Standpoint Epistemology and Epistemic Peerhood: A Defense of Epistemic Privilege

ABSTRACT: *Standpoint epistemology is committed to the view that some epistemic advantage can be drawn from the position of powerlessness. Call this the* epistemic privilege thesis. *This thesis stands in need of explication and support. In providing that explication and support, I first distinguish between two readings of the thesis: the thesis that marginalized social locations confer some epistemic advantages (the epistemic advantage thesis) and the thesis that marginalized standpoints generate better, more accurate knowledge (the standpoint thesis). I then develop the former by appealing to the notion of epistemic peers available in the disagreement literature. I next turn to the latter thesis, arguing that consciousness-raising plays an analogous role in the achievement of a standpoint as training does in the achievement of expertise. The upshot of this analysis is that it clarifies that while marginalization is necessary (though not sufficient) for epistemic advantage, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for epistemic privilege.*

KEYWORDS: standpoint epistemology, epistemic privilege, epistemic peerhood, consciousness-raising, expertise

Introduction

If the engine in your car starts to sputter on your drive home from work, you might consult a mechanic. If you are suffering from a cold you cannot seem so shake, you might think it wise to seek out a doctor. Mechanics and doctors, experts that they are, are better positioned than those who are not to offer a diagnosis. In many cases, it may be clear who the experts are, and we may understand the processes (such as specialized training) by which their expertise is earned.

But now imagine that you have been contracted to redesign a city block so that it is accessible to people with physical disabilities. Presumably, you are the expert—after all, that is why you have been offered the contract. But, assuming you are without such disabilities, are you as equally well positioned as someone who *does* live with such disabilities to determine what might make the city block more accessible?

Standpoint epistemology, a school of thought that holds that social identity is (in some cases) relevant to epistemic positioning, speaks to such questions. Though standpoint epistemology is comprised of a cluster of theses that aim to demonstrate the epistemic relevance of social features, the *epistemic privilege thesis* is of particular interest. This thesis holds that social disadvantages may

afford one some epistemic advantages. Thus, to answer the question posed above, the standpoint theorist might argue that someone with disabilities is better positioned to assess what work needs to be done to make the city block more accessible for folks like themselves.

In this respect, the standpoint epistemologist treats those with social disadvantages *as if* they are experts, like doctors or mechanics. Of course, for such a claim to be plausible, more must be said about the nature and source of this expertise. In what follows, I offer that intervention.

As I detail below, a survey of the standpoint literature reveals some ambiguities in the literature with respect to the epistemic privilege thesis. Thus, I propose distinguishing between two versions of the epistemic privilege thesis that have been run together in discussions of standpoint theory. One thesis pertains to the epistemic advantages of a marginalized social location (sometimes called the *inversion thesis* or *epistemic advantage thesis* (Wylie 2003; Ashton 2019; Dror 2022). The other speaks of the epistemic privilege of marginalized standpoints rather than social locations (what is sometimes referred to as the 'standpoint thesis' [Tanesini 2019]).

In order to further flesh out what the epistemic advantage of marginalization amounts to, I appeal to the peer disagreement literature on *epistemic peerhood*. Just as epistemic peerhood is defined in terms of evidential or cognitive *equality*, I define epistemic advantage in terms of evidential or cognitive *superiority*. Marginalization may be epistemically advantageous in that it may place one in a position to gather more evidence (evidential superiority) or to develop certain beneficial epistemic virtues and habits (cognitive superiority).

These epistemic advantages are distinct, however, from the epistemic privilege of marginalized standpoints, as is evident in the process by which these standpoints are achieved. Marginalized standpoints must be *achieved* through the practice of *consciousness-raising*, a process that is roughly comparable to the sort of training that facilitates expertise within a domain. Although there are certain epistemic advantages endogenous to marginalization, marginalized standpoints can be achieved by the marginalized and non-marginalized alike.

However, while marginalization may be necessary (but not sufficient) for epistemic advantage, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for the epistemically privileged knowledge made available from marginalized standpoints.

Insights into Standpoint Theory

For the sake of simplicity, standpoint epistemology can be understood as consisting of three theses: (1) the situated knowledge thesis, (2) the epistemic privilege thesis, and (3) the achievement thesis. It is important to understand each thesis independently and how they interact because it makes both versions of the epistemic privilege thesis more plausible. Two questions present themselves to those who defend the epistemic privilege thesis: (1) Why think that social disadvantage might confer some epistemic advantage? (2) How does one arrive at an epistemically privileged standpoint? The situated knowledge thesis answers the first, while the achievement thesis answers the second.

