



# ‘The Community of Resistance’ --- A Reflection and Discussion on Anne Seller’s *Realism versus Relativism: Towards a Politically Adequate Epistemology*

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**Abstract.** This article hopes to review and discuss Anne Seller’s article *Realism versus Relativism: Towards a Politically Adequate Epistemology* [9] to reflect Seller’s view of Realism and Relativism in Feminist Epistemology and her efforts to reconcile the conflict between the two.

**Keywords:** Feminist Epistemology, Realism, Relativism, Women’s Experiences, The Community of Resistance.

## 1 Introduction

The debate between Realism and Relativism in Feminist Epistemology has been going on for a long time. When feminists and anthropologists conduct research at the social level, they often adopt specific research methods that claim to be scientific and objective and obtain knowledge that is claimed to be true. For example, (E1):

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Research progress such as ethnography and comparative analysis are carried out in human group A, and the feedback results are obtained. These results tend to indicate that women are limited in knowledge acquisition in group A. It may reveal a reality in the world, which may be claimed as knowledge of this world that, as many feminists reflect in the epistemological aspect, the epistemic injustice exists between two genders.

For realists in Feminist Epistemology, there is an existing reality independent of various cultural and ideological situations that can be examined by objective method and then be claimed to be knowledge. As the rival of Relativism, sometimes Realism is also called ‘Objectivity’, and it also involves the radical form, i.e., Absolutism, which claims that ‘standards for justification apply universally, regardless of time, place, etc.’

[2] In my opinion, there are two critical features of Realism in Feminist Epistemology:

(A1) The reality of some facts about women’s situation exists.[6] It is independent of the diverse epistemic systems of women in different communities.[6]

(A2) Objective methods should be adopted to know the reality in (1).

If using Realism to view the example (E1) in the paragraph above, a realist may claim that her knowledge of epistemic injustice obtained by research can not only reflect the reality of this unfairness behind group A but also has a universality that reveals the same reality in other human communities which have different ideology in this living world.

However, for those who claim to be relativists, the knowledge and justification are no longer universal but more situated to the corresponding epistemic system. In fact, many critics of feminist epistemology emerge just because they think that it involves a form of Relativism that values the role of the operation of some social factors.[2] The basic form of 'X-Y' may clearly illustrate the basic elements of Relativism, 'Y' is 'the necessary or ultimate medium for the existence of X, or the best, only, or ultimate standard or measure for X.' [7] If then, in Epistemic Relativism, 'X' is what we claim as 'knowledge and justification' and 'Y' is 'different local conceptual or cultural frameworks.' I can then try to establish two critical features of Relativism in Feminist Epistemology compared with the Realism mentioned above:

[B1] The knowledge and justification about women's situation depend on the conceptual and cultural framework. Women in different communities have different epistemic systems; their experience are valid, and 'we cannot demonstrate in a non-circular way that our epistemic system is superior to any other.' [3]

[B2] For the way of study, 'objectivity' is also situated, which may be relative to complicated value and judgment processes.

If using Relativism to view the example (E1) in the paragraph above, a relativist may claim that if the research can genuinely represent the experience of women in group A, then there is epistemic injustice in group A, but for the question of whether this injustice is also in other groups, this should depend on women's experience which based on the particular epistemic system of that community.

How to reconcile the differences between Realism and Relativism in Feminist Epistemology, as shown in (A1) (A2) [B1] [B2], is a topic of concern to many feminists. Next, we will try to give our own understanding of Seller's article *Realism versus Relativism: Towards a Politically Adequate Epistemology* to analyze her thoughts on the two views and her attempt to find a middle ground between the two.

## 2 Analysis of Seller's Article

I tend to divide Seller's article into three parts. The first part is the comparison between Realism and Relativism. The second part is about some critical recognition through comparison. Finally, based on the discussion of the premier two parts, the third part is about the Seller's proposal about 'The Community of Resistance,' [9] including its characteristics and advantages, to reconcile the conflict between Realism and Relativism in Feminist Epistemology.

