

ESSAY | PEER REVIEWED

An Approach to the Notion of Situated Knowledge

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Abstract

The authors of this essay are members of the Knowledge Construction Commission of the Latin American Music Therapy Committee. In this paper, we set out to investigate the genealogy of the notion of situated knowledge. The notion arises from standpoint theory (Harding, Haraway) and has been fruitful in debates about ways of constructing knowledge that have taken place during the second half of the 20th century. In conjunction with critical geography, it has made it possible to question positivist assumptions and to propose that: a) knowledge is constructed in particular social and historical conditions, affected by political processes; b) it follows that considering knowledge, including scientific knowledge, as universal, neutral, and objective is a myth; c) communities have epistemic privilege when it comes to accounting for their experiences and realities; and, d) the situated nature does not refer to geographical locations but to the reflective and critical processes carried out by communities.

Keywords: knowledge construction; epistemic privilege; epistemic injustice

Editorial Comment

In this short essay, the authors ask themselves what conditions are required for knowledge to be considered situated. Their reflections lead us to recognize the performative nature of the spaces in which we carry out our professional practices, develop theories, and conduct research. They raise situations of injustice due to cognitive capitalism but, at the same time and in line with decolonial perspectives, they

assert their position of epistemic privilege to narrate the development of the discipline in the region.

Introduction

The Knowledge Construction Commission of the Latin American Music Therapy Committee (hereinafter CLAM) is a working group that was formed in 2021. The objectives of the Commission were finalized at the same time as we held our first debate: would our field of reflection focus on “knowledge production” or “knowledge construction”?

Each of these expressions, with their semantic but also political implications, led us to consider the types of knowledge that circulate in music therapy in Latin America and the ways in which we come into contact with international disciplinary production and/or formalize our own practices and make them known.

In dialogue with the work of Zambonini, Díaz Abrahan, and Tosto (2022), we asked ourselves about scientific production in our countries. What are the characteristics of the articles published by Latin American music therapists in academic journals in the region?

To answer this question, we decided to conduct a bibliometric analysis based on a database of documents published in Latin American journals: *Incantare*; *Brazilian Journal of Music Therapy* (Brazil); *Ecos*, *Puentes*, and *Revista de la Red Latinoamericana de Musicoterapia para la Primera Infancia* (Argentina); and *Revista de la Asociación de Musicoterapeutas del Uruguay*, during the period 2016 to 2021. The results of this research were presented at the VIII Latin American Music Therapy Congress in October 2022, held in Argentina (Knowledge Building Commission – CLAM, 2022).

When analyzing the information obtained, we were able to arrive not at conclusions, but at the formulation of more questions: What actions could CLAM take to promote writing and the dissemination of disciplinary knowledge in each of its member countries? What exchange networks could be built in order to make visible the reflections that music therapists in the region make on their own professional practices? How could the inclusion of qualitative analysis in research projects be encouraged so that the results capture the richness of the professional practice of music therapy? And how could we promote the processes of learning new interpretive keys for music therapy in Latin America?

During 2023, our work focused on valuing oral traditions in the processes of constructing and disseminating disciplinary knowledge. These reflections were captured in two podcasts produced by the Knowledge Construction Commission – CLAM (2023a, 2023b), and a third podcast produced in 2024 (Knowledge Construction Commission – CLAM, 2024), encounters that led us to the notion of situated knowledge.

The Notion of Situated Knowledge: Background

Far from being able to mention all the contributions that have helped shape and develop the notion of situated knowledge, and with a particular interest in understanding its genealogy, we decided to focus on two fields that have been central to its formulation: (1) feminist philosophy of science, based on its development in the United States in the second half of the 20th century, and (2) historical geography studies, with Nigel Thrift’s work on spatial formations.

Feminist Philosophy of Science

In the second half of the 20th century, some philosophers of science put forward a critical perspective on the processes of knowledge construction as they were approached in American academia (Haraway, 1995; Harding, 1987). In the standard, positivist version of scientific practices:

- The subject and object of knowledge are presented as a dichotomy: the knowing subject and the object of study are separate, and the knowing subject does not enter the space where the object to be known is located.
- The subject with the capacity for knowledge is an individual, universal, homogeneous, disembodied, and to a certain extent disconnected from their environment. They have the power to see without being seen, and do not see themselves, and therefore lack reflection.
- The visual practices that are implemented in the processes of knowledge production (experiments) are those in which the observer wants to see everything, but from nowhere (fixed gaze).
- The goal of science is to produce universal, value-neutral, and objective knowledge.
- Knowledge is thought of as production, following the logic of the capitalist system which, in its eagerness to accumulate, promotes the predominant position of bibliometrics (databases, impact factors).