Briefly, the situated knowledge thesis holds that features that are typically taken to be epistemically irrelevant because non-epistemic, features such as one's social identity and the material conditions of one's life, influence the sorts of experiences subjects are likely to have and, in turn, shape and limit what we know (Hartsock 1983: 285; Haraway 1988; Wylie 2003: 31; Intemann 2010: 783–85; Tanesini 2019). Thus, for instance, sexism may be more apparent to someone who is accustomed to experiencing sexism than someone who is not. It is in this respect that we might say social identity 'puts one in a position to know' (or not know), in that our location within a social hierarchy places us in a position to have certain experiences and material conditions, and to have (or lack) the conceptual resources needed to understand those experiences (Wylie 2003: 31).

Though the achievement thesis is given less attention in discussions of standpoint theory, it is central to my argument—in large part because the achievement thesis answers the question of who may achieve a standpoint and how. Marginal social positioning can yield certain epistemic benefits. However, the achievement thesis clarifies that not all is lost for the dominant, for they too can achieve access to epistemically privileged standpoints through the process of *consciousness-raising*. Thus, the achievement thesis is essential to the project of standpoint epistemology in that it clarifies that the privileged knowledge derived from marginalized standpoints is not *in principle* inaccessible to those who are dominantly positioned. An analysis of consciousness-raising that is parallel to the development of expertise makes this point clear.

The thesis that concerns me is that of epistemic privilege. Drawing on the available literature, the epistemic privilege thesis can be understood in two ways. The first is what is sometimes referred to interchangeably as the *inversion thesis* or *epistemic advantage thesis*—the claim that social oppression inversely correlates to epistemic advantage (Dror 2022; Tanesini 2019; Ashton 2019).

For those who are marginalized, the experiential basis of oppression may account for their noticing aspects of the world that are unlikely to be attended to by those who are not marginalized (Smith 1979; Hartsock 1983; Mills 1998, 2007; Alcoff 1999; Dror 2022). The fact of their oppression may also lead the oppressed to develop certain habits of attention (Kukla 2006; Pohlhaus 2011), epistemic virtues (Wylie 2003: 33–34; Medina 2013: 42, 45), or confer motivations to see more clearly (Collins 1986; Alcoff 2007; Mills 2007). No matter the path to epistemic advantage that they identify, however, what these accounts share is the view that oppression makes visible what, from the perspective of those who are not oppressed, is obscured.

Of course, as Lidal Dror observes, these advantages are not guaranteed by social positioning, as the marginalized can 'suffer from false consciousness', 'may have some motivational epistemic *dis*advantages relating to the workings of social marginalization', or may otherwise be 'especially in the sway of ideology' (Dror 2022: 4, 7–8). However, the epistemic advantage thesis remains well motivated in that the oppressed will *tend* to have more evidence (via social experiences of oppression), greater motivations (in virtue of their vulnerability), and better cognitive capacities (as a result of the epistemic virtues that oppression may lead

one to develop) with respect to understanding the nature of oppression and the workings of social marginalization.

Distinct from the epistemic advantage thesis, though sometimes conflated with it (see Wylie 2003; Intemann 2010; Dror 2022) is a separate thesis according to which epistemic privilege is a feature of a standpoint. Thus, a second way of cashing out epistemic privilege involves what Alessandra Tanesini calls the 'standpoint thesis': that some socially situated *standpoints* are epistemically privileged compared to others (Tanesini 2019). Alison Wylie also draws attention to this distinction, writing that '*standpoints* (as opposed to *locations*) have the especially salient advantage that they put the critically conscious knower in a position to grasp the effects of power relations on their own understanding and that of others' (Wylie 2003: 34, Wylie's emphases). Sharon Crasnow also seems to endorse a view of epistemic privilege according to which it is a feature of standpoints: 'Epistemic privilege does not come from viewing things from the perspective of those in subordinate positions, but rather from that perspective *together with* an awareness of social, political, and other factors that maintain the status quo' (Crasnow 2008: 1093–94, my emphasis).

Standpoint theorists argue that it is *marginalized* standpoints that are epistemically privileged, in that they *generate* knowledge that is 'less partial and distorted' (Harding 1992: 454). Nancy Hartsock, arguably the progenitor of feminist standpoint theory, observes that feminist standpoints 'make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy' (Hartsock 1983: 284). Donna Haraway argues that '"subjugated" standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world' (Haraway 1988: 584).

But there is a tension in how some develop the standpoint thesis in particular that leaves open the question of whether the knowledge generated from marginalized standpoints is accessible to the non-marginalized. Philosopher of science Sharon Crasnow writes: 'standpoint theorist [*sic*] claim that marginalization is a necessary but not sufficient condition for their epistemic privilege' (Crasnow 2008: 1092). Contrast this with Maureen Linker, who writes, 'Simply being a part of a group that has historically been oppressed is neither necessary nor sufficient for having epistemic privilege. It is not sufficient because individual group members may not be aware of this history or identify with the group. . . . However it is not a necessary feature of epistemic privilege that one be a member of the group to which one has earned the privilege' (Linker 2014: 69).