Especially, Anne Seller does not turn to the analysis of Relativism in the second section of the article but starts to talk about *When to Believe An Authority*. [9] I think this is because in Feminist Epistemology, to study related issues such as Standpoint Theory needs many resources, theories, and testimonies as support, many of which can

be seen as ‘authority.’ So, studying the response of relativists and realists to ‘authority’ may not only help to refine the strengths and weaknesses of both but also show the key to their differences and the possibility that Relativism and Realism have a common ground.

## **2.1 The Comparison Between Realism and Relativism**

### **2.1.1 Definition**

Seller first defines Realism as ‘there is an objective order of reality, which the human observer can know’, [9] which is the same as (A1). The definition of Relativism she gives as ‘all ways of making sense of the world’ [9] corresponds claim that of no best alternatives epistemically in [B1], but Seller emphasizes ‘every woman’s experience is valid’ [9] sounds quite like Radical Relativism. However, Seller tries to prevent this definition from going out of the border of Relativism into Subjectivism in her article, which I will mention in 2.3.3.

### **2.1.2 The Strength and Weakness of Realism**

#### (1) Strength

The strength of Realism, according to Seller, is that ‘we all agree with some truth’ [9] and some ways to find them, which may bust some ridiculous non-knowledge rumors about gender, even if this advantage is more political or functional.

#### (2) Weakness

The weakness of Realism is revealed when we ask how we know the truth: we may ask for a scientific approach, as Seller specifically pointed out, ‘rational-scientific’ [9] without male bias seeking by many feminists.

First, this will lead to ‘An elitist epistemology,’ [9] which is a problem politically but also related to epistemic unbalance between the elites and the masses.

Second, the movement of feminism struggles to break the chains that males put on females from its beginning, with the awareness and reflection of many extraordinary women, many oppressions within social structure including the aspect of education, the aspect of religion, [5] and the aspect of ethnicity [8] have been found. As the reflection goes deeper, the system of scientific knowledge and relative scientific methodology also attracts many feminists and some of them claim to recognize that the doing of science can also be an expression of gender. [1] So the so-called ‘rational-scientific’ contains many ideologies and false consciousnesses that make women feel oppressed. According to Seller’s statement, realists insist that we need not be positivists and guarantee value-free cognitive processes precisely but continue to ask whose interests are served under our cognitive processes of gaining knowledge or justifying. However, this does not tell us what is true and has hidden dangers of undemocratic politics (By telling others what interests served under their epistemic system but from the perspective of my epistemic system).

### 2.1.3 The Strength and Weakness of Relativism

#### (1) Strength

In *The Appeal of Relativism*, [9] Seller praises Relativism in its political and epistemological aspects because Relativism advocates epistemic difference and admits the diversity of cognitive framework, which leads to the claim of valid experience and corresponding situated knowledge within different communities, ‘You cannot know what is wanted or felt and cannot discover oppression unless you listen to people.’ [9]

#### (2) Weakness

In the article, the author does not have an independent analysis of the weakness of Relativism. However, from my point of view, the author generally understands Relativism’s weakness in two directions. The first direction is that due to the claim of validity and equality of all epistemic alternatives, it sometimes disarms feminists because sexist’s views and experience can also be appealed. The second direction is that many relativists, as feminists, desire a kind of ‘truth’ about women due to the first direction. But this kind of ‘truth’ hardly be found if we adopt a perspective of Relativism.

## 2.2 Critical Recognition through Comparison

### 2.2.1 About ‘Scientific Methods’

#### (1) Knowledge as Control or Power

As Bergin mentions in her article about some problems with ‘objectivity’, [4] which researchers claim about their outputs, from a feminist perspective, the scientific methods involve many value judgments and cognitive patterns accumulated based on specific historical conditions, gender positions, Etc. It prefers feature [B2] of Relativism rather than (A2) of Realism. This trend is evident in Seller’s article, manifesting in her critique of Realism in 2.1.2 and her introduction of ‘knowledge as control or power,’ [9] which indicates another aspect of scientific knowledge about domination and control instead of an objective way of gaining the truth about the world.

#### (2) Analysis of The Cause

Seller also mentions that the authority can share views with us. When views are about observations and surveys of the world, we can use our political commitments to decide our view of the truth. Seller uses the disagreement on the radiation problem between her and experts to show that people can use their value systems to analyze the cause by, for example, deciding which set of statistics to choose. Seller thinks that the differences between realists and relativists do not look so great in this aspect.