We will pause for a moment on this last point. The impact of cognitive capitalism on peripheral countries in the international division of intellectual labor is recognized, for example, in the establishment of English as the lingua franca of science. But it also leaves its mark on the choice of research topics, the way research questions are formulated, as well as the choice of methodologies and the criteria used to evaluate the knowledge produced (Beigel & Sabea, 2014; Zukerfeld, 2008).

The notion of situated knowledge emerges from the problematization and debates surrounding the idea of objectivity in scientific knowledge proposed by positivism. At the confluence of feminism and its observations about patriarchal ways of doing science, and the defeat of postmodernism with the unsolvable problem of relativism associated with it, Donna Haraway (1995) focuses on scientific practices, that is, on the work that scientists do, and, making a critical reading of those practices, tells us that:

- The subjects who know are not universal, they are not homogeneous.
- Scientists are immersed in a culture, they have ideals to which they aspire, they have ideologies that condition the ways in which they understand the object they intend to study and, not least, they occupy positions of power.
- Experiments place the observer's eye in a dominant position with respect to the object being studied, which can sometimes be experienced as violent.

Understanding scientific practices in this way, acknowledging the existence of their axiological, ideological, and cultural components, knowledge loses its aspiration to be objective, universal, and neutral. Feminist studies of science tell us that, instead, knowledge is always embodied, partial, and situated. For the feminist philosophical proposal, the partiality of knowledge, far from detracting from the work of scientists, becomes a call to responsibility. It is an invitation to make explicit the position from which they seek to understand the phenomena they study.

Historical Geography Studies

From another perspective, Nigel Thrift and other authors of critical geography open the field of social sciences to a relational and political conception of space. In line with feminist thought, especially that of Haraway, Thrift (1996) argues that the boundaries between subject and object are difficult to draw. Interested in studies of practices rather than studies of scientific theories, and concerned with issues related to agency, that is, what actors do in the world and how and why they do it, this author criticizes the Cartesian idea of the split subject, "both because the interior and exterior of the subject are folded

into each other and because the things that we have conventionally represented as objects, such as machines, are allowed into the realm of action and the actor” (p. 2).

Our team has found other similarities between feminist proposals and those made by these geographers. We could mention, mainly, the appreciation for non-representational theories of the world; the notion that the world of ideas is understood through its implementation (what they call thinking in action); the criticism of the predominance of the sense of sight in understanding how to carry out research processes; and the interest in understanding cognition in terms of being embodied and situated, among the most notable.

We would like to acknowledge here the contribution of geographers to the notion of situated knowledge based on their reflections on the contexts in which the phenomena we wish to understand occur. For Thrift, contexts are not scenarios where events occur and people act. “Rather, I consider context to be a necessary constituent element of interaction, something active, differentially extensive, and capable of problematizing and working on the limits of subjectivity” (p. 3). This active nature brings contexts closer to the idea that they have a performative value. Shotter (as cited in Thrift, 1996, p. 43) understands that “rather than living ‘in’ space and time, we explain time and space practically, in relation to our way of life.” In other words, subjects behave, think, feel, speak, and relate to other subjects according to the space-times they inhabit.

The Construction of Situated Knowledge

Following the Colombian anthropologist Piazzini Suárez (2014), we would like to propose that knowledge is recognized as situated because it arises from reflective and critical processes and not because it is generated in a specific geographical location.

Especially for our topic of reflection, we are interested in distinguishing between local knowledge (formulated by scientists, researchers, and teachers in the region, as opposed to global knowledge, which comes from Europe and North America) and situated knowledge. In other words, knowledge produced in Latin America is not always situated; sometimes it is only local. Thus, placing all knowledge in its historical and social context is necessary but not sufficient for it to be considered situated.

Situated knowledge is not an a priori condition but the result of a construction task that starts from the experiences and knowledge that certain groups (countries, regions, communities) have of the world and seeks to transform it. It is not a question of geography but of geopolitics. Situated knowledge contains a political dimension, a dimension of articulation with the various instances and actors that exercise power.

What does it mean to articulate scientific practices with power? To answer this question, and limiting the scope of the answer to the field of music therapy in Latin America, we agree with the reflections of authors who work from decolonial perspectives (Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, Rita Segato). In agreement with them, we propose that disciplinary knowledge could be considered situated to the extent that the criteria used to evaluate those involved in its construction (teachers, students, researchers, academics) are made explicit; it will be situated to the extent that the racial, cultural, class, and gender components of those who practice music therapy in the region are recognized.

Regarding the methodological aspects related to the construction of situated knowledge, we have not found references in the literature that identify particular and specific methods that could guarantee the results of their application. For Harding (1987), whatever the method or strategy, it is a matter of taking into account the multiplicity of points of view that are part of the phenomenon to be studied and of carrying out scientific practices with three key questions: how knowledge is produced, from where, and for whom. She suggests, then:

- Listen carefully to the subjects who are protagonists of the experiences or phenomena, or who live with them.
- Question hegemonic or traditional points of view about how to approach research on the phenomenon.
- Observe not only the phenomenon but also its surroundings; observe what is not considered relevant by traditional approaches to science.
- Look for “patterns of organization of historical data not previously recognized” (p.11).

