

Situated Knowledges

*Science, Feminism and
Partial Perspective*

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Donna Haraway

- ◆ Feminist philosopher of science and technology
- ◆ Has degrees in Zoology, Philosophy, English and Biology
- ◆ Work focuses on the intersections of feminism, science, technology, and the human experience
- ◆ “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”
 - *Feminist Studies*, Autumn 1988



Objectivity

- ◆ What is Objectivity?
 - An attempt to discover scientific truths by the elimination of personal biases
- ◆ Haraway's critiques of Objectivity
 - It is not possible
 - Ignores social location and identity of observers
 - Its not how modern scientific inquiry actually works
 - Funding sources
 - Scientific debate
 - Matthew Effect
 - Objectivity does not find truth
 - Creates a God Trick



Objectivity God Trick



- ◆ The all seeing disembodied vision of science
 - Presumes an omniscient observer
 - Object under investigation is unchanging
 - Observer is separate and impartial

“Vision has historically been used to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power.” (Haraway 581)

Social Constructionism

- ◆ What is Social Constructionism?
 - All knowledge is the result of social construction, a shared understanding of the social world agreed upon within a society
- ◆ Haraway's critiques of Social Constructionism
 - Standpoint Theory
 - Knowledge is only available from specific social locations
 - Reduces all knowledge to ideology
 - Abandons science as a site for feminist knowledge
 - Science and opinion become equally valuable
 - Doesn't lead us to truth
 - Sets up another God Trick



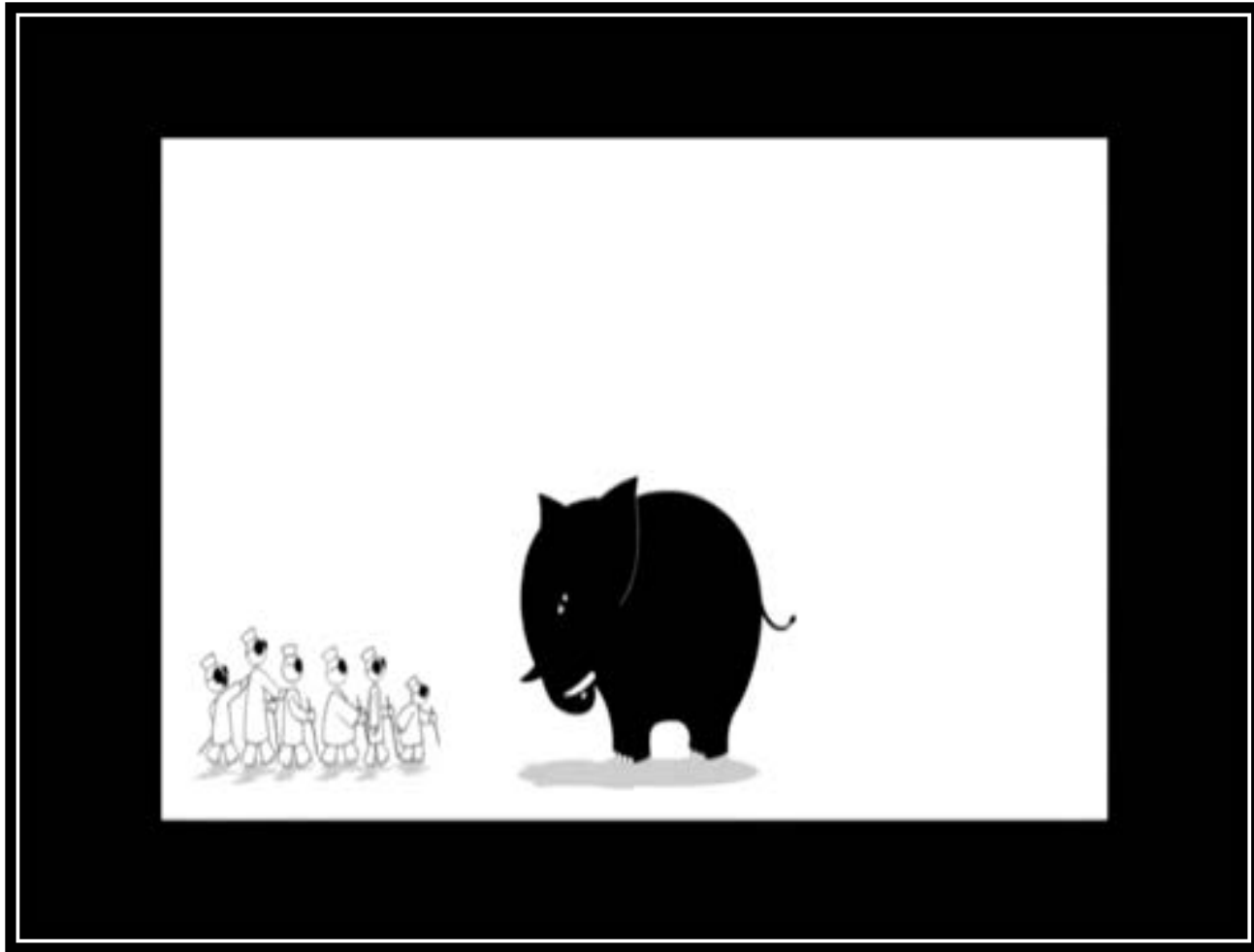
Constructionism God Trick



“...we end up with a kind of epistemological electroshock therapy, which far from ushering us into the high stakes tables of the game of contesting public truths, lays us out on the table with self-induced multiple personality disorder.” (Haraway 578)

- ◆ With all knowledge socially constructed, there are no universal truths
 - Truth is meaningless and inaccessible
 - Limits the ability to search for answers

Six Blind Men and an Elephant



Video Courtesy of Phat Phish
Mumbai Documentary House

Situated Knowledges

- ◆ What does Situated mean?
 - The social location of a person in reference to place, time and power
- ◆ Situated Knowledges
 - Observer understands their own location
 - Awareness of the limits of their vision
 - Understands that all knowledge is partial



“Only partial perspectives promise objective vision... Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of the subject and object.”

(Haraway 581)

Situated Knowledges

- ◆ The “real world” can only be understood by seeing every perspective as part of a much larger whole
 - All observation is shaped by the position in society that the observer holds
 - Allows for knowledge expressed by both the observer and the observed
 - Acknowledges the partiality of all understanding, and seeks multiple perspectives



Activity: A Card Trick

- ◆ Describe the object based only on what you can see.
- ◆ What is the shape, color, size?
- ◆ What can't you see?
- ◆ What happens when we incorporate what your classmates see?



Discussion Questions

- ◆ What does Haraway's Situated Knowledges contribute to sociology?
- ◆ Can you think of any critiques of Situated Knowledges?
- ◆ Can you think of any ways Situated Knowledges can help us create equality?