### 2.2.2 About Experience

#### (1) Test of Realist’s Theory

The observations shared by the authority mentioned in 2.2.1 are more like materials that need some epistemic approach (including scientific methods) to get conclusions. Seller is interested when the authority shares the idea, vision, or theory with us. I think if we reflect on the relationship between ‘women’s experience’ and ‘the idea, vision, or theory,’ and if we regard the idea, vision, or theory as claims to the knowledge and relevant justification about reality, then we can get some recognition about the feature

(A1) of Realism and feature [B1] of Relativism. Seller's keyword on this relation is 'exchange,' [9] 'between someone who holds a view and others who try out that view for themselves'. [9] Realism points out that the claim about the oppression facts cannot be reduced to whether anyone believes it but Relativism values women's experience to decide. However, the differences become less acute when we ask 'how we can know, or decide, whether or not we are oppressed,' [9] in which we can then find the 'exchange' processes:

[1] Others tell Seller the theory about the oppression facts of women.

[2] Seller then reinterprets behaviors and events that belong to her personal experience.

[1] [2] show that women's experience interact with the theory about reality to help it be 'established.' So (A1) feature of Realism may be rechecked that the knowledge of reality claimed by the theory or something else by realists only through the ultimate test by experience of a particular community that it then can stand.

I think [1] [2] also indicated a kind of form that needs to be carried by interactions within groups rather than individual independent experience, so even though the whole process 'is consistent with relativist's insistence' [9] it is still necessary to highlight that the validity of the experience in the community rather than each individual, which give [B1] a conditional restriction, and also echo the author's avoidance of Subjectivism in the definition of 2.1.1.

(2) To Analyze the Experience Itself?

However, realists still desire to check the experience itself, to analyze what may be the fact, the value, the latent interest, Etc. Seller argues against it by proposing that in the experience, various conditions such as values and facts become 'inextricably combined,' [9] so it cannot be analyzed as clearly as a practical syllogism [9] and distinguish a causal structure in which some elements follow others.

However, realists may still insist on asking which description is true, and others may be dishonest. It related to the weakness of Relativism in 2.1.3 that can we seek a valid but also 'true' description of our experience?

### 2.2.3 Small Summary

Based on the above, Seller, on the one hand, criticizes the so-called objective research method ((A2)). On the other hand, she emphasizes the validity of the experience advocated by Relativism. At the same time, Seller has a strong tendency to find a new definition of 'truth' under the framework of Relativism to overcome the shortcomings of Relativism. Also, Seller values the experience of community and corresponding political meaning. These cognitive achievements eventually prompt Seller to propose 'the community of resistance' to reconcile the contradictions between Realism and Relativism.

## 2.3 'The Community of Resistance'

I hope to integrate the author's 'The Community of Resistance' discussion through the following four aspects.

### 2.3.1 Expression and Necessary Politic Commitments

'The Community of Resistance' means being in a community where every member hears, interacts, and supports each other, and everyone can 'feel safe to speak of hidden or recognized experience.' [9] At the political level, this represents a politically adequate appeal. On the level of epistemology, this means that different cognitive systems can fully open to others to understand the other party's presuppositions and concept formation and reversely review their own experience and cognitive system, then keep further exchanges in later listening and dialogues.

### 2.3.2 Truth-Finding

Seller's process of 2.3.1 differs from Bergin's process of conversation, which can erase epistemic differences [4] because it is also a truth-finding process. In the community, women will decide 'what is really true there' [9] by exchanging and checking their experience. Like the perception of physical objects, shared recognition with others obtained in this active dialogue is the 'perception' of reality about women's situation. In this process, the 'truth' that Relativism desires and the 'experience' that Realist's analysis sometimes lacks are combined. The platform between Realism and Relativism is found: It's a dynamic process of producing knowledge, 'neither knowledge nor political solutions are final, they consist rather in continual doing.' [9]

### 2.3.3 Valid Experience of Community

Seller values each woman's experience, but she thinks the experience of the isolated individual 'cannot show what is going on' [9] because of the lack of conversation with others. So, she illustrates that experience in a dialogue-active community. Thus, 'every' in her definition, 'every woman's experience is valid,' [9] I think, is more likely to express the meaning of 'every woman's experience cannot be simply ignored.'