Piazzini Suárez (2014) considers that the partial objectivity of researchers, far from diminishing the value of the knowledge they construct, becomes an epistemic privilege, given that the subjects, who are strongly involved in their social and cultural contexts, can better account for the phenomena they wish to understand. Thus, epistemic privilege confers authority, justifies relevance, and strengthens the validity of knowledge construction processes:

The researcher’s beliefs and behaviors are part of the empirical evidence in favor of (or against) the arguments that support the research conclusions. And this evidence must be subjected to critical analysis just as much as the data set that is usually defined as relevant evidence. The introduction of this “subjective” element into the analysis actually increases the objectivity of the research, while reducing the “objectivism” that tends to hide this type of evidence from the public. (Harding, 1987, p. 26)

Situated Knowledge and Music Therapy

As part of the disciplinary community of Music Therapy in Latin America, we have often been challenged by the conditioning factors of the knowledge construction processes that take place in the region. Some are economic, others academic, others cultural; all are part of those performative contexts discussed by Thrift (1996).

When considering the performativity of contexts, we find a powerful argument for proposing, for example, that evaluating the professional experiences of colleagues who write in peripheral countries using the criteria applied to central countries is, in principle, an act of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). We understand, then, that we are in a position to claim the epistemic privilege referred to by Piazzini Suárez (2014). We are part of the phenomenon we wish to understand, and we are engaging in critical reflection with the aim of understanding the notion of situated knowledge and its circulation within the music therapy community in the region. We ask ourselves, first of all, whether our use of the notion of situated knowledge is not another case of uncritical appropriation of theoretical notions that come from other fields of knowledge, as is the case, for example, with the notion of territory. We do not have a definite answer to this concern; we do not know precisely what meanings Latin American music therapists attribute to the expression “situated knowledge.” At times, it seems that the adjective “situated” is used to refer to knowledge that is recognized as emerging from work with individuals and communities that inhabit a familiar and close-knit space.

Following the work of feminist epistemologist Sandra Harding, we venture to raise some questions for the field of music therapy, directed both at theoretical reflections on the discipline and research and at the foundations of music therapy practices in different settings: clinical, educational, and/or community.

For the field of theoretical reflections:

- a. What aspects of the musical experiences we share with patients have not yet been described by the theoretical reflections of our discipline? For example, have we

- included the landscapes in which music therapy practices take place?
- b. Have we questioned the notion of music, which is central to music therapy?
- c. What requirements do we have for intuitions, common sense, and beliefs to be transformed into knowledge accepted by the scientific community of the discipline?
- d. How do we incorporate the experiences of patients, their families, and our colleagues in healthcare teams into our theories?

For the field of research:

- a. What kinds of questions do music therapy researchers ask about the phenomenon they want to investigate? “The questions that are asked—and, above all, those that are never asked—determine the relevance and accuracy of our overall picture of the facts as much as any of the answers we may find” (Harding, 1987, p. 21).
- b. What position do music therapists take in relation to their objects of study?
- c. What methods are used to construct knowledge about what they seek to know? How is the choice of research method justified?
- d. How are the units of analysis of the matrices we use for data processing formed?
- e. What ideas of science underlie the research we propose?
- f. Have we explored the possibilities offered by ethnography, autoethnography, and other data construction techniques?
- g. The scientific method, when rigorously applied, protects the object of study from the researcher’s subjectivity. How do we explain that this is precisely what we do not want to happen?
- h. For whom is this research problem a “problem”? Situated research defines the issues to be investigated from the perspective of the patients’ experience.
- i. How would we investigate what the parents of a child with a disability who plays in a band feel, or the pleasure someone feels when singing in a choir?

For the field of practice:

- a. What kinds of questions do music therapists ask themselves about the people and situations in which they will intervene?
- b. What position do they take in relation to them?
- c. What attitudes do they bring into play when approaching those they intend to intervene with?

Conclusions

At the end of this brief essay, we recognize the epistemic power of the notion of situated knowledge, that is, its power to generate processes of knowledge construction. As we have proposed it, this notion comes with challenges for the field of music therapy theories, practices, and research in the region.

In its articulation within the political dimension of the discipline, Latin American music therapists also face challenges related to the circulation of knowledge, in particular, the problem of translations. According to Haraway (1995), translations are a problem when they are associated with a reductionist stance, that is, when there is a language that is imposed as the norm, as the standard language, and all translations must be done into it. In Latin America, disciplinary knowledge circulates from the central countries to the peripheral ones (through translation) and rarely in the opposite direction. We ask ourselves why, and we quickly find the answers in the works of “situated experts” who subscribe to decolonial perspectives. One of them, