FEMINISM *and Method*

Ethnography, Discourse Analysis and Activist Research

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This book is dedicated to
Lionel Cantú
October 7, 1965–May 26, 2002
A generous and insightful soul whose kindness
and lively spirit are sorely missed

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Preface

The work presented in *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research* represents more than twenty years of investigations, self-reflection, and dialogue with other feminist scholars and community activists. As a consequence there are many to thank. First, my special thanks to Emily Clark for her willingness to participate in a dialogue about our work together that is discussed in chapter 10.

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Throughout the book, I include excerpts of my dialogue with many courageous women and other community members in New York, Philadelphia, and Iowa who shared with me their experiences, fears, hopes, and dreams. I am most grateful to them for their willingness to participate in my research with little to gain from it. I also want to acknowledge the many feminist scholars and teachers whose work influenced my development as a feminist researcher, most especially Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding, Nancy Fraser, Myra Marx Ferree, Marilyn Gittell, Judith Lorber, and Gaye Tuchman.

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graphic encounters and acknowledges the powerful role we play in shaping what can be seen.

As my discussion of Collins's and Smith's approaches demonstrates, despite important thematic continuity across the different perspectives on standpoint theorizing, there are a number of critical differences in how different theorists define what constitutes a standpoint and how researchers analyze "experience." I categorize these approaches as follows: standpoint as embodied in social identities, as a communal or relational achievement, and as an axis point of investigation. In the next chapter, I detail these three dimensions and contest a reductive reading of feminist standpoint approaches.

CHAPTER 5

Standpoint Epistemology

Explicating Multiple Dimensions

In this chapter, I outline the multiple dimensions of my methodological approach to materialist feminist standpoint analysis, illustrate its utility for exploring women's political praxis, and highlight the dilemmas of my multidimensional standpoint approach for comparative analysis. While I illustrate each strand of standpoint theorizing with reference to particular authors, some theorists contribute to more than one strand. Furthermore, my presentation should not be viewed as a comprehensive review of standpoint theories more generally. It is designed as an outline of the dimensions of standpoint analysis that I find most useful in constructing a comparative approach to ethnographic research on women's political praxis.

I illustrate the dilemmas I encountered in developing a comparative ethnographic analysis of women's political praxis with my research with community workers from different racial-ethnic backgrounds identified in two very different contexts: (1) in low-income neighborhoods in New York City and Philadelphia interviewed in the mid-1980s and mid-1990s; and (2) in two small towns in rural Iowa interviewed between 1990 and 1996. I discuss this research by exploring community workers' "standpoints" from three points of view: as (1) embodied, (2) constructed in community, and (3) an axis point of investigation. Within each of the three dimensions of standpoint epistemology, ethnographers must explicate how to treat "experience" and negotiate shifting intersections of race, class, and gender as well as account for changes over time in the social, political, and economic context.

In reviewing the literature on the different approaches to standpoint epistemology, I identified a number of powerful connecting links among them. They include the significance of experience for the development of feminist theory and the connection between standpoint theory and the feminist political goals of the women's movement. However, when I explored the implications of different standpoint frameworks for ethnographic research on women's political praxis, I identified crucial differences in the way theorists understand what constitutes a standpoint and how researchers analyze "experience." I categorized these approaches as follows: standpoint as embodied in social identities, as a communal or relational achievement, and as an axis point of investigation.

I begin by outlining in greater detail than in the previous chapters some of the key criticisms of standpoint epistemology leveled by postmodern and poststructural critics and highlight two primary limitations of their critique: (1) failure to address the central goal of standpoint epistemology—namely, to develop alternative methodologies that challenge masculinist and white middle-class bias in traditional scientific and social scientific positivist research strategies; and (2) misunderstanding of the multiple dimensions of "standpoint" embedded in standpoint theoretical perspectives. I review some of the main points of connection among these differing standpoint approaches with particular attention to what each approach "counts as experience" (Scott 1992) for, as Scott argues, this "is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political" (p. 37). The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate the power of materialist standpoint methodology for ethnographic research on women's political praxis by explicating the multiple dimensions of feminist standpoint epistemology.

Standpoint Epistemology and Its Critics

Most theorists associated with feminist standpoint epistemology (for example Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith) begin their analyses by questioning the "truth claims" of positivist research methods and by offering methodological strategies linked to feminist political praxis. Sandra Harding (1991) seeks to reinvent science from the point of view of feminist and postcolonial theoretical and political concerns.[1] Nancy Hartsock (1987) argues that "an analysis which begins from the sexual division of labor . . . could form the basis for an analysis of the real structures of women's oppression, an analysis which would not require that one sever biology from society, nature from culture, an analysis which would expose the ways women both participate in and oppose their own subordination" (p. 175).

Few of the most vocal postmodern critics of standpoint theory offer methodological alternatives to those posed by standpoint theorists. Those who do offer alternative research strategies often limit their approaches to textual or discursive modes of analysis. For example, following an assessment of the limits and possibilities of feminist standpoint epistemologies for generating a "global social analytic," literary scholar Rosemary Hennessy (1993) posits "critique" as materialist feminist "reading practice" (p. 91).[2] She then argues that "critique understands consciousness as ideologically produced" (p. 92) and therefore effectively resists the charge of essentialism. In revaluing feminist standpoint epistemology for her method, she reconceptualizes "feminist standpoint" as a "critical discursive practice, an act of reading which intervenes in and rearranges the construction of meanings and the social arrangements they support" (p. 91). Such a redefinition of standpoint provides a very limited vantage point for feminist investigations of women's political praxis. Although Hennessy starts her analysis by calling for attention to the material conditions that shape women's social lives, she reduces "feminism as a standpoint" to a discursively produced phenomenon. Hennessy's methodological "innovation" effectively renders other methodological strategies outside the frame of materialist feminist scholarship. Furthermore, Hennessy's strategy fails to provide a methodological solution to the primary goal she specifies, namely, to develop a "way of thinking about the relationship between language and subjectivity that can explain their connection to other aspects of material life" (p. 37). In a recent revisiting of her position "that economic, cultural, and political facets of social life are mutually determining," Hennessy acknowledges a shift in her thinking as she came to recognize that "this retreat from class analysis in the academy in the eighties and nineties began to seem one of neoliberalism's most effective ideological weapons" (2000, 12).

Poststructural critics of feminist standpoint epistemology within the social sciences also conclude their analyses with calls for discursive strategies. For example, after assessing Smith's standpoint epistemology, sociologist Patricia Clough (1993) argues for a "feminist, psychoanalytically oriented semiotic approach" that does not rely on "actual experience" (pp. 178–79). By misreading Smith's notion of "standpoint" as reducing subjectivity "to a determined position within the structure" (p. 179), Clough creates what Smith (1993) refers to as a "StrawSmith" (p. 180). Clough then calls for shifting the starting point of sociological investigation from experience or social activity to a "social criticism of textuality and discursivity, mass media, communication technologies and science itself" (p. 179). In contrast, Smith offers feminist ethnographers a place to begin inquiry that envisions subjects of investigation who can experience aspects of life outside discourse. Smith's methodological goal is "to develop inquiry into the social relations in which that experience is embedded, making visible how it is put together and organized in and by a larger complex of relations (including those of ruling and the economy)" (p. 184).

Ignoring Smith's "everyday world" approach, many critics of feminist standpoint epistemology have centered their criticism on the way certain standpoint theorizing reduces women's "ways of knowing" (Belenky et al. 1986) to essentialized categories associated with women's social identities. However, standpoint theorists do not insist that sustained vision from women's vantage point provides "an accurate depiction of reality" as Hawkesworth (1989) charges. Donna Haraway (1988), for example, argues that: "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (p. 153). In their responses to Susan Hekman's (1997) assessment of feminist standpoint theory that appeared in *Signs*, Nancy Hartsock, Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding, and Dorothy Smith all emphasize that feminist standpoint theorizing is designed to investigate how power works rather than some apolitical or abstract "truth." As Harding (1997) explains, "it seems to me that Hekman distorts the central project of standpoint theorists

when she characterizes it as one of figuring out how to justify the truth of feminist claims to more accurate accounts of reality. Rather, it is relations between power and knowledge that concern these thinkers" (p. 382).

The appeal to women's embodied social experience as a privileged site of knowledge about power and domination forms one central thread within standpoint epistemologies. However, as Alison Jaggar (1989) argues, "women's standpoint" should not be equated with women's viewpoint or actual experiences (p. 48). Rather, *standpoint* "refers to a way of conceptualizing reality that reflects women's interests and values and draws on women's own interpretation of their own experience" (Jaggar 1983, 387). Nancy Hartsock (1983) writes that "a standpoint carries the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible" (p. 117). In reworking Marx's historical materialism from a feminist perspective, Hartsock's stated goal is to explicate "the genderedness of relations of domination." She offers the concept of "a feminist standpoint . . . as a basis for understanding the sexual or erotic form taken by gendered power relations" (p. 151). For Hartsock, "the feminist standpoint" offers a "vision of reality" that is "deeper and more thoroughgoing than that available to the worker" and embodied in Marx's notion of the proletarian standpoint (p. 234). Hartsock (1983) states that her goal in articulating "a feminist standpoint" is a "modest one" and further argues that "women's lives provide a related but more adequate epistemological terrain for understanding power. Women's different understanding of power provides suggestive evidence that women's experience of power relations, and thus their understanding, may be importantly and structurally different from the lives and therefore the theories of men" (p. 151).

Hawkesworth (1990) challenges this historical materialist claim and argues that:

> To claim there is a distinct women's "perspective" that is "privileged" precisely because it possesses heightened insights into the nature of reality, a superior access to truth is to suggest there is some uniform experience common to all women that generates this univocal vision. Yet, if social, cultural, and historical differences are taken seriously, the notion of such a common experience becomes suspect. In the absence of such a homogeneous women's experience, standpoint epistemologies must either develop complicated explanations of why some women see the truth while others do not, a strategy that threatens to undermine the very notion of a "women's standpoint," or collapse into a trivial and potentially contradictory pluralism that conceives of truth as simply the sum of all women's partial and incompatible views. (P. 138)

The dual dilemmas identified by Hawkesworth (creating a hierarchy of standpoints[3] or resorting to "judgmental relativism" [Harding 1991, 139]) are closely linked to analyses that rely exclusively on an embodied construction of standpoint. However, rather than view standpoints as individual possessions of disconnected actors, most standpoint theorists attempt to locate standpoint in specific community contexts with particular attention to the dynamics of race, class, and gender.

African American and Chicana feminists have been especially critical of standpoint theorizing that constructs a totalizing view of women's experiences, taking white Western women's social lives as the framework for analysis.[4] However, they also face challenges associated with embodied standpoint analysis as they attempt to articulate the construction of standpoint from the point of view of women of color. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) addresses the intersection of gender and race in her articulation of Black feminist thought. Remaining sensitive to the critiques of essentialism, Collins (1990) concludes her analysis by emphasizing that "despite African-American women's potential power to reveal new insights about the matrix of domination, Black women's standpoint is only one angle of vision" (p. 234). Yet by constructing even this partial standpoint as an angle of vision achieved by African American women, she also falls into the "trap" of essentializing Black women's experience to a certain extent—namely, by masking dimensions of class and sexuality among other axes of difference that fracture Black women's social location (see White 1990). Patricia Clough (1994) aims her criticism of Collins's approach right to the heart of embodied standpoint analyses when she emphasizes that privileging "experience, especially the experience of oppression" in any form, even with attention to the partiality of that experience is a problematic theoretical move (p. 103).

Diversity and Continuity within Standpoint Epistemology: The Matter of Experience

While constructions of standpoint as embodied in specific women's experiences are most vulnerable to charges of essentialism, standpoint theorists typically resist focusing their analyses on individual women removed from their social context. In fact, Hartsock and Collins both emphasize that "standpoints" are achieved in community, through collective conversations and dialogue among women in marginal social positions. According to Collins (1990), standpoints are achieved by groups who struggle collectively and self-reflectively against "the matrix of domination" that circumscribe their lives (p. 234). Hartsock (1983) also emphasizes that "a 'privileged' standpoint is achieved rather than obvious, a mediated rather than an immediate understanding . . . an achievement both of science (analysis) and of political struggle" (p. 288). In this regard, Chéla Sandoval's analysis of *oppositional consciousness* has much in common with Hartsock's. Although Sandoval locates her analysis in a postmodern frame and Hartsock resists such a move, the legacy of historical materialism links their work within a broadly defined feminist standpoint

epistemology. In fact, Hartsock (1996) acknowledges the power of Sandoval's analysis for challenging essentialized views of identity and identity politics. Like Sandoval, Hartsock (1996) believes that "the development of situated knowledges can constitute alternatives: they open possibilities that may or may not be realized. To the extent that these knowledges become self-conscious about their assumptions, they make available new epistemologies and political options" (p. 271).

A number of important analyses of women's political activism bear out these materialist feminist claims.[5] Working-class and third world feminist scholarship are especially clear about the import of marginalized and localized understandings for effective political action. For example, Terry Haywoode (1991) emphasizes that the key to effectiveness of the urban working-class women activists she worked with in the 1970s and 1980s was the way they understood the social organization of community, for "women know a great deal about community life because it is the stuff of their every day experience" (p. 183). This form of "working-class feminism" built upon women's kinship and friendship networks and relied on the often invisible work of "center-women" (Sacks 1988) who facilitated the development and mobilization of these networks. Chandra Talpede Mohanty (1997) describes how daily struggles and resistance to global capitalist ideologies make visible "the common interests of Third-World women workers" that can serve as the basis for organizing across differences and national boundaries. Cherríe Moraga (1981) also argues that the political consciousness of women of color develops from the material reality of their lives.[6]

For Collins (1990), dialogue among "subjugated" groups (defined as "African American women, African American men, Latina lesbians, Asian American women, Puerto Rican men, and others with distinctive standpoints") enhances the development of truth claims that can approach an "objective" understanding of the relations of domination in the following way: "Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own thought as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives" (p. 236).

In considering Collins's claim, Susan Mann and Lori Kelley (1997) caution that consensus-building strategies privilege the majority perspectives and "those with the greatest power and resources have no reason to give up their privilege simply because they understand oppression better" (p. 403). Again we confront the limits of standpoint analysis that is detached from the community context where relations of domination could be brought into the analytic frame. By constructing groups who share similar racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities as potentially articulating a similar standpoint, Collins is masking other differences within each defined group. Since Collins's goal is to

articulate Black feminist thought, she does not investigate how standpoints are differently achieved within other racial-ethnic groups. However, her approach could be broadened to examine the construction of standpoints in ways that remain sensitive to the differences within and across groups. As Collins (1998) explains:

> Theorizing from outsider-within locations reflects the multiplicity of being on the margins within intersecting systems of race, class, gender, sexual, and national oppression, even as such theory remains grounded in and attentive to real differences in power. This, to me, is what distinguishes oppositional knowledges developed in outsider-within locations *both* from elite knowledges (social theory developed from within centers of power such as Whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, class privilege, or citizenship) and from knowledges developed in oppositional locations where groups resist only *one* form of oppression (e.g., a patriarchal Black, cultural nationalism, a racist feminism, or a raceless, genderless class analysis). In other words, theorizing from outsider-within locations can produce distinctive oppositional knowledges that embrace multiplicity yet remain cognizant of power. (P. 8, emphasis in original)

How we extrapolate "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1988) from the everyday world for theoretical analytic purposes continues to challenge ethnographers and other feminist researchers of women's political praxis.[7] As Chandra Mohanty (1995) argues, "we cannot avoid the challenge of *theorizing* experience. For most of us would not want to ignore the range and scope of the feminist political arena" (p. 71, emphasis in original). This is especially unavoidable if the focus of one's research is the dynamics of women's political praxis. Joan Scott's (1992, 25) critique of how historians use "experience" as "uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation" directly challenges early feminist attempts to rewrite women's history and to document women's subjectivity and agency. Her challenge has been taken to heart by many researchers operating inside and outside feminist frameworks. Her call is not to discard experience in historical research but to contextualize and historicize its usage. Yet, as Kathleen Canning (1994) points out, "Scott's arguments foregrounds the discursive in the construction of women's work while leaving obscure its relationship to the social context in which it emerged" (p. 379). Like Canning, I am also interested in exploring the complex interplay of the material or nondiscursive practices and the discursive patterns and disruptions that contour women's life and, more particularly, influence their political praxis. In this regard, Canning (1994) and I join Dorothy Smith in the goal of keeping "both subjects and the objects of the discourses" in the methodological frame (p. 383).