### 2.3.4 Problem-solving Benefits

'The community of resistance' can help solve the problems of 'About my past' [9] and 'The communities which have something *fundamentally* disagree with me' [9] emerging in Relativism.

## 3 Individual Disagreements Towards 'The Community of Resistance'

### 3.1 The Danger of Bigger Relativism

In my opinion, 'the community of resistance' has the danger of just becoming a bigger Relativism instead of a politically adequate and knowledge-gaining process, which means a possibility that the claims of knowledge from 'the community of resistance' are only relative to 'the community of resistance' itself but cannot represent a kind of 'reality.' According to my reflection, three possible ways may result in this danger.

The instability of our epistemic system may be the first possible way. On the one hand, in a community where every member is open to expressing, we can collectively try to capture some possible knowledge of reality by listening to and reflecting on the experience of others and sharing our own experience. However, on the other hand, our epistemic system is different from a complicated machine that operates under strict rules and procedures. Once it is affected by other patterns, the pattern of our expression of experience may change. Seller seems to adopt an ideal model: many different minds are gathered in a community, express, receive, and reflect, and then knowledge continuously be produced. However, she may forget that, at the same time, these minds also change and reshape themselves. For example, some minds may tend to imitate others unaware, and some may become silent about their own experience, not because of politics or other factors related to the community but for initial reasons in the function of their epistemic system. The change then leads these individuals to express their views not as original as it is assumed. As a result, the epistemic activities of ‘the community of resistance’ may change little by little to a particular pattern compared to the assumed original knowledge-gaining pattern.

Too many non-structure and environmental factors may sometimes be difficult to control, and this may be the second possible way to lead to danger. For example, Seller amplifies the role and power of interaction, but interaction also be shaped by many factors like ideology, according to relativists. The structure in a politic-open zone with knowledge-producing progress in which every woman talks and reflects on the meaning of their cognitive concept and then finds some agreement is quite concise, but the actual world is complex. Once there are other factors but not the function set by Seller start to lead the cognitive activities of the community, then the community may start to go towards some directions.

The third possible way is from the negative perspective that it is hard to find an external way to examine whether ‘the community of resistance’ is during a continuous knowledge-gaining process instead of forming its own ideology system. Realists may want to help to check this worry, but they then will face the problems of the ‘objective scientific method’ and ‘hypothesis’s ultimate test as experience’ mentioned by Seller, so they have to be involved in a group to discuss and find, but as ‘the community of resistance’ has a kind of universality that need everyone’s contribution,<sup>[9]</sup> this group then can be seen as a branch of ‘the community of resistance.’ So, we need an external way, outer the talkative people, to examine whether something is wrong happening in the community, but it is hard to find such a way, just like when Realism tries to get external justification of the objective reality they claim to prevent going into Relativism’s specific context.

### **3.2 ‘A Close Analogue with Perception’**

Seller believes that through intersubjectively checking, the community members can be confident that their feelings can represent some reality as a response. Seller also thinks it is a close analog to perception, which can represent some real physical object in the external world, like Representationalism points. However, due to such a claim about analog made by Seller, we can then use skeptical patterns to undermine the

effectiveness of Seller's truth-perusing process. For example, when women with different situated cognitive systems find some sharing meanings between them about marriage and love through mutual caring and talking, why can we simply and confidently assert that those meanings have to do with the reality of women's marriage and love but not just as a result of some consensus that exists in human language expression patterns, more radical, some basic intuitions of human as creature transmitted by the form of meanings and feelings?

## 4 Conclusion

In conclusion, Realism and Relativism in Feminist Epistemology have their respective features, strengths, and weaknesses. In *Realism versus Relativism: Towards a Politically Adequate Epistemology*, Seller values situated cognition, valid experience, and alternative description of the world in Relativism but also admits that 'truth' in Realism is meaningful. The middle ground between Realism and Relativism is 'the community of resistance,' which can reconcile the conflict, but there are also limitations of being too idealistic. The author still strongly prefers Relativism, so in the future, I may do more research on Feminist Realism and try to figure out solutions based on Realism theory in Feminist Epistemology.

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