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On Power and Measurement Systems:

Feminist Standpoint Empiricism and the Sexual Experiences Survey

Abstract

This article examines the early development of Mary Koss's influential Sexual Experiences Survey, a tool developed to assess the prevalence of rape, and defends Koss' then-controversial interpretive choice to endorse a broad-scope definition of rape. Koss's choice was well-justified, I argue, because it was rooted in an empirical recognition of unjust power dynamics that confounded researcher's attempts to measure the pervasiveness of rape. By adopting a feminist standpoint, Koss and her colleagues recognized how a range of measurement procedures implicitly disempowered respondents' capacity to express inquiry-relevant data. Through this identification, Koss fine-tuned the measurement instrument against confounding and disempowering factors. One result of my argument is that, for a phenomenon like rape, the iterative development of a valid and reliable measurement system is compatible with, and in some respects comparable to, the feminist project of identifying how gendered relations of power enable the persistence and concealment of gender-based sexual violence.

Introduction

On the 13th of June, 1993, Mary Koss, a psychologist who studied sexual assault and rape, opened the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* to find her research at the center of a national controversy (Koss 2011). Several years earlier, Koss had co-authored a set of articles that presented a new survey to assess the prevalence of rape among young adult college women in the United States. The Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) was meant to correct some methodological limitations of similar surveys conducted through law enforcement agencies (Koss and Oros 1982). However, the SES generated a new challenge for the researchers. Some respondents reported sexual experiences that fit the definition of

rape as defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), but in the same survey, they did not identify as experiencing rape (Koss 1985). Koss faced an interpretive challenge. To establish a lifetime prevalence estimate, Koss needed to decide whether or not to count behavioral reports of rape alone (about 27%) or counts of self-identification as a victim of rape (4%) (Koss 1987 et al.; Koss 2011). Koss and her colleagues selected the count of behavioral reports, and the "1 in 4" statistic was published in *Ms.* magazine and widely distributed (Sweet 1985).

The shocking "1 in 4" statistic thrust Koss's research into the news. Critics of the survey argued Koss had prioritized her characterization of rape over victims' own. As Katie Roiphe declared, echoing arguments made by social welfare researcher Neil Gilbert, "73 percent of the women categorized as rape victims did not initially define their experience as rape; it was Mary Koss, the psychologist conducting the study, who did" (Roiphe 1993a). Roiphe and Gilbert argued Koss was unscientifically presenting "advocacy numbers" to "change the social perceptions of what constitutes common experience in heterosexual relations" (Gilbert 1991, 65). Their concern was with Koss's wide-scope characterization of rape, which led to an overestimate of the prevalence rate.[1]

This article provides an analysis and defense of Koss's early characterization of rape by adopting feminist standpoint theory. I argue that Koss's interpretive choice was well-justified because it was rooted in an empirical recognition of how power dynamics confounded researcher's attempts to measure the prevalence of rape. Koss and her colleagues recognized and countered a range of procedures through which measurement methods disempowered respondents' capacity to convey inquiry-relevant data. By

[1] Gilbert also voices a moral critique of the SES. They claim that Koss paternalistically undermined respondents' autonomy by describing their experiences with her own words. The idea here, championed by some of the then-self-described feminist critics, was that Koss was undermining women's epistemic authority over their firsthand experiences (cf. Roiphe 1993b; Hoff Sommers 1994). I set this concern aside for the time being.

adopting a feminist standpoint, Koss and her colleagues could recognize a range of confounding and disempowering factors. The article proceeds as follows.

First, I provide a broad overview of the early development of Koss's survey instrument. Section two explicates feminist standpoint empiricism (FSE) as a critical epistemic tool that identifies how unjust relations of power can disempower those who occupy marginalized social locations. FSE is applied directly to the development of Koss's SES in sections three and four, wherein I argue that Koss's methodological improvements to the survey should be understood as an empirical recognition of, and ameliorative response to, the confounding effects of unjust relations of power. Section four also considers and responds to an objection about FSE's conception of power. The last section situates FSE within the developmental process of a measurement system. So situated, I argue that there are two strands of relative epistemic advantage to appreciate. First, that a social location disposes women to better identify the social conditions of sexual violence, and second, that the adoption of a standpoint affords a critical analysis of women's social location *against* regressive conceptions about the nature and prevalence of sexual violence.