Yet, at another level, Scott and Smith are engaged in similar projects; namely, to challenge the taken-for-granted practices of their respective disci-

plines that render invisible or domesticate women's work as well as their everyday lives. Scott (1992) summons historians to view experience as "not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced" (p. 26). In this regard, we might identify a parallel here with Smith's (1996) "everyday world" perspective in which she defines experience as "always social and always bear[ing] its social organization" (p. 1). For Smith, "a sociology for people proposes to explore from experience but beyond it, beginning in the living as people can speak of it rather than in the pregivens of theoretically-designed discourse" (p. 1). Smith's (1992) mode of inquiry calls for explicit attention to the social relations embedded in women's everyday activities. However, it does not end at the level of the individual women as "knower" but is "directed towards exploring and explicating what she does not know—the social relations and organization pervading her world but invisible in it" (p. 91).

Commenting on Susan Hekman's (1997) "revisiting" of feminist standpoint theory, Dorothy Smith (1997) argues that "experience is a method of speaking that is not preappropriated by the discourses of the relations of ruling" (p. 394). Here Smith's construction of experience should be differentiated from Scott's historical reference and related to their different disciplinary foci (although, of course, this should not be read as reifying the methods employed by researchers within each discipline since sociologists also employ historical methods and historians also gather data from living "informants"). Smith ties her understanding of experience to the collective conversations of the women's movement that gave rise to understandings about women's lives which had no prior discursive existence. She explains: "When we assembled *as* 'women' and spoke together *as* 'women,' constituting 'women' as a category of political mobilization, we discovered dimensions of 'our' experience that had no prior discursive definition" (p. 394, emphasis in original). Smith makes a crucial distinction between the political import of experience and the epistemological claim to the truth of what is spoken (a key aspect of Hekman's critique of standpoint theorizing) when she writes: "The authority of experience is foundational to the women's movement (which is not to say that experience is foundational to knowledge) and has been and is at once explosive and fruitful" (p. 394). For Scott, experience is embodied in particular textual products that are, by extension, the result of patterns of exclusion, interpretation, and power. In this regard, ethnographers also confront the thorny dilemmas of inclusion, interpretive authority, and power as we grapple with the construction of individual narratives from interviews and other field-based research methods.

Since many postmodern and poststructural critics of standpoint epistemology present a narrow interpretation of what constitutes a standpoint, they often equate it with some notion of unmediated experience. However, a careful review of standpoint theoretical perspectives reveal multiple approaches to

the construction of standpoint: as embodied in women's social location and social experience, as constructed in community, and as a site through which to begin inquiry. With a multidimensional standpoint framework, I have been able to explore the specificity of women's experiences in different social locations as well as to compare across different times and places. The goal of my multidimensional approach to standpoint analysis is to move beyond a fractured account of differences to a broader understanding of how relations of ruling can be effectively brought into view and resisted. It is the processes of social control and resistance (or "how things are put together" to use Smith's [1992, 88] formulation) that can be articulated through this multidimensional standpoint analysis, not a specifiable translocal political analysis or practice. I begin the next section with a brief description of the two research studies from which I draw examples to illustrate my approach, then shift to illustrate the three dimensions of my standpoint analytic approach.

Toward a Multidimensional Standpoint Framework

In the mid-1980s, I initiated a study to examine how gender, class, and race influenced the political consciousness and political practice of women from low-income communities in New York City and Philadelphia. This research was prompted by the question: how do people remain involved in community activism for social and economic justice over an extended period of time? To address this question, I explored the complex ways that women from different racial and class backgrounds became politically conscious of the relations of domination that shaped their lives and how their political analyses and political strategies changed with the shifting political and economic context. In the mid-1990s, I contacted a subset of the women originally interviewed in the mid-1980s to explore how their political praxis changed over time (see Appendix A for a more expanded description of the methodology used for this research).[8]

Upon moving to Iowa in 1989, I began to investigate the ways in which women from rural communities viewed the wider political landscape that contoured their lives and informed their political practice (see Appendix B for further description of the methodology used in this study). Throughout the rural research, I became increasingly aware of how this differing community context provided the grounds for certain kinds of political consciousness and political practices that contrasted sharply with my findings from the urban-based study. Yet these political perspectives and practices were not fixed and immutable. As I had found among the urban community workers, political praxis changed over time and was further influenced by varying political and economic forces. Here I faced one of the central dilemmas that constrain the development of comparative standpoint analyses; namely, that dimensions upon which we might generate our comparisons are ever-shifting social dynamics that are difficult to specify even in one particular site. On the one hand,

it might easily be argued that little basis exists for the comparison in these two cases regardless of theoretical position adopted. On the other hand, such a sharp analytic exercise can provide an illustrative model for the development of comparative standpoint analyses. I turn now to discuss the dilemmas encountered in conducting ethnographic work from differing feminist standpoint perspectives. Throughout the discussion, I make reference to findings from my research with community workers in urban and rural settings as a way to illustrate each of the dilemmas posed.

Dilemmas of the Embodied Standpoint

Many feminist theorists understand standpoint as embodied in specific actors who are located in less privileged positions within the social order and who, because of their social locations, are engaged in activities that differ from others who are not similarly situated. As discussed above, these theorists are often criticized for drawing upon an essentialized view of women and equating particular ways of knowing with their identities as women. Carol Gilligan's (1982) work is often identified as exemplifying the essentializing tendencies of this strand.[9] As noted earlier, Collins has also been faulted for failing to adequately incorporate class or sexuality into her analysis of "Afrocentric feminist consciousness" (see White 1990). While these criticisms must be taken into account when assessing the usefulness of an embodied construction of standpoint, it is also important to explore the methodological implications of this approach. Is failure to fully contextualize the standpoint of particular women inherent to the methodology or a consequence of the challenge in articulating the complexity of particular women's lives? In my view, the use of an embodied standpoint as one methodological starting point does not necessarily presume privileging or rendering invisible other aspects of women's experience or ignoring the fluidity of its construction. However, the difficulty in fully explicating the social construction of women's social location remains as a fundamental challenge to feminist researchers working from an embodied standpoint perspective.

For example, many feminist theorists who contribute to the embodied strand of standpoint theorizing argue that low-income women of color or others located in marginalized social positions develop a perspective on social life in the United States that differs markedly from that of middle- and upper-income people.[10] Collins (1990) explains that since working-class Black women are "much more inclined to be struck by the mismatch of [their] own experiences and the paradigms of sociology itself," they are more likely to identify "anomalies" between their experiences and those represented by normalized, yet distorted, sociological accounts (pp. 50–51). Here Collins is describing the advantages of "outsider within theorizing" for sociology. Smith (1993) describes her formulation as "insider sociology" (p. 190). The shifting use of the terms *insider/outsider* highlights a central contribution of embodied standpoint theorizing when recognized as social and relational achievements (see chapter 4). While extolling the benefits of "insider" knowledge for understanding and articulating the construction of domination, Collins and Smith also highlight the value of this knowledge for transforming the dominant practices of their field (hence, Collins's notion of the "outsider within").

Women activists I interviewed in both urban and rural settings expressed political analyses that correspond with "outsider within" as well "insider" constructions of "situated knowledges." Ann Robinson, an African American community worker in Harlem, discussed the difficulties she faced as a low-income woman of color and how her experiences influenced her analysis of racism, sexism, and class. Ann described how her experience with the welfare system increased her sensitivity to others forced to rely on public assistance. Further, she insisted, her personal experiences as a single mother on welfare enhanced her commitment to fighting injustice and economic inequality. White European American and rural resident Amy Grove, who lost her home and farm during the "farm crisis" of the early 1980s, said that she had "a lot more compassion and understanding of what other people go through" because of the foreclosure. Following the foreclosure, Amy accepted a job with the social services department. She believed this made her more effective as a government employee and community worker in rural Iowa. This perspective mirrors the narrative accounts of the urban community activists like Ann Robinson who believed that because they had "been there" and had experienced poverty and discrimination, they were more sensitive to other community members undergoing economic and emotional stress. Of course, narrations of one's privileged stance as an "indigenous" knower does not equate with one's actions and having "been there" does not necessarily produce corresponding political analyses.

Urban community activists, even those who shared similar backgrounds, were not always in agreement about the solutions to the problems of poverty and what political actions would help improve the lives of the poor. A few women felt that if an individual remained in school and worked hard on the job, he or she could leave the ranks of the poor—a perspective that mirrored dominant discourse on welfare reform (see chapter 7 in this volume). Others insisted that the society must provide the poor with better education and expanded employment opportunities to help them out of poverty—a more progressive construction but one still focused on individualist strategies. In contrast, other workers felt that the rich, who rule our society, are not interested in eliminating poverty; therefore, the poor must gain control of the major political, economic, and social service institutions in the United States. The contrast between urban community workers' analyses of how to counter poverty in their communities reveals how political perspectives can vary among those who share similar racial-ethnic and class positions. This analysis contests an essentialized definition of standpoint that equates particular ways of knowing with specific social identities. However, if we take this embodied

construction as one angle of investigation, it is possible to explore the relationship between particular social locations and varying constructions of oppositional as well as dominant political analyses. This becomes more apparent when we shift from racial/class/gender constructions of an embodied standpoint to situational constructions as I illustrate with Barbara Drake's account.

White European American factory worker Barbara Drake also discussed her situated ability to see how power works in her small Iowa town and said that people who hold positions of "prestige" in her community can do and say things that others cannot. When I asked her to describe those with prestige, she pointed to members of the community who had lived in the town "forever," who came from families with a long history in the community. In this illustration, Barbara did not call on racial identity or class location as a way to explain her different understanding of power. She saw it through her "newcomer" status. Since the dynamics of whiteness and, to a less salient degree, class are not made explicit in Barbara's reported experience in her small rural town, her claim to a different form of knowledge poses a challenge to standpoint perspectives that exclusively center the processes of race, class, and gender in shaping differing standpoints. This is not to say that Barbara's gender, class, and race were not significant organizing frames through which she saw her differing location. However, these dimensions were not made self-evident in her narrative. Barbara's account further illustrates the challenge faced by ethnographers who define standpoint as embodied in the class, race, and gender position of particular knowers without locating these constructions in particular community contexts. However, it also highlights the difficulty in using spoken accounts of experience or an individual's viewpoint as an access to, or way to locate, a standpoint since these expressions capture dominant as well as alternative political analyses.

As I shifted my research to a rural context I was immediately aware of my own position as an "outsider" to the communities I studied. On the one hand, as a "native" New Yorker and former urban social worker, I was more familiar with the neighborhoods and broader community context in which the urban community workers I interviewed worked. On the other hand, as someone from a white working-class background, my racial-ethnic difference from the predominantly African American and Puerto Rican women was salient in most encounters. As I began to interview white European American women in rural Iowa, I recognized how the dynamics of regional familiarity positioned me differently with respect to white rural women despite our racial "similarity." Over time, my relationship to the women I met in both settings also changed as did my own perceptions of "outsiderness." As I demonstrated in chapter 4, this shifting insiderness/outsiderness was a source of important ethnographic information and continues to guide my ethnographic research strategies.

Heightened sensitivity to the multiplicity and contradictions of women's embodied standpoints as well as a researcher's own position in the field has made it difficult for feminist ethnographers to explicate the complex relationship between race, class, and gender. This unstable process of intersectionality is shaped by hegemonic constructions of race, class, and gender that pervade personal narratives and ethnographic encounters.[11] It is also contoured by regional discursive and material practices as illustrated in Barbara Drake's construction of her status as "newcomer." Further, since "insider" analysts do not develop their political perspectives outside the dominant discursive frames, their situated knowledges do not automatically contribute to an oppositional consciousness. The second approach to standpoint theorizing attempts to articulate the ways in which "different ways of knowing" (Belenky et al. 1986) or "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1988) are located in and derived from different types of communities, organized by, and, at times, in opposition to relations of domination.

Dilemmas of "Community"

In contrast to the first approach, some standpoint theorists define standpoint not as a property of disconnected knowers but as located within particular communities.[12] Through this strand of standpoint theorizing, we could better analyze Barbara Drake's conceptualization of her identity as "newcomer." Barbara locates her privileged standpoint in a relational community context rather than in her individual identity as a woman or working-class resident. Furthermore, from a relational standpoint perspective, the identity of "woman" or class or other embodied identities are constructed in community and therefore cannot be interpreted outside the shifting community context.

However, when we shift from the individual embodied definition of standpoint to a relational or community construction we face another challenging dilemma; namely, how do we define and locate community? Is community a geographic and identifiable site or a collective process through which individuals come to represent themselves in relation to others with whom they perceive share similar experiences and viewpoints? Collins (1990) draws on the later construction of community for her analysis of Black feminist thought. Collins (1997) argues that "the notion of a standpoint refers to historically shared, *group*-based experiences" (p. 375, emphasis in original). But how do we identify or define the boundaries of a group when it is not coterminous with a definable geographic area? Like the embodied approach to standpoint theorizing, group-based approaches have also been criticized for unproblematically using women's class and racial identities to define who is or is not part of a particular group. Yet, as my research in both rural and urban settings demonstrates, identity conceptions including those that are coterminous with racial-ethnic identities cannot be detached from geographic or other constructions of community.[13]

The concept of "community" brings with it a host of associations. As Raymond Williams (1976) demonstrates, the complexity of the term *community*

also relates to the historically changing definitions of community and to the various historically specific forms of social organization of community. However, a conceptualization of community as coterminous with small town and rural life as in Ferdinand Tonnies's (1963) *gemeinschaft* construction remains a prime feature of agrarian ideology. This construction of rural community life has material consequences for the rural Iowa residents I interviewed. Many of the white rural community workers internalized this conservative definition of community and constructed their political activities accordingly. The social control features of the *gemeinschaft* construction of rural community life limited their effectiveness in challenging inequality and discrimination in their small towns. They recognized the sanctions they would face if they spoke out against the dominant view of economic development. From a relational standpoint perspective, however, accounts from the rural and urban community workers tended to turn the *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* distinction on its head. Those who felt "outside" the dominant construction of insider felt marginalized in this "close-knit" community; while many of the urban women described close ties they had with neighbors and other community workers.

The dimension of time is also brought into the frame to shake up any firm continuity in any one location. White rural community worker Marlee Castle recalled: "It used to be that you could share equipment, you could . . . trade labor and so forth [with your neighbors]. That's virtually nonexistent. You don't find very many farmers out there that will do that any longer. They go to the other farmer's landowner, and say, 'I can do a better job, or I can do this for you,' and . . . it's a real different kind of mentality than what it was ten years ago." Of course, further analysis is required to assess the extent to which Marlee's construction of community mirrors other accounts and aligns with other ethnographic modes of analysis. However, the fact that she experienced a diminished sense of communion in her rural town informed the way she related to her neighbors and friends, and in turn, informed her political analyses and political engagement during the 1990s.[14]

While many of the rural women interviewed in the 1990s expressed similar concerns for the perceived loss of Gemeinschaft-like social relations in their small town, the urban community workers frequently mentioned how people in their embattled urban neighborhoods pulled together during difficult times. Wilma North of Philadelphia said that in the mid-1980s, "Everybody in the community is trying to work together, to serve, [to] do something as far as these needs are concerned. They realize that you have to hang together rather than separately. They realize it's going to take all of us, all of our efforts to try to do something—to eliminate some of this." On first read, it would seem that the sense of shared oppression in the poor urban neighborhoods contributed to a heightened sense of connection among women activists. However, once I adjusted for time and explored constructions of "communion" within the rural accounts, I did locate a similar perception; namely that the collective nature of economic distress during the so-called farm crisis of the mid-1980s seemed to counter the experience of alienation expressed by Marlee Castle. In fact, Marlee reported that "the crisis was kind of a tie, it bound a lot of people together." She contrasted that time with the 1990s:

> There was a time when it wasn't embarrassing to say I'm having financial difficulties. We had to severely restructure our farming. We went through a bankruptcy, my husband and I, on our farm. We've been lucky to be able to stay out here, though. . . . There were many of them not that lucky. But there was a time when I think there was a lot of cohesiveness. People stuck together. They had goals [like] "my neighbor's in trouble, we've got to help them out." And that's gone again. It's scary that that's gone again!

Among the most salient factors that Marlee believed contributed to the loss of communion was the perception that many low-income "newcomers" were moving into the community thus disrupting the sense of cohesiveness built on long-term residency. Marlee's analysis should not be read as evidence that such cohesiveness existed, but as an indication of how this construction informed her own (and possible other middle-class white residents') political engagement.

These excerpts from my research highlight different ways rural and urban residents responded to the declining economic conditions in their communities—defined primarily in geographic terms. In both locations, activists expressed a belief that shared oppression drew members of their communities together. Embedded in each geographic account of community were class and racial-ethnic, among other, components of identity and communion. In other words, not all members of the geographic community are called into the frame. Non-geographic constructions of community are infused throughout the narratives, although less visible from view than the more typical geographic usage. And, as I emphasized with regard to outsiderness/insiderness, constructions of community remain in flux as individual members are repositioned by social and economic processes. Here I find the long-term ethnographic lens most helpful for mapping these changes over time.

The geographic conception of community is also illustrated in African American urban community worker Othelia Carson's narrative. She emphasized the importance of her relationship to her neighborhood because "you know the people—you know the thieves, you know the crooks." Othelia's description of her relationship to her urban community evokes some of the sentiments offered by the women interviewed in Iowa, although the rural women never mentioned thieves and crooks as members of their communities. In contrast, they drew distinctions between "insiders" and "outsiders" and those with "status" or "privilege" and others. While these constructions also dovetailed with racial-ethnic identity, racial-ethnic and gendered constructions of community were less salient in the rural women's spoken accounts when compared with the urban women's political analyses. However, as the racial-

ethnic composition changed within the small rural communities, the saliency of racial-ethnic identity constructions increased.

This brief exploration into the dilemmas of the relational construction of standpoint reveals the persistence of experience as spoken or otherwise recorded as a way to identify "collective subject positions" (Haraway 1988) or communal constructions of standpoint (p. 590). An ethnographic approach to standpoint analysis provides the long-term vision and relational context in which to interpret the expressions of those who occupy different positions within a specifiable context and, therefore, serves to temper, to a certain extent, the tendency toward essentialized or fragmented accounts associated with the embodied standpoint perspective. However, we are left with some of the same methodological challenges associated with reliance on individual expressions or other observations of experience. How do we treat contrasting experiences and analyses of the "partial views and halting voices" (Haraway 1988, 590) articulated within shifting community contexts? From a communal/relational standpoint perspective, do all individual constructions of experience constitute a standpoint? As ethnographers of women's political consciousness and practices, the problem of how to relate to and treat the testimony of individual knowers remains to haunt us.

Chéla Sandoval (1991) treats experience as simultaneously embodied and strategically created in community and concludes that this dynamic interaction affects the political practice of third world women. Sandoval's model of oppositional consciousness offers a methodological strategy that contests previously taken-for-granted categorization of women's political practice. Many feminist theorists who incorporate both the embodied and relational strands of standpoint epistemology emphasize that perspectives from the vantage point of the oppressed remain partial and incomplete. How partial the perspective remains a central problematic of feminist standpoint analyses. Furthermore, as Harding (1986) asks, "Can there be *a* feminist epistemological standpoint when so many women are embracing 'fractured identities' as Black women, Asian women, Native American women, professional, working-class women, lesbian?" (p. 163, emphasis in original). Constructions of community in and through which women experience and construct their perceived identities are "fractured," fluid, and shifting phenomena as well. The third strand of feminist standpoint epistemology provides a framework for capturing the interactive and fluid conceptualization of community and resists attaching standpoint to particular bodies, individual knowers, or specific communities or groups.

Dilemmas in Locating Standpoint

In the third construction of standpoint, standpoint is understood as a site from which to begin "a mode of inquiry" as in Dorothy Smith's "everyday world" institutional ethnographic approach to standpoint epistemology. Smith (1992) explains that her approach "does not privilege a knower" (or subject of research) whose expressions are disconnected from her social location and daily activities (p. 91). Rather, Smith starts inquiry "with the knower who is actually located: she is active; she is at work; she is connected with particular other people in various ways. . . . Activities, feelings, experiences, hook her into extended social relations linking her activities to those of other people and in ways beyond her knowing" (p. 91). This mode of inquiry calls for explicit attention to the social relations embedded in women's everyday activities. As Smith (1996) explains, her "everyday world" approach:

> aims at knowing the social as people actually bring it into being. Its objects would not be meaning but the actual ongoing ways in which people's activities are coordinated, particularly those forms of social organization and relations that connect up multiple and various sites of experience since these are what are ordinarily inaccessible to people. And unlike maps of lands, seas, and seacoasts, these have to be maps of relations in motion, the dynamic of which generates changes in how we are related, what we experience, and what we do and can do. (P. 24)

Smith's (1992) analysis "of 'standpoint' as 'a *method of inquiry*' " (88) offers a valuable methodological strategy for exploring how power dynamics are organized and experienced in a community context.

Racial formation theory provides another "method of inquiry" that articulates well with Smith's feminist standpoint approach. Although Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986), the most prominent proponents of this framework, do not attend to gender and sexuality, their approach offers a conceptual tool for mapping the way racial meanings and racial identities infuse gender identities and institutional arrangements in a particular society (Winant 1994, 23). By drawing on the methodological and conceptual tools offered by institutional ethnography (Smith 1987) and racial formation theory (Omi and Winant 1986), we can broaden our approach to standpoint analysis to incorporate the discursive fields and material structural conditions that shape how different women's lives are organized by relations of ruling, how these experiences change over time, and how women resist, or reposition their relationship to, mechanisms of social control. Both approaches leave open the specific content of "how things are put together" (Smith 1992, 88). The challenge in articulating these daily practices and processes to form "maps of relations in motion" (Smith 1996, 24) is well illustrated with reference to the experiences of the Mexican and Mexican American residents who began moving in 1990 to rural southwest Iowa for work in an expanded food-processing plant. As the number of Latinos increased in the town, the perception of many white residents shifted from denying the permanency of the changing racial-ethnic composition in their town to active resistance to resentful acceptance and to, a lesser extent, supportive attitudes.

Despite the diversity among the Latinos (who had moved from rural towns in Mexico, small towns in the United States, as well as large cities like Chicago

and Mexico City), white European American residents initially saw all Mexicans and Mexican Americans as illegal immigrants and transitory workers. However, white ethnic residents' perceptions of the Latinos shifted in response to outside intervention by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Racial-ethnic consciousness initially remained hidden from view within the predominantly white communities. By spring of 1992 when the Latino community had grown to form approximately 10 percent of the population in Midtown (the pseudonym for the town in which the expanded food-processing plant is located), a local resident called the INS who, in turn, conducted a massive raid in this town of 1,250 to identify and deport illegal workers and their families. Ironically, this action, born in anti-Latino sentiment, created the grounds for a redirection of racialization processes and racist attitudes. The INS raids, subsequent deportations, and ongoing investigation served to regulate the lives of all Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the town. However, INS intervention also made visible the contradictions in the construction of the "outsider" as discussed in chapter 4. While INS activities confirmed white European American residents' fears that there were many undocumented Mexican workers in the plant; it also demonstrated that many Mexican and Mexican American residents were "legitimate" members of the community.

The community workers in rural Iowa have a different relationship to the interlocking of gender, race-ethnicity, class, and political action when compared with the urban community workers. To understand the differences between the individual, interpersonal, spatial, and historic contexts of their lives requires an analysis that is grounded in each community worker's varying perspectives and experiences as well as the organization of his or her everyday activities. By approaching standpoint as a site of inquiry as well as an embodied perspective and relational achievement, my multidimensional materialist feminist standpoint analysis leaves room for the fluidity of social, political, economic, and ideological manifestations of women's experiences as they shift over time and place.

Conclusion

A careful review of feminist standpoint theories reveals three dominant constructions of standpoint that offer different strategies for ethnographic investigation of women's political praxis. Multidimensional standpoint methodology for comparative ethnographic research must confront the dilemmas of experience at three junctures: at the level of the individual knower, in constructions of community, and within methodological strategies.

Knowledge generated from embodied standpoints of "subordinates" is powerful in that it can help transform traditional categories of analyses that originate from dominant groups.[15] However, as many feminist standpoint theorists argue, it remains only a partial perspective. By placing the analysis within a community context, we can better reveal the multiplicity of perspectives along with the dynamic structural dimensions of the social, political, and economic environment that shape the relations of ruling in a particular social space. The multidimensional feminist standpoint analysis explicated through the above discussion enhances our understanding of how community is constructed, sustained, and redefined by community members in different contexts and how conceptualizations of community also promote or inhibit political activism. By exposing "the arbitrariness and instability of positions within systems of oppression," we draw upon "a conception of power that refuses totalizations, and can therefore account for the possibility of resistance"—a central goal of feminist praxis (Martin and Mohanty 1986, 209).

The multidimensional feminist standpoint analytic model I propose is one that remains consistently relational, open to contestation, and designed to challenge taken-for-granted constructions that derive from either a view from above or a view from nowhere.[16] Ethnographers of women's political praxis also need to go beyond reliance on "experience, as spoken" or individually manifest (Smith 1996, 1). Smith's "everyday world" standpoint methodology provides a framework through which to use "experience, as spoken" to explore ruling relations manifest in the actualities of women's lives rather than an end in itself. Experience is itself organized through relations of ruling not visible to individual knowers and is therefore politically constituted. The content of women's spoken experience must remain open to exploration from a number of angles: first as constructed knowledge from individual knowers, next as an expression of a relationship to other knowers and multiple institutional sites of power, and finally, as a site of inquiry. Simultaneously, attention must be paid to how gendered processes of racialization inform the construction of experience within these three analytic dimensions. By utilizing the multiple dimensions of standpoint epistemology, it becomes possible to build a foundation for comparative materialist feminist analyses that remain sensitive to the partial and shifting nature of relationships under multiple and mutually constituting systems of oppression. The ethnographer is herself an actor in the field of study and must also reflect on the ways her relationship to the field and to local residents or community members is shaping the angle of vision.

In the next section, I shift the angle of vision from the practice of ethnography to the analysis of texts to demonstrate the value of a materialist feminist approach to discourse. The two chapters in Part III highlight the power of a materialist feminist discourse analysis for policy studies and social movement research. The discourse analysis I utilize resonates with the approaches that simultaneously incorporate discursive, cultural, and structural factors.[17] A materialist feminist approach to discourse analysis focuses attention on the social and political context, subject positions and power relations in and through which social movement frames or governing practices are generated, circulated, and reinscribed within different discursive and institutional sites as well as the shifting discursive fields surrounding the production of specific movement frames or social policy.[18]