemology is not only about the question of whether there is or is not evidence in support of the thesis of epistemic privilege; it is also about the question of what kind of evidence is relevant for the thesis of epistemic privilege. When Pinnick (2005) claims that there is no evidence to support the thesis of epistemic privilege, she seems to expect that feminist epistemologists present extensive data about the relative numbers of women in scientific communities and the success of these communities in achieving their cognitive ends. As she explains, "we have no data that would test the strength of the hypothesis as asserting a causal relationship between women and cognitive ends" (Pinnick 2005, 108). In light of this conception of relevant evidence, it may seem that a contextually grounded case study, like the one I have presented in this section, is not much of evidence in support of the thesis of epistemic privilege, but as Pinnick says, mere "anecdotal reportage" (2005, 114).

Pinnick's (2005) conception of relevant evidence rests on an assumption that I have challenged in this section. This assumption is that it is not relevant to pay attention to the content of any particular socially grounded perspective when we test the thesis of epistemic privilege.[1] In this section I have challenged this assumption by presenting a case study where it is relevant to specify the content of a socially grounded perspective in order to be able to decide whether the case study supports the thesis of epistemic privilege. In terms of contextualism, this challenge means that Pinnick's conception of relevant evidence does not function as a default entitlement. Therefore, it should not be assumed at the outset that contextually grounded case studies, like the one I have presented here, are mere "anecdotes."

CONCLUSIONS

For a long time feminist standpoint epistemology has relied on the power of visual and spatial images such as "perspectives" and "standpoints." The very term "standpoint" evokes an image of a position where one stands and views the object of inquiry from a particular "perspective" (Pohlhaus 2002, 288). Even though this image has been fruitful in feminist epistemology, it is time to acknowledge that it creates more problems than it solves. One problem is that it imports a foundationalist theory of epistemic justification into feminist epistemology. The visual and spatial image of a "standpoint" easily leads us into thinking that we need a "view from nowhere" in order to be able to compare different perspectives. I have argued that a contextualist theory of epistemic justification offers an alternative to a "view from nowhere." A context of default entitlements provides a "situated" standard of impartiality that enables us to assess the relative merits of two or more socially grounded perspectives. Another problem generated by visual and spatial images is that it is not clear what we assess when we assess socially grounded perspectives. I have argued that it is possible to identify and evaluate an assumption that manifests

a socially grounded perspective. This requires that we specify a context of epistemic justification.

I have not yet said anything about standpoints and how they differ from perspectives. So, let me explain what a standpoint is in a contextualist theory of epistemic justification. In contextualism, epistemic justification takes place in a context of default entitlements. In any context, some assumptions are likely to function as default entitlements simply in virtue of the fact that no one has yet challenged them in an appropriate way. This may be due to the fact that scientific communities are dispersed in institutions and societies that have limited the access of many social groups into scientific education and profession in many ways. Contextualism suggests that opening a community to wider participation as well as to outside criticism increases the likelihood that some default assumptions are challenged in appropriate ways. The more diversity there is in a scientific community, the more likely it is that its default assumptions are challenged, and consequently either defended, modified, or abandoned. So, I suggest that a standpoint is a commitment to diversity in a scientific community.

To summarize, a socially grounded perspective is not simply a view from a social position. It is a matter of doing research with certain moral and social values. Also a standpoint involves moral and social values, but moral and social values have a different function in a standpoint from the one they have in a socially grounded perspective. A standpoint is a matter of building scientific communities which are committed to diversity and responsive to criticism coming from other communities. So, whereas a socially grounded perspective is something that an individual can realize in her inquiry, a standpoint is a community achievement.[2]

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NOTES

[1] It seems to me that Pinnick (2005) conflates the thesis of epistemic privilege with another thesis, the thesis of "*automatic* epistemic privilege" (see Wylie 2003, 28; italics mine). The thesis of automatic epistemic privilege is the assumption that women know some things better simply in virtue of their social position (Wylie 2003, 28). This thesis suggests that we do not have to pay attention to the content of any particular socially grounded perspective in order to decide whether socially grounded perspectives adopted by women are better than other relevant perspectives. As Wylie points out, it is not clear that anyone who has advocated a feminist standpoint epistemology has endorsed the thesis of automatic epistemic privilege (2003, 28).

[2] My contextualist understanding of "standpoint" is consistent with some claims Harding makes about standpoints. Harding emphasizes that a standpoint is not the same as the social position occupied by an inquirer or a participant in her study (1991, 123). She stresses that taking a standpoint is a matter of moral and political commitment (1991, 126-127). And she suggests that a standpoint is a collective achievement (1991, 127).

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