1. Case Study: An Early History of the SES

Following the tidal wave of feminist organizing in the 1960s, feminist texts like Susan Brownmiller's *Against our Will* (1976) and social movements like "Take Back the Night" raised public awareness about the shocking prevalence of rape. But even as the public became alert to the problem, the scope was clearly understood. When Koss began to investigate the issue, yearly incidence estimates captured by federal legal agencies like the FBI and the Bureau of Justice Statistics were between 65 and 140 per 100,000 people (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1984; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1984). These estimates looked comparatively low, compared to Diane Russell's estimated a rate of 2,688 per 100,000 from a small sample of interviews in San Francisco (Russell 1984). The massive discrepancy caught Koss's attention.

Dissatisfied with methods used by federal agencies, Koss's first attempt at an improved survey sought to reduce the influence of confounding factors by focusing questions on behavioral experiences. She asked, for example, "Have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man when you didn't want to because he used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.)?" Such a question could identify a case of rape (per the FBI's criteria) without defining or using the term in the survey (Koss and Oros 1982).[2] As a validity check, Koss included a final question asking respondents, "Have you ever been raped?" This validity question could be compared to reported behavioral experiences to identify which questions tracked "accurate" experiences of rape. However, to her surprise, this validity check resulted in far fewer self-reports of rape than the behavioral questions did. More than half of the women (57%) affirmed behaviorally specific experiences of rape but denied that they were raped (Koss and Oros 1982). There was not a clear baseline to establish any question's validity. Later reflecting on this discrepancy, Koss wrote that, "The conclusion that women could report experiencing behaviors constituting rape but not perceive themselves as raped was a lightbulb moment *revealing an alternative interpretation of what initially looked like a dismaying measurement problem*" (2011, 350, emphasis mine).

This was a significant juncture for Koss. She could have adopted the interpretation that the self-identification question ("Have you ever been raped?") offered the better incidence count than the behavioral questions. This would result in a much lower prevalence estimate, about 4%. Instead, Koss interpreted the behavioral questions as a validity check against the self-identification question to bring to light an unexpected discrepancy in respondents' self-perception. This allowed her to infer that self-identification did not provide a baseline for validity, for perhaps many reasons. Did respondents hold

[2] At the time, the FBI defined rape as, "the carnal knowledge of a woman by a man, forcibly and against her will. Carnal knowledge here means sexual intercourse. It is not necessary that the penetration of the vagina be complete and sexual emission need not occur" (Law Enforcement Assistance Administration 1975; Federal Bureau of Investigation 1986). As you may imagine, this leaves many criteria unspecified.

different characterizations of rape? Is there a social or cognitive pressure that disincentivized self-identification? In the end, Koss decided that, for the survey instrument, it was empirically preferable to avoid labelling rape and rely exclusively on behavioral criteria.

To further understand this discrepancy, Koss conducted a series of studies to understand the victimization experienced by what she termed "hidden" or "unacknowledged rape victims" (Koss 1985; Koss et al. 1988; Warshaw 1988, 202-205). These studies included a scale that asked respondents to evaluate their self-perception of their victimization on a four-point scale (Koss 1988; Rutherford 2017). The four degrees were:

1) 'I don't feel I was victimized'
2) 'I believe I was a victim of serious miscommunication'
3) 'I believe I was a victim of a crime other than rape'
4) 'I believe I was a victim of rape'

Data from this scale offered two important insights. The first was that Koss and her colleagues were able to obtain some evidence for their theory that respondents were not self-identifying experiences rape, even when they reported sufficient behavioral criteria. The second insight was that, when respondents were split into groups based on their relationship to the perpetrator, perceptions of victimization varied between those who were raped by a stranger rape and those who were raped by an acquaintance. Of those who reported sufficient behavioral criteria of rape by a *stranger*, 22% labeled the experience a miscommunication, while 55% labeled it rape. Conversely, of those who reported sufficient criteria of rape by an *acquaintance*, 51% labeled the experience a miscommunication, while 23% labeled it rape (Koss 1988, 12). This suggested that the label respondents ascribed to their experiences may depend on their relationship to the offender.

Building on this body of work, Koss continued to refine the SES by rewording questions and focusing on behavioral experiences. She removed the validity check, which asked directly about rape, and the survey was given the de-sexualized title, "National Survey of Inter-Gender Relationships." In

sum, the SES was accompanied by a number of other surveys to assess beliefs about gender roles, personality traits, perception of victimization, and much more. With these refinements, Koss worked with a team of researchers to distribute the survey on a larger scale, administering it to 6,159 students across 32 higher education institutions in the US.[3] The resultant "1 in 4" statistic has been incorporated into sexual violence prevention education throughout the country. This research played a role in the push toward the first passing of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), where, nine years after the first version of the SES, Koss was invited to testify before the US Congress to provide expert testimony on the bill (Koss, testimony on Violence Against Women 1991).

2. Feminist Standpoint Empiricism

This section lays out a conception of feminist standpoint theory to lay a basis for my argument in the following section. Outside of a few debates among feminist theorists, the term "standpoint" is often used interchangeably with terms like "perspective" or "social location." I follow several standpoint theorists in differentiating a "standpoint" from a "social location" (Hartsock 1983; Collins 1997; Wylie 2004, 2012; Toole 2024; Milanovich 2025). A social location refers to the patterned relationships afforded by the role or position one maintains within a social system: an institutional role, an economic relation, or an identity. Social locations afford patterned forms of relationality that can shape one's attention and, thus, one's epistemic resources. A social location is an abstraction about the kinds of patterned experiences one encounters within a social system. As many social theorists have argued, those who occupy marginalized social locations often incur unique forms of relative epistemic advantages, sometimes quite trivially (Merton 1972; Smith 1974; Haraway 1988; Kukla 2021; Bright 2024; Milanovich 2025). Marginalization situates one to recognize and appreciate data easily overlooked by non-marginalized inquirers, this recognition can cultivate new affective motivations for inquiry and, as a result, unique epistemic aims (Narayan 1988; Bright 2024).

[3] For a more substantial historical account, see Gavey (2005), Levine (2021), and Rutherford (2017).

A standpoint, however, is *a situated political analysis of a social location*; it is a social "project" in the sense that it is developed and refined collectively by those who jointly occupy an approximate location (Weeks 1998). As Wylie puts it, "*standpoints* (as opposed to *locations*) have the especially salient advantage that they *put the critically conscious knower in a position to grasp the effects of power relations on their own understanding and that of others*" (2004, 346, emphasis mine). The epistemic aim of a standpoint is to provide knowledge of how, and that, the epistemic resources of a targeted social location are produced, authorized, and maintained.[4]

Importantly, this is a necessarily collective enterprise, since any robust analysis of a social location must attend to the common features of how that location is experienced among a diverse set of its occupants. Intemann argues that this manifests as a methodological commitment to centering the empirical adequacy of inquiry (2015). Classically, a standpoint is developed and collectively "achieved" with regard to one's own social location alongside others who similarly occupy that location. A feminist standpoint is developed concerning women's social location, for example. Because inquiry is always situated, we tend to have the best epistemic access to the social locations we ourselves occupy, but this does not limit our knowledge of other locations. Of course, people may occupy many social locations, and these often vary over time (Milanovich 2025, 10). As an epistemic theory, a standpoint is a project that investigates how a social location shapes and constrains the epistemic resources and capacities of a knower, always with attention to the dynamics of power that scaffold the social and material conditions of that location.

Central to my purposes, FSE is founded on a responsibility to "challenge, rather than reinforce, systems of oppression in order to arrive at a group consciousness of *how power structures and influences the*

[4] Some standpoint theorists distinguish the "epistemic privilege" of a *standpoint* from the "epistemic advantage" afforded by occupying a *social location* (cite Crasnow 2008; Tanesini 2019; Tilton 2024; Toole 2024; Milanovich 2025). This distinction will be relevant for my discussion in section five.

world (including epistemic practices)" (Intemann 2015, emphasis mine). This normative commitment to anti-oppression contextualizes the epistemic aims of inquiry, shaping foundational research questions and informing methodological practices of data collection, interpretation, and dissemination. Informed by a commitment to anti-oppression, researchers characterize objects of research with attention to the unjust relations of power which structure them. A novel characterization of the object under study can make "certain kinds of questions meaningful and appropriate [in ways] that would not be so in the context of another overall characterization" (Longino 1990, 99). In this sense, by the adoption of a feminist standpoint—a political analysis of a social location—inquiry can attend to unique features of the object of study (e.g., how the object is structured by particular relations of power), ultimately generating unorthodox characterizations of the object which make new lines of inquiry appropriate.

3. Power Relations: How they Distort, Confound, and Suppress

I shall argue here that Koss's improvements to the SES should be understood as an empirical recognition of, and ameliorative response to, the epistemic effects of unjust relations of power. But first, I must clarify why power relations matter to social inquiry at all. Here I adopt Allen's rather broad concept of power, and specifically her conceptions of "power-over" and "power-to".[5] For Allen, power-over or "the ability of an actor or set of actors to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in a nontrivial way" can be easily imagined in research practices (1998, 33). Certainly, most objectionable manifestations of power-over are not ethically permitted in contemporary research practices (e.g., forced participation in a clinical trial), but this does not mean that our ethically permissible research practices are not themselves situated in relations of power.

As Rolin has argued, relations of power are often opaque and resistant to our attempts to understand them (2009, 223). For instance, effective research on gender-based discrimination is often

[5] For Allen, the umbrella concept of power is defined as "the ability or capacity of an actor or set of actors to act," but particular manifestations of power carve out more specific criteria (1998, 36). This characterization of power has roots in Lukes (1974) and Wartenberg (1990).

inhibited because of participants' emotional reactions such as fear, disgust, shame, or anger—all of which can dissuade participants from sharing their experiences (2009, 220).[6] Of course, to say that respondents may withhold information based on affective experiences does not necessarily mean that participants' emotional reactions are direct responses to researchers themselves. As Allen stresses, power-over does not require any intentionality on the part of particular individuals because "much of the power that is relevant to feminist theory is held or exercised in 'routine and unconsidered ways'" (1998, 33). Interviewees may, for example, have habitualized cognitive practices of self-silencing or evasion as a response to shame about a particular question, independent of the researcher's intentions for the questions.

Unjust relations of power shape the language to which participants have access through complex sociopolitical structures.[7] They may lack the language to clearly or effectively describe their experiences to researchers—a hermeneutical injustice to participants which strains inquiry (Fricker 2007). Allen would describe this as a lack of "power-to," or a lack of "the ability of an individual actor to attain an end or series of ends" (1998, 34). This kind of disempowerment is seen in lacking the means to communicate, or in facing undue pressures *not* to communicate, one's experiences as a result of power relations.[8] When one develops the language to share their experiences, they have developed a new

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[6] Some related methodological research on "reactivity" tracks a number of ways in which respondents alter responses within the context of inquiry. For an overview, see Runhardt's "trichotomy of reactive change" (2021) which explicates Golembiewski et al.'s early work (1976).

[7] The function of value-laden descriptions of scientific terms have been frequently discussed by feminist philosophers of science. See Longino and Doell (1983, 209) and Alexandrova (2018, 423-426). For more discussion on epistemological and ethical concerns with descriptive language in surveys on gender-based violence specifically, see Hester and Donovan (2009).

[8] Many kinds of disempowerment do not entail blame or any individual responsibility. Experiencing disempowerment may be analogous to experiencing injustice in this sense.

capacity. Apt and effective communication is a power-to, or a kind of empowerment. Forms of disempowerment can clearly harm research participants, but they also cause problems for researchers who are inquiring into sensitive social phenomena (such as sexual assault), because respondents may be structurally disposed—without intention—to withhold or distort evidence.

Turning back to Koss's early investigation of the prevalence of rape, she identified several ways in which then-standard methods of inquiry disempowered respondents and led to poor data collection practices. She recognized that, at the time, many of the nationally representative surveys measured rape as though it were comparable to other violent crimes. In particular, she identifies glaring methodological issues with the 1982 National Crime Survey (NCS). The survey

> includes items such as, 'Were you knifed, shot at, or attacked with some other weapon by anyone at all during the last six months?' The screen question to alert the interviewer to a possible rape is 'Did someone try to attack you in some other way?' Affirmative responses are followed by questioning that uses the word 'rape' repeatedly. (Koss and Oros 1982).

Partially because of these methodological issues, national reports like the NCS fed into a broader narrative that rape was a comparatively rare occurrence. For their experience to count, respondent must 1) identify their experience as violent, akin to the use of a lethal weapon, 2) infer that their experience of rape was an "attack," and 3) descriptively identify that experience as "rape." The effect of these constraints is that the operationalized definition of rape, which was measured, was more severe than the in-text definition that the NCS endorsed.

The experiences reported to the NCS which were labeled as rape were likely extreme relative to the legal criteria. This is, in part, because the operationalized characterization of rape in the NCS utilized more criteria than the legal definition. This may provide one explanation why Koss's victimization rate was 10 to 15 times larger than what the NCS calculated (Koss 1987, 168). The NCS's operationalization of this extreme characterization of rape could function to disempower respondents by providing government-authorized justification for respondents to doubt, deny, and discount the use of

some labels for sexual violence. Survivors who do not recognize their experience of rape as violent, do not conceptualize the experience as an attack, and do not use the word "rape" are inhibited from sharing their experiences. This is a concrete harm to respondents themselves *and* the validity of the prevalence measure.

Another site of disempowerment Koss recognized was in how law enforcement agencies counted and published data about the frequency of rape. Most data on rape took the form of *incidence counts*—or the total number of incidents reported to law enforcement in a year. A yearly incident count gives a blurry lens to recognize the scope of the problem. A high incidence count may mean, for example, that many people were raped once, or that a few people were raped multiple times; that could be a difference between saying that there are a small number of serial rapists *or* there are a large number of single-time offenders.

Because the NCS characterizes rape as a criminal offence, the incidence count only reflects *that* the crime occurred. Surveys like the 1982 NCS were shaped by the institutional interests of law enforcement agencies aiming to reduce the incidence of violent crimes. But shaping the characterization of rape into an incidence count of reported criminal offences elides important aspects of the phenomenon: an incidence count temporally constrains the experience a single event tracked within a calendar year. Incidence does not track the recurring after-effects of rape or the duration of effect on one's mental health. In addition to incidence counts, Koss and her colleagues wanted a *lifetime prevalence estimate* for rape, or an estimate of how many adult women had been raped within their lifetime. This estimate would enable research on the long-term mental health effects of sexual assault, as the aftereffects of assault can remain with respondents for much longer than a calendar year (Koss 1987, 162). Prevalence counts enable researchers to answer finer-grained questions about experiences of rape and thus empower respondents. In the next section, I will speak more about the process of empowerment within Koss's research before turning to a clarificatory objection.

4. Empowerment in the Processes of Research

Here I follow Rolin's argument that, when researchers inquire into power-sensitive social phenomena, "the process of generating evidence needs to be coupled with a process of empowerment if social scientists are to generate evidence under suppressive social conditions" (2009, 224). Because the current social conditions of an unjust society are constituted by relations that encourage the suppression or distortion of some human experiences, critical researchers ought to adopt practices that counteract these effects in the generation of evidence. This kind of empowerment is the capacity to act "in spite of" or "in response to" power held by others (Allen 2008, 160). Here, empowerment can take many forms: providing hermeneutical resources, minimizing structural constraints on participants, or adapting methods to limit the effect of uncomfortable emotions—each articulating one's experience *in spite of* the dominant narratives which cloud them. Empowerment requires an anti-oppressive stance *against* manifestations of disempowerment. As Rolin puts it, "when social scientists encounter the barriers of suspicion and mistrust, they could build relations of mutual trust by showing that their research involves a long-term commitment to improve the social and economic conditions of the unprivileged" (Rolin 2009, 224). Empowerment can function epistemically to obtain data that would otherwise be withheld or overshadowed in the absence of an anti-oppressive stance.

Consider a few examples from the SES. First, while Koss adopted legal definitions of rape, she faced the challenge of determining how to measure the criteria of those definitions. In contrast to opaque questions (e.g., the NCS's "Did someone try to attack you in some other way?"), Koss phrased questions in behavior-focused, concrete language that described particular sexual acts. This facilitated empowerment for respondents as it enabled their experiences to be made publicly legible *through* the legal definition—it validated their experience as *real*. Epistemically, this change alone has likely enabled Koss to uncover evidence for the 27% prevalence estimate. One research report published by the US Department of Justice found that behaviorally specific questions identified eleven times as many incidents of rape as non-behaviorally phrased questions (Fisher and Cullen 2000). In a discussion of this finding, the authors note that it is plausibly "due to the sensitive nature of sexual victimization,

graphically descriptive screen questions are needed to prompt reluctant victims to report their victimization to interviewers" (Fisher and Cullen 2000, 14, emphasis mine). Participants' reluctance to report experience may have a number of plausible causes—like insufficient hermeneutical resources or feelings of discomfort—but when researchers signal permissive, non-stigmatizing, or supportive attitudes towards respondents, they were more forthcoming. These behaviorally specific questions operationalized a more concrete definition of rape which was measured. In comparison to the NCS's conception, Koss's characterization did not require a recognition of criminality, violence, or an identification with misogynistic stereotypes about sexual promiscuity often associated with victims of rape.

Relative to the NCS, which permissibly endorsed misogynistic stereotypes, Koss's survey enabled participants to share their sexual experiences with researchers with less stigmatization. Participants' experiences could be recognized as rape and, owing to a broader circulation of the word rape, future women gained access to this hermeneutical resource. A more substantial and practical form of empowerment was made by developing finer-grain distinctions to describe experiences of rape (e.g., stranger rape, date rape, spousal rape).[9] Koss identified correlations between respondents' self-perception of victimization and the relationship respondents had with the perpetrator. Distinguishing between date rape and acquaintance rape, for example, challenged dominant narratives about the victims, perpetrators, relationships, and social contexts of rape. This richer set of characterizations allowed respondents to recognize and name their experiences with a broader conceptual repertoire—respondents gained a greater capacity to interpret and share their experiences.

[9] Sexual violence prevention programs are tailored to the particular nature of the problem under study. Developing a prevention strategy to reduce sexual assault among *strangers* will look different from a comparable program targeted at *acquaintances*, owing to the diverse geographies where these forms of social relations take place.

A potential concern with the foregoing analysis is that counteracting the suppression and distortion effected by power relations implies that there is a deeper, more authentic experience which processes of empowerment identify as unbiased, power-free, or "really real," to use Elisabeth Lloyd's phrase (1995). This claim would be at odds with the relational, constructivist view of power deployed by Allen and Rolin: if power constitutes our social relations so thoroughly, then it cannot be the case that processes of empowerment nullify all effects of power on evidence. Empowerment would implement a new set of power relations. We would not have an obvious reason to believe that the newer set of relations provides a "less biased" view of the phenomenon. Why, epistemically, is the effect of empowerment better than disempowerment?

My aim is not to endorse any "really real" foundation that lies beneath the distortion of relations of power. I am not arguing—as some standpoint theorists have been interpreted—that empowerment renounces the theory-ladenness of our language and offers "immediate" access to the world via a "view from nowhere." After all, standpoint theorists are centrally committed to the thesis that knowledge practices are all socially located (Nelson 1993, 138; Milanovich 2025, 6). Rather, *I am arguing that a critical standpoint (i.e., a situated political analysis of a social location) is developed to identify particular points of disempowerment and their epistemic effects.* Standpoints provide a local analysis of how evidence is distorted by a dominant ideology; subsequent processes of empowerment challenge the specific manifestations of evidential distortion caused by the dominant narrative alongside a commitment to anti-oppression. Distortions of evidence must be empirically recognized before empowerment is epistemically warranted. In this sense, empowerment *does* instate new relations of power, but these relations maintain stronger coherence with empirically recognized features of the social location. Empowerment is preferable to disempowerment because, ultimately, attention to the epistemic effects of power can generate more data about the object of inquiry with specific attention to the social aims of that inquiry. The anti-oppressive commitment is central because it focuses a standpoint's analysis on the empirically recognizable experiences of oppression of a *particular* social location. Empowerment is thus central to projects which

seek to explain sensitive social phenomena. I turn now, finally, to consider how these dynamics of power can affect a measurement system.

5. Situating Standpoint Theory within the Development of a Measurement System

So far, I have argued that the adoption of a critical standpoint enables researchers to attend to the epistemic importance of unjust power relations. Power-sensitive methodological interventions may dampen these epistemic limitations while simultaneously providing relative empowerment against cultural narratives that justify oppression. This situates the application of a standpoint to the SES into a broader literature about the epistemic aims of measurement systems. I argue here that there are two strands of relative epistemic advantage to appreciate. First, women's situation within a social location affords them better access to inquiry-relevant evidence for a refined characterization of rape. Secondly, the adoption of a standpoint affords a critical analysis of women's social location against regressive conceptions about the nature and prevalence of rape. I begin with a general discussion about how measurement systems may be characterized.

Measurement may be understood in a variety of ways (Tal 2015). One framework describes measurement as a *system* that is constructed by coordinating three aspects into coherent relations (Cartwright and Runhardt 2015; Bradburn et al. 2016). Initially, the *characterization* of an explicitly identified category sets the identity conditions for the object to be measured. Characterizations are defined (and redefined) throughout the system's development, but they may initially commit to vague or minimal criteria. For example, a characterization of temperature may begin as a relative sensation on the skin (e.g., steam feels "warmer than" water) before we can define progressively more reliable characterization descriptions that rely less on individual felt sensations (e.g., "the kinetic energy of molecules"). A characterization must also be consistently *represented* by a system of symbolization (e.g., a scale of measurement). This is the second aspect that often constrains the characterization of a phenomenon. Celsius is, for example, a unit of measure that represents a scale if temperature. Symbolized representation provides a precise description of a particular measure (think "20°C").

Representation gives greater descriptive specificity to the system's characterization (compare "warmer than" to "an increase of 5°C"), as well as a reliable and recordable mode of communication and comparison (e.g., answering questions like, "Was this Summer warmer than last?"). Third, measurement systems need *procedures* to ensure that repeatable practices are consistently utilized to measure a phenomenon. Procedures may set appropriate use conditions of a measurement instrument (the placement of a mercury thermometer) as well as the production and calibration of those instruments (e.g., the volume of the inside of a bulb thermometer).