Thus, it is a matter of some controversy whether marginalized social positioning is necessary or sufficient either for the epistemic advantage of social locations or for the epistemic privilege characteristic of standpoints. It is this tension that leads some (for example, Hekman 1997; Pinnick 1994, 2005) to criticize the standpoint project. For if evidence is such that it must be *democratically accessible* (Kelly 2008), then it is unclear how we can reconcile this view of evidence with the claim that the marginalized have privileged access to evidence. In short, articulations of the epistemic advantage thesis, and the epistemic privilege thesis, leave unclear whether the dominant are, *in principle*, excluded from these standpoints. Consider, for instance, that Crasnow's (2008) reflection on the relationship

between marginalization and epistemic privilege emerges in a discussion of Collins's (1986) work on the 'outsider within', a particular way of seeing open to Black women. It seems that Crasnow is speaking of the epistemic advantages associated with a social location rather than a standpoint. What I believe we witness in Crasnow (2008) and throughout the standpoint literature is a conceptual slide from the epistemic advantages associated with oppressed social locations to the epistemic privilege that is characteristic of marginalized standpoints. It is necessary to disentangle these threads that have been run together in various discussions of standpoint theory.

For clarity, I refer to the thesis that oppressed social locations confer epistemic advantages as the *epistemic advantage thesis*. The thesis that oppressed standpoints are epistemically superior I refer to as the *epistemic privilege thesis*. I propose thinking of the situated knowledge thesis as providing support for the epistemic advantage, or inversion, thesis. For if social identity makes a difference in what a person experiences and understands, then it is not unreasonable to suggest that it may also confer the epistemic advantages canvassed above. For the sort of epistemic advantages picked out by the inversion thesis, it is therefore reasonable to posit that marginalization is a necessary condition. It is being a Black woman, after all, that generates the experience of the 'outsider within' and the attendant advantages therein (Collins 1986).

The achievement thesis, however, might be understood as providing support for the epistemic privilege of *standpoints*. A standpoint is 'struggled for, achieved, by epistemic agents who are critically aware of the conditions under which knowledge is produced and authorized' (Wylie 2003: 31). Moreover, as Wylie writes, a standpoint may be thought of as a 'critical consciousness' on knowledge production, one that takes into account 'the nature of our social location and the difference it makes epistemically' (2003: 31). Roughly, a standpoint is itself a particular view of the world that takes as its starting point the marginalized lives that form its basis (Harding 1992). It is thus informed by the epistemic advantages associated with social location. As Sandra Harding writes, 'thinking from marginal lives leads one to question the adequacy of conceptual frameworks that the natural and social sciences have designed to explain (for themselves) themselves and the world around them. This is the sense in which marginal lives *ground* knowledge for standpoint approaches' (Harding 1992: 451, my emphasis).

The epistemic privilege of standpoints captures something *deeper* than the epistemic advantage associated with oppressed social locations, however. This is because standpoints require a critical consciousness on the epistemic insights that a particular social location makes available. As Kristen Intemann writes, 'standpoints do not automatically arise from occupying a particular social location. They are achieved only when there is *sufficient scrutiny and critical awareness of how power structures shape or limit knowledge in a particular context*' (Intemann 2010: 785, my emphases). Consider that it is one thing to notice sexism because of how one is socially positioned, for instance, and another thing entirely to appreciate how (and that) sexism informs one's treatment in the workplace, the reception of one's testimony, or one's approach to a particular research question or design problem.

The achievement thesis thus distinguishes the epistemic privilege associated with standpoints from the epistemic advantages associated with social locations. Further, it specifies both that marginalized standpoints and the epistemically privileged knowledge generated from that standpoint represent an achievement that is earned through a process of collective struggle. What both the epistemic advantage and epistemic privilege thesis share, however, is that they take it that marginalization is not only epistemically relevant, but also epistemically beneficial.

Below, I both clarify why marginalization is epistemically advantageous and explore why we might think marginalized standpoints are epistemically privileged (*and* the process by which such a standpoint is achieved). An upshot of this analysis is that it will also answer an objection often posed to standpoint theorists regarding the accessibility of knowledge claims generated from marginalized standpoints.

