

Situatedness

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Situatedness is the notion that our lived experiences formatively shape the way we see, interpret, and respond to the world around us.

Seeing Thestrals, Understanding Social Marginalization

In the famed fantasy series *Harry Potter*, written by J.K. Rowling¹, thestrals are a type of horse, with bat-like wings, skeletal bodies, and reptilian faces. The narrator describes Harry Potter's first sighting of thestrals in the *Order of the Phoenix* as follows:

If he had to give them a name, he supposed he would have called them horses, though there was something reptilian about them, too. They were completely fleshless, their black coats clinging to their skeletons, of which every bone was visible. Their heads were dragonish, and their pupil-less eyes white and staring. Wings sprouted from each wither—vast, black leathery wings that looked as though they ought to belong to giant bats. (Rowling, 2014)

Despite their ominous appearance, thestrals are harmless. But what makes them special in the series, and central to this discussion on situatedness, is that thestrals can only be seen by people who have witnessed death. In a lesson on magical creatures, Rubeus Hagrid, the gamekeeper in the series, asks his pupils, “Who can tell me why some of you can see them and some can’t?” The book-smart heroine, Hermione Granger, responds: “The only people who can see thestrals are people who have seen death.” Harry Potter can see them because he witnessed the death of his parents. Likewise, Luna Lovegood, a friend of Harry’s, can also see them because she witnessed the death of her mother. But unlike Harry and Luna, Hermione and Ron, Harry’s closest friends, cannot see thestrals because they haven’t seen death.

Though thestrals are a fictional example, they effectively highlight how our lived experiences affect what we come to see as ‘real’ or ‘true’ in the world. Thestrals are simultaneously visible to some and invisible to others, as are some experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, fat-phobia, classism, and sexism. Thestrals are also a powerful metaphor for those who have experienced loss, and how that loss changes our world.

For those reading this text who have witnessed death (like Harry and Luna), are there ways you experience the world differently because of it? Have celebratory days like Mother's Day or Father's Day changed? Has a specific material item, like a keepsake, a piece of clothing, or a photo, perhaps taken on a new meaning? Or maybe your overall outlook on life has shifted since that experience? Many of these are common experiences for those who have experienced loss, and like the thestral, may not be 'real' or 'visible' (at least in the same way) to those who have not.

Considering the concept of situatedness beyond the example of death can be useful in making sense of how other experiences shape our reality in profound and formative ways. Situatedness refers to the interconnectedness of meaning and our sociocultural, historical, and/or geographical contexts. Said simply, situatedness highlights the ways in which we see and live in the world differently based on our past experiences and understanding of social contexts.

In my own teaching, I've used the concept of situatedness to better understand the problematic use of Indigenous mascots and imagery in professional sports. Names such as "Chiefs," "Tomahawks," "Indians," "Eskimos," "Seminoles," and "Thunderbirds" (among others in circulation), have culturally and geographically specific—and sometimes sacred—meanings to members of distinct Indigenous communities. Many Indigenous peoples (and others) therefore feel these names should not be used by non-Indigenous groups or organizations. In short, they are offensive to many Indigenous peoples and groups because *they are situated* in broader contexts of cultural appropriation, colonialism, and cultural imperialism. For those who do not see these wider contexts, or who have not experienced the negative effects of Indigenous racism, cultural appropriation, or colonialism first-hand, the use of Indigenous mascots may be seen as 'not a big deal.'

For those who have, however, or who understand these wider social and historical contexts, they are seen as racially insensitive, derogatory, and discriminatory. Why is it problematic to have a team called the “Redskins”? It is only through understanding the concept of situatedness—and the socio-cultural, historical, and/or geographical contexts of these debates—that we can start to understand divergent experiences and perspectives.

The concept of situatedness can be applied to almost anything, given that our beliefs emerge from particular social locations. I find it is particularly useful when it comes to better understanding issues of social marginalization, which are typically more visible to those who have experienced them, compared to those who have not. How might experiences of sexism and sexual harassment in the workplace be more visible to women? How might inaccessible washrooms be more visible to those with mobility issues or to trans and non-binary people? How might medical encounters be more triggering for people who are overweight, Black, trans, and/or Indigenous? How might micro racial aggressions be more readily perceived by persons of colour and Indigenous folks? How might classism be experienced more acutely by those with lower income? And how might examples of ageism be more common to older individuals? Depending on our own social locations, we may not be able to experience these things in the same ways as other people. However, through an understanding of the concept of situatedness, we can acknowledge that thestrals—as a metaphor for social privilege and marginalization—are, indeed, all around us.

Discussion Questions

- How does the concept of situatedness help us understand experiences of sexism and sexual harassment in the workplace, inaccessible washrooms, fraught medical encounters, micro racial aggressions, cultural ageism, and class discrimination? If you are a member of a marginalized group directly affected by these experiences, how is your understanding of these experiences different than those who are not? Furthermore, how might members of the same marginalized group experience discrimination differently, and how might these inter-group differences be explained using the concept of situatedness?
- How have your own experiences shaped the way you see education, professional sport, religion, or some other feature of social life?

Reference

Rowling, J. K. (2014). *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Bloomsbury.

Additional Resources

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HarvardX. Situatedness Animation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkT9sFsCqB8>

Laird, K. (2019, May 28). Understanding our situatedness, blowing up assumptions. <https://theblacksheepagency.com/blog/understanding-our-situatedness-blowing-up-assumptions>

Notes

1. The author does not support Rowling's transphobic views, which were made public on social media in 2020.