A valid and reliable measurement system requires that the characterization operationally aligns with the symbolic system of representation, and these aspects each cohere with the procedures that measure the target phenomenon. Often, this is a recursive practice, what Hasok Chang calls "epistemic iteration," that narrows toward more valid and reliable characterizations, representations, and procedures by resolving intra-system incoherences (2004). If I modify a measurement procedure, I must identify any subsequent incoherence in the broader system. This is not an exclusively "logical" coherence (i.e., between propositions), but instead a coherence between theoretical characterization, practices of measurement, instrumental construction, and constraints of representational systems. As Chang puts it, "coherence consists in various activities coming together in an effective way toward the achievement of the aims of the system" (2012, 16). These activities may include designing phenomenon-specific procedures, instruments of measurement, and other concrete practices of research.[10]

Another way to think about this form of coherence is to say that, in practice, the output representation of a measurement system depends on the coherence relations of the whole measurement system. I may look at my mercury thermometer to measure the temperature of this room. If the

[10] Recently, Crasnow (2021) and Graefrath and Jahn (2025) offer different arguments for the view that our ontological posits (alongside other constraints such as the aims of a theory and value commitments) can guide our deliberation about which characterizations of a phenomenon are more or less appropriate and coherent with the broader system of commitments.

instrument was well-calibrated, then I would expect that the measure was accurate. This device measures the expansion of the mercury in the glass tube alongside a visual, representational scale. If it *were* the case that the thermometer was measuring the temperature accurately (set aside for this example *how* we would independently know it were accurate), then I could also infer that the thermometer was calibrated under atmospheric pressure roughly comparable to the atmospheric pressure of this room—because the density of the mercury acts as a proxy for measuring the temperature.

We could then say that the meaning conveyed by a represented measure is underdetermined by the system's representational output (21°C). The density of mercury depends on both atmospheric pressure and heat, such that we may use the density as a proxy to measure atmospheric pressure (i.e., a mercury barometer). The representational information a measurement system conveys is indexed to the design of the instrument and its epistemic aims. As a matter of process, developing a measurement system is challenging because, at the outset, we often lack a characterization that clearly distinguishes all of the plausibly confounding factors of the object of measurement. At first we did not know that the density of mercury depends on both temperature and atmospheric pressure. As Chang's insightful historical reconstruction demonstrates, differentiating confounding properties of the object of study is essential to the development of valid and reliable systems of measure (2004).[11]

5.1 How Feminist Standpoint Empiricism Compliments the Development of a Measurement System

When considering how this framework of measurement systems applies to the case of measuring the prevalence of rape—a measurement system which, especially in the early 1980s, was in its infancy—we must begin with an initial characterization of rape. In the first SES, Koss adopted the legal definition of rape as a starting point. At the outset, she assumed that those who had been raped

[11] In rather obvious ways, the measurement of heat is not compelling analogous to a prevalence measure of rape. Measures in the social sciences seldom track transhistorical "indifferent kinds" (Hacking 1999) to which some natural sciences attend. I would accept that this presents a plausible challenge in the long-term (i.e., how do we compare historical measures of a phenomenon maintains a fluid constitution?), but there are some reasons, I suggest, that this may not be so concerning in the short-term.

would report the experience in the survey. The responses to the question "Have you been raped?" would then act as a proxy for the respondent's own experiences. But instead, responses to this question acted as a proxy for *many* confounding factors: a "no" could be mean that the respondent has not experienced the behavioral criteria legally defined as rape, or a "no" could mean that the respondent implicitly adopts an different conception of rape, or even that the respondent does not feel comfortable disclosing this experience on a survey, or countless alternatives. The meaning of "no" on the SES was underdetermined. But what Koss found instead was that the behaviorally focused questions tracked women's experiences with greater validity, and these could be more reliably interpreted in light of the legal definition.

When developing a measurement system, we must identify the confounding factors on which the target phenomenon depends to explain deficiencies in the validity and reliability of the system. Identifying plausible confounding factors in the operational practice of scientific inquiry is a part of the *discovery* of plausible theories and hypotheses—but, once identified, they are subject to testing and public *justification*.[12] Discovery and justification each essential aspects of inquiry and we should not assume that they maintain the same epistemic aims. While there is robust debate about what constitutes effective justification for a claim, there is not a clear or ready-made process that dictates discovery. But if we take seriously the idea that our knowledge of the world is differentially socially distributed, then it is not a far stretch to say that some people will be structurally disposed to excel at the task of discovering novel hypotheses.

For example, consider the Rape is a fundamentally gendered phenomenon. We should not be surprised, then, that women are better situated to identify plausible confounding factors as a measurement system is developed. The gendered nature of sexual violence culturally scaffolds women's experience with an attentiveness to the reality and possibility of rape. As Brison puts it, "Girls in our

[12] In this section I am adopting a broadly operationalist framework to articulate how the characterization of a concept is always developed alongside the methods deployed. See Chang (2019) for an overview.

society are raised with so many cautionary tales about rape that, even if we are not assaulted in childhood, we enter womanhood freighted with postmemories of [other women's experiences of] sexual violence" (2002, 87). Women's social location is structurally disposed to attend to the always-present risks of sexual violence. Interpersonally attending to the always-possible risk of rape affords a cultivated attention to the contextually specific conditions of sexual violence. In this way, women's social location conditions a distinct epistemic advantage for the task of identifying confounding features of rape.

As I write today, about forty years after Koss's research began, public perceptions about the reality of rape have shifted to accept many once-controversial criteria used to define rape. But the public's acceptance of a wider-scope characterization has been slow. Throughout the 1990s, Neil Gilbert relied on—and presumably endorsed—a narrow characterization of rape to argue against the plausibility of Koss's "1 in 4" statistic. For Gilbert, rape is an experience which survivors can clearly recognize, define and recall (1994); rape is not facilitated by verbal or psychological coercion (1998, 359) or by alcohol or drugs (Gilbert 1991, 59); respondents experiences of rape are freely shared with researchers, in the right language, and without prompting (1998, 361); people who have been raped are not likely married to their perpetrator (1998, 359); they would not interact with their perpetrator after the incident, and they almost certainly would not "have sex" with them after being raped (Gilbert 1998, 357); but they would likely seek out social support at rape crisis centers, and/or report their experiences to law enforcement (Gilbert 1998, 359). Though this characterization was certainly not universally endorsed in the 1990s, these criteria found frequent circulation in public discourse about sexual violence. Gilbert's characterization captures many of the implicit justifications for maintaining unjust social relations, and his arguments were widely published in major news outlets like the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* (Gilbert 1993; Gilbert 1991; Roiphe 1993a).

This characterization of rape is alarmingly narrow; it substantially reduces the sensitivity of the measurement to exclude many people's experiences of sexual assault. But this characterization of rape was challenged by feminists who rejected the implicit (and explicit) misogyny of Gilbert's critique. This collective commitment to anti-oppression enabled a new, politically stimulated analysis of the

experience of rape and the social conditions that enabled and concealed its scope from public awareness. The resultant standpoint—manifested in part by Koss's research, but by no means individually because of it—arose as an analysis of women's social location and provided an anti-oppressive explanatory framework to challenge misogynistic characterizations. This analysis offered feminists unique insights into the sociopolitical conditions that enabled the high prevalence of sexual violence.

The epistemic *privilege* of this standpoint conferred strategies of inquiry that supplemented the epistemic *advantage* afforded by women's social location. While women's social location structurally imposes an attention to the conditions of rape, a standpoint affords a political analysis of how those conditions are produced and maintained within society. Such a standpoint *problematizes* dominant narratives about rape, *recognizes* their internalization, and *connects* them to broader, historically contingent social discourses (Milanovich 2025, 10-11). The resultant epistemic advantages and privileges enabled researchers like Koss, and feminists generally, to identify *how* and *that* relations of power confounded their empirical inquiry into the prevalence of rape, but with attention to the real possibility that the high prevalence of rape is a historically specific problem that may be politically challenged and ended.

Conclusion

In sum, unjust relations of power can negatively affect both the *subjects* of research and the *measurement system*. For a social phenomenon like rape, the iterative development of a measurement system—i.e., inquiry into *why* the measure lacks validity or reliability—is comparable to, and compatible with, the feminist project of identifying how gendered relations of power enable the persistence of sexual violence. A politically compelled attention to relations of power is not necessarily at odds with the fundamental goal of measuring social phenomena. The epistemic value of Koss's research is her integration of an explanatory conception of power into the measurement system. Power is, by its definition here, historically contingent. If it is the case that our object of measurement is affected by unjust relations of power, then the epistemic aim of our measurement systems *cannot* be to approximate a transhistorical phenomenon. Instead, measurement systems function in the ongoing, complex

interplay of establishing our always-provincial instruments in light of our non-ideal aims of social science (Kukla 2024). We ought *empirically* to attend to unjust relations of power as we refine systems of measurement.

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