From Epistemic Peerhood to Epistemic Advantage

There are a number of theoretical arguments (Wu 2023; Saint-Croix 2020) and empirical cases (Intemann 2009; Jeppesen and Lakhani 2010) that motivate claims of epistemic advantage, many of which have been canvassed above (and I explore in greater detail below). Yet, despite this, the epistemic advantage (inversion) *and* epistemic privilege (standpoint) theses remain controversial. One way to make the epistemic advantage thesis more plausible is to situate it in terms familiar from the literature on disagreement in conventional epistemology. In particular, my aim here is to explicate the *epistemic advantage* thesis in terms of epistemic peerhood. Doing so enables standpoint theorists to demonstrate that marginalization yields an epistemic advantage in that it has an impact on what evidence one has and how one reasons with that evidence. I thus turn to a discussion of epistemological literature on peerhood.

The concept of epistemic peerhood is central in discussions of peer disagreement in part because whether we ought to respond to a disagreement by rationally adjusting our confidence or by remaining steadfast in our beliefs depends on whether the person with whom we disagree is a peer (see Matheson [2015] for a helpful survey of the disagreement literature). To illustrate, consider this example, popularized by David Christensen (2007: 193) and modified here:

> Mental Math. My friend and I have been going out to dinner for many years. We always tip 20% and divide the bill equally, and we always do the math in our heads. We're quite accurate, but on those occasions where we've disagreed in the past, we've been right equally often. This evening seems typical, in that I don't feel unusually tired or alert, and neither my friend nor I had more wine or coffee than usual. I get $43 in my mental calculation, and become quite confident of this answer. But then my friend says she got $45.

How I ought to respond to the disagreement in this case turns on whether I take my friend to be an epistemic peer. But the question remains: how do I determine if she is my peer?

The answer to this question—and to what makes someone an epistemic peer—is far from settled in the epistemological literature on disagreement (for a survey of competing approaches, see Gelfert 2011). However, for the purposes of drawing out one possible characterization of epistemic advantage, I focus on the account of peerhood as developed by Thomas Kelly (2005) and Jennifer Lackey (2010) and which takes as its starting point the view that an epistemic peer is 'someone who is, somewhat roughly, antecedently as likely as you are to get things right (on matters of the relevant kind)' (Enoch 2010: 956. See also Elga 2007; and, arguably, Christensen 2007). This leaves us with an even more difficult question: How am I to determine whether my friend is antecedently as likely to get things right as I am?

Kelly suggests that an epistemic peer is someone who is '[equal] with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on the question' (Kelly 2005: 174). A person who satisfies this condition is an *evidential equal*. Jennifer Lackey suggests a possible second condition for epistemic peerhood, writing that an epistemic peer is someone who is 'equally competent, intelligent, and fair-minded in their assessment of the evidence and arguments that bear on the question' (Lackey 2010: 302). I confess consternation as to what Lackey might mean by 'equally intelligent and fair-minded'. As such, I center my attention on her stipulation that an epistemic peer is someone who is 'equally competent', as I take it there is a shared intuitive grasp for what it means to be competent with respect to one's evidence. Lackey calls anyone who satisfies this condition a *cognitive equal*. I take it that this condition is satisfied when a person is capable of adopting the confidence their evidence makes rational, and believing, on the basis of this evidence, what one has a rational permission to infer.

Applying these conditions to the Mental Math case, I can establish that my friend is my epistemic peer if she is equally as likely as I am to get things right, and this is true when she

1. Has equally strong evidence relevant to the question at hand, and
2. Is equally competent with respect to the evidence relevant to the question at hand.

If my friend fails to be either my evidential or cognitive equal, then it follows that she is not my epistemic peer.

Epistemic advantage can be defined in such a way that it parallels this characterization of epistemic peerhood. Whereas Christensen, Elga, Enoch, and others have suggested that peerhood is satisfied when someone is equally likely as you are to be correct, I suggest that the conditions for epistemic advantage are satisfied when someone is *more likely to be correct*. This condition is satisfied when a person

1. Has a greater body of evidence relevant to the question at hand, or
2. Is more competent with respect to the evidence relevant to the question at hand.

Thus, a person is epistemically advantaged with respect to some question when she is either an *evidential* or *cognitive superior*.

Consider how this applies to a revised case of Mental Math. Imagine in this revised scenario my friend has indeed had more wine than usual, enough to impair her ability to calculate the bill. Call this version Mental Math*. In Mental Math*, I am *epistemically advantaged* with respect to the question of our total owed. In this scenario, I am cognitively superior: she is impaired, and I am not. At the very least, in this version we are not cognitive equals. We can just as easily modify the case so that my friend satisfies the second condition of peerhood but fails the first. For instance, we might imagine that she ventured a guess at the total without looking at the bill: then I would be her evidential superior.

That some people are epistemically advantaged with respect to a domain is not, by itself, a controversial claim. In fact, examples of epistemic advantage abound in the literature. As Adam Elga (2007) notes, we defer to weather forecasters not merely because we believe they have more information than we have, but also because we believe they have superior judgment with respect to that information. Still further, the concept of epistemic advantage helps us to make sense of a number of other practical cases. Catharine Saint-Croix observes, for instance, that auto mechanics and oncologists are similarly epistemically advantaged in that they have more evidence and reason better with the evidence they have given their training and experience (Saint-Croix 2020: 491).

Epistemologists of all stripes should readily accept the intuition developed here that being an evidential or cognitive superior with respect to some question means one is epistemically advantaged with respect to that question. And yet, for all its apparent plausibility, the standpoint epistemologist's defense of this thesis has been resisted widely. I take this to show that the central controversy regarding the thesis is not about the concept of epistemic advantage itself, but about the suggestion that there is a relationship between epistemic advantage and positions of social marginalization. As I discuss below, marginalization facilitates epistemic advantages, which in turn grounds the epistemic privilege of knowledge produced from marginalized standpoints.

Marginalization as Expertise

We can conceptualize epistemic advantage in terms of epistemic peerhood. Thus, where peerhood is a status indicating that one is an evidential or cognitive equal, epistemic advantage implies that one is either an evidential or cognitive superior. Standpoint epistemology is distinct in that it asserts that marginalization can yield such epistemic advantages.

If we understand marginalization to yield epistemic advantages roughly comparable to the epistemic advantages associated with expert status, like auto mechanics and oncologists, then claims of epistemic advantage should be uncontroversial. However, one might object to my attempt to draw a parallel between the epistemic advantage of experts and the epistemic advantages of life on the margins. It is, of course, obvious that oncologists and auto mechanics are, generally speaking, epistemically advantaged (or, if one prefers, epistemically

superior) in virtue of the training that they receive. Presumably, such training makes an individual more sensitive to evidence that laypersons, who have not undergone such training, might overlook. Moreover, it seems plausible that even when experts and laypersons possess the same evidence—as in the case of a weather forecaster and someone watching their report—the expert may be more competent than the layperson with respect to that evidence, given the skills acquired by the former in training. Social identity, one might object, is not like expertise. Where training allows experts to satisfy the standards for epistemic advantage set out previously, critics might argue that there is nothing that accounts for those who are marginalized satisfying these standards.

Arguably, moreover, the epistemic position of experts is more akin to a standpoint than a social location because expertise, like a standpoint, is an achievement acquired through training, as well as experience. While being oppressed *is* a necessary condition for having some of the experiences that are epistemically advantageous (in that they increase one's evidential base), it is not a sufficient condition for occupying an *epistemically privileged* standpoint, any more than 'being employed as an oncologist' is a sufficient condition for expert status (Saint-Croix 2020: 492). Rather, both require a sort of training, the cultivation of a critical outlook on the experiences one has (and the evidence those experiences make available).

These worries point to two asymmetries: first, between the achievement of expert status and the achievement of a marginalized standpoint; second, and by extension, between epistemic advantage as it applies to experts and the epistemic advantages of oppression. Presumably anyone can become an expert in a subject, given the motivation and opportunity. Thus, the status of experts as epistemically advantaged is acquirable and, by extension, so, too, the knowledge that such a position makes available. Though there is some anecdotal data that suggests changing one's social identity—a gender-transition, for instance—might lead to changes in what one knows about the world (see Boylan 2003), in most cases one cannot simply become another social identity.

Thus, if *epistemic privilege* is, like *epistemic advantage*, understood as a result of or arrived at in virtue of marginalization, then that status is not acquirable by anyone who lacks the relevant positioning, and by extension, neither is the knowledge made available by that standpoint.

Despite this apparent asymmetry, there is reason to think that the process by which one arrives at an epistemically privileged standpoint *is* best understood as a sort of training. Thus, what grounds the analogy between expertise (and the knowledge such expertise makes available), on the one hand, and the epistemic privilege of marginalized standpoints, on the other, is that both require a sort of training.

As I discuss above, the epistemic privilege (or standpoint) thesis applies to standpoints, and membership in a standpoint is achieved through the process of *consciousness-raising*. Consciousness-raising refers to the practice of coming together in groups, identifying commonalities in experience, and developing a critical perspective on those commonalities. By achieving and acting on a shared understanding of these commonalities, one can unmask the ideological misrepresentations that distort (self and public) understanding of that group.

Consciousness-raising succeeds in unmasking these misrepresentations by having participants critically examine the relationship between the social situatedness of members of the group and the experiences those members have in virtue of that situatedness (Ruth 1973; MacKinnon 1989; Wylie 2003). Consciousness-raising, then, involves becoming aware of patterns in experiences, patterns that may escape the attention of others.

One might naturally ask in what respect consciousness-raising is like training. To show that it is, something must be said about *why* training leads one to be epistemically superior (in the domains in which one has received training). But first, better understanding expertise may help us appreciate the process by which such expertise is acquired and why consciousness-raising may function as one such process in the social domain. For this, I turn to work from Alvin Goldman (2001, 2018) on the nature of expertise.

Though Goldman does not speak to the training that leads to expertise, he does offer some insights into what features make one an expert, writing that expertise involves 'a superior quantity or level of knowledge in some domain'; 'an ability to generate new knowledge in answer to questions within the domain'; more than the mere possession of accurate information, it must also include 'a capacity or disposition to deploy or exploit this fund of information to form beliefs in true answers to new questions that may be posed in the domain'; and 'a set of skills or methods for apt and successful deployment of this knowledge to new questions in the domain' (Goldman 2001: 91–92). Thus, as Goldman argues elsewhere, expertise involves both 'the person's knowledge or information, and . . . [their] skill or performance ability' (Goldman 2018: 3; for additional accounts of expertise, see Quast [2018], Goldman [2018], Lackey [2018], or Matheson et al. [2018]). Importantly, Goldman acknowledges that a novice can seek to become an expert 'by improving his epistemic position vis-à-vis the target subject matter, e.g., by acquiring more formal training in the field' (2001: 89). Thus, I believe it is safe to presume that for Goldman, formal training is the process by which one develops the skills and cognitive capacities that facilitate expertise, and training refers to that process by which one improves one's epistemic position. As I show below, consciousness-raising is one such process.

But first consider an example that can be used to reverse engineer *why* training facilitates both skill and cognitive expertise. Imagine, for instance, the highly specialized training that medical doctors receive. This training equips medical practitioners with a more robust conceptual repertoire than is available to laypersons and may include concepts that are more fine-grained and thus pick out a wider body of evidence. Still further, these resources enable one to attend to aspects of the world one might not otherwise notice, or to see them from a new (or varied) perspective(s) (Dreyfus 2017: 149–50, 152). For instance, a doctor and a patient can each read the patient's medical file and see that the patient is experiencing anxiety, an increased heart rate, and a flushed face. But given the specialized training available to doctors and the wide breadth of knowledge this training makes available, the doctor is in a position (where the patient is not) to infer that these symptoms indicate the patient is suffering from high blood

pressure (the patient, however, might think they are merely experiencing panic attacks).

Just as specialized training in a subject can lead one to gather more and better evidence, or provide one with tools that allow one to reason more efficiently with the evidence they have, the same can be said of consciousness-raising. The process of consciousness-raising, and the political struggle it involves, leads to the development of alternative conceptual frameworks and epistemic resources—the tools that help us attend to and interpret aspects of the world—that are sensitive to the experiences of those at the margins (Toole 2021).

Consciousness-raising serves the same function as expertise training in that (1) it equips one with a broader set of conceptual resources, resources that enable one to gather more and better evidence; and (2) it enables one to draw inferences on the basis of one's evidence that might not occur to laypersons. For the marginalized, this process involves becoming aware of patterns of oppression that one experiences in virtue of one's marginalization (Smith 1997; Medina 2013: 46; Mills 1998: 31–32). The next step in consciousness-raising involves the development of conceptual resources to name and attend to the experiences one has *qua* one's position of marginalization (such as colorism: see Fricker 1999; Pohlhaus 2011; Toole 2019). Armed with such resources, those who have consciousness-raised are more likely to notice and attend to aspects of the world picked out by that resource. Thus, as Toole (2019) argues, having a concept like colorism allows one to see that Black actresses on magazines are white-washed; that more roles are made available for light-skinned Black actresses than for dark-skinned ones; and that light-skinned actresses appear on magazine covers more frequently than do their dark-skinned peers. The features of the world picked out by concepts like colorism may, however, escape the notice of anyone who lacks this concept.

But consciousness-raising also leads one to reason better with the evidence that they have. In part, this is because consciousness-raising '[lifts] the veil of false consciousness' (McWeeny 2016: 151) and, to paraphrase Catherine MacKinnon (1989: 96), allows one to experience how one experience one's self. Free of the corrupting influence of false consciousness, which Marx and Engels (2010: 164) describe as a process wherein 'the real motive forces impelling [one] remain unknown to the thinker', consciousness-raising allows one to see these 'real motive forces' and to reason free from the influence of the oppressive system that these forces might otherwise render invisible. Thus, someone who occupies a feminist standpoint might see *as* sexual harassment what someone who does not occupy such a standpoint sees as merely harmless flirtation. This may be true *even if* the latter also has in their conceptual repertoire the concept of sexual harassment. Because of the influence of patriarchy in how we attend to and interpret events, if that person has not consciousness-raised, they may lack the interpretive skills needed to see the event *as* an instance of sexual harassment.

This discussion leads to three important clarifications regarding the epistemic privilege thesis. The first is that membership in a marginalized group is neither necessary nor sufficient for epistemic privilege. The second is that consciousness-raising is a necessary *and* sufficient condition for epistemic

privilege. The third is that an epistemically privileged status is made possible by consciousness-raising because it operates in much the same way as training does, in that it equips one with conceptual resources that make accessible new bodies of evidence and enable one to reason more competently with the evidence they have.

Both the first and second clarifications allow standpoint theorists to avoid the accusation that automatic privilege is attributed to those who are socially marginalized (Wylie 2003: 30). The second point further clarifies that *epistemically privileged standpoints* are accessible both to knowers who sit at the social margins *and* to those who are dominantly positioned socially—as long as they have consciousness-raised. The third clarification specifies why consciousness-raising can plausibly be understood as a path to epistemic privilege.

This still leaves open the question of *why* we ought to think, as standpoint theorists suggest, that standpoints representing marginalized perspectives are *epistemically privileged* over standpoints that represent dominant perspectives.

The Epistemic Superiority of Marginalized Standpoints

In summary, thus far I have done three things: First, I introduced a distinction between the epistemic advantages of marginalized social locations and the epistemic privilege characteristic of marginalized standpoints. Second, I demonstrated that epistemic advantage could be understood through an appeal to epistemic peerhood. Thus, where epistemic peerhood is understood in terms of evidential and cognitive equality, epistemic advantage can best be understood as evidential or cognitive superiority. In this respect, I suggested that the epistemic advantages of marginalization are comparable to those advantages that expertise makes available.

This forced me to the third step: to address an apparent asymmetry between the two, in that training is required to acquire expert status. My answer to this asymmetry was to posit consciousness-raising as a form of training that equips members of a standpoint with more or better evidence or enables them to draw better conclusions from the evidence available.

On my view, marginalized standpoints are epistemically privileged over dominant standpoints. That is to say, knowledge generated from these standpoints '[offers] a more truthful, or less distorted, account of the social world or a deeper understanding of some of its features' (Tanesini 2019: 337). Moreover, anyone occupying a marginalized standpoint will have an epistemic advantage over those who occupy the dominant standpoint, in that they will be evidentially or cognitively superior. This is in virtue of the fact that marginalized standpoints '[provide] the basis for revealing the perversion of both life and thought' that dominant standpoints will represent as natural and non-oppressive (Hartsock 1983: 288).

As an aside, I note that a difficulty that besets standpoint theory is specifying what a standpoint is and determining how to identify who has achieved a standpoint. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to address this difficulty, paradigmatic cases of marginalized standpoints might provide a starting point for scholars interested in pursuing this question further. I take the Combahee River Collective

—a group of Black lesbian feminists working from roughly 1974 to 1980—to be a good case of such a standpoint, as is illustrated by their 1977 statement that drew attention to the epistemic and political deficiencies in both the (white-led) feminist and (male dominated) Black Nationalist movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Combahee River Collective 2015 [1977]).

Now what remains to be done is to address why it is that *marginalized* standpoints are epistemically privileged. That is, how can we make sense of the claim that marginalized standpoints see truths or have access to certain kinds of knowledge unavailable from dominantly situated standpoints (Kukla 2006; McKinnon 2015)? Here Harding is particularly instructive. As she writes, '[s]tarting off thought from these lives provides fresh and more critical questions about how the social order works than does starting off thought from the unexamined lives of members of dominant groups' (1992: 451). But further arguments may clarify *why* starting thought from marginal lives produces the benefits that standpoint theorists claim and why *consciousness-raising* is essential to the epistemically privileged status of knowledge produced from these standpoints.

Some arguments appeal to the *double consciousness* of marginalized perspectives. This argument, which has its origins in the works of Black authors—most notably W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), bell hooks (1984), and Patricia Hill Collins (1986)—captures the idea that, when marginalized, one must see the world from two perspectives—that of the oppressed and that of the oppressor. Members of marginalized groups must both engage with the world from their position of powerlessness and anticipate the way in which the dominant engage with the world (Jaggar 1983; Pohlhaus 2011; McKinnon 2015). The central insight of this view is that because marginalized knowers are vulnerable to dominant knowers, they often must consider how the world (and their actions and beliefs) will be seen from the dominant perspective. The converse relationship does not hold; dominant knowers are not similarly required to 'see' the world or consider things from the marginalized perspective.

Still others appeal to the habits and patterns of attention that marginalization leads one to develop, what Quill Kukla (2006) calls *second natures*. Think of second natures as a tendency or habit to notice certain features, a capacity that one develops either through training or as a result of cumulative experience. In the social domain, a second nature is a persistent mode of engagement with the world in virtue of some aspect of one's social identity. Second natures function as patterns of habituation. As we become attuned to patterns that turn up in our experience, we come to develop a second nature whereby we notice these patterns over time. These patterns of experience modulate our attention, shifting it from certain areas and toward others. Thus, those experiencing a pattern of oppression along one axis will likely notice other instances of oppression as they relate to that axis. Conversely, those who do not experience a pattern of oppression are unlikely to notice oppression.

These features—the dual perspective that marginalization affords and the patterns of attention oppression leads one to develop—and those surveyed above make plausible the claim that there is an epistemic advantage to oppression. Importantly, though these features may be automatic and are had *qua*

marginalization, epistemic privilege is not. Epistemic privilege requires engagement in consciousness-raising to *develop a framework in which these resources and features have epistemic significance*. Consciousness-raising makes this possible because it represents a triumph over *bad ideology*.

Bad ideology refers to structures of thought and practice whose function it is to obscure the truth in order to sustain systems of oppression (Srinivasan 2020). Bad ideology serves to legitimize and justify this oppression, and, in so doing, elides the fact of oppression and injustice from view. Prior to consciousness-raising, 'the whole of the phenomenal framework in and through which the individual receives, classifies, channels, and responds to her experiences' will be shaped by the operative ideological framework (Ruth 1973: 291). As Marx (1978: 164), Louis Althusser (2001 [1970]: 1504), and countless others have observed, operative ideologies interpellate subjects, creating our identities and shaping our consciousness. Thus, ideologies provide the conceptual framework through which we understand and experience our self and form the epistemic background against which we construct our reality (Haslanger 2011: 180). Thus, given the effects of bad ideology, one will understand one's experience in such a way as to confirm the prevailing ideological framework.

Thus, while certain experiences and habits may be endogenous to marginalization, it is consciousness-raising that enables epistemic agents to attend to and interpret these experiences in a way that is not consistent with bad ideology. This in turn motivates the development of a conceptual repertoire that is better suited to attending to and making sense of the experiences one has qua marginalization and within systems of oppression. Consciousness-raising is a route to epistemic privilege, then, because it leads us to develop more robust epistemic resources, resources made accessible through oppositional perspectives and that pierce through the dominant ideology.

This expanded conceptual repertoire will, then, allow one to gather more or better evidence. It does so in part because the concepts we possess determine what aspects of the world we attend to (that is, the bodies of evidence to which we have *access*), and how we see those aspects to which our attention is drawn (that is, how we *interpret* the evidence to which we have access) (Woomer 2017). This means that marginalization may result in a greater body of evidence in two respects. First, marginalized standpoints may have a more robust set of conceptual resources, because they have both the resources disseminated by dominant standpoints, and those resources they have developed to understand their experiences of oppression. Dominant standpoints, however, tend to have only the resources developed from dominant perspectives. Second, because marginalized standpoints possess a more robust set of resources, occupants of that standpoint are likely to notice features of the world that dominant knowers overlook, because they (but not dominant knowers) have the resources needed to understand those features.

In short, then, marginalized standpoints are informed by marginalized perspectives, perspectives that bring with them experiences and habits that dominant standpoints overlook and are inadequate for conceptualizing. That marginalized standpoints have a more robust set of conceptual resources and a

more robust perspective for viewing the world accounts for the epistemically privileged status of these standpoints.

Consequently, marginalized standpoints are epistemically privileged, and those who occupy these standpoints satisfy the conditions for epistemic advantage developed above. Those who occupy marginalized standpoints are evidentially superior in that they have available to them a more robust set of resources that draw their attention to aspects of the world overlooked by those without those resources. They thus have more evidence than those who occupy the dominant standpoint. Moreover, having overcome the pernicious and distorting effects of bad ideology, they are also better positioned to reason with the evidence that they have. They are, therefore, also cognitively superior. Standpoints representing marginalized perspectives are therefore epistemically privileged.

Conclusion

Epistemic advantage can be understood in terms familiar from the epistemological literature on disagreement. By understanding epistemic advantage in terms of epistemic peerhood—defining it as evidential or cognitive superiority—marginalization can be seen to produce many of the same epistemic benefits as expertise. Just as training accounts for the epistemically privileged status of experts, there is a comparable process in standpoint theory, that of consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising is what enables the non-marginalized to occupy a privileged standpoint and to acquire many (if not all) of the epistemic advantages that oppression affords those who are socially marginalized. Though the non-marginalized may never have the phenomenal experience of oppression, for instance, they can acquire evidence of oppression via testimony or observation. Thus, while marginalization may be necessary for some epistemic advantages, it is not sufficient, and it is neither necessary nor sufficient for occupying an epistemically privileged standpoint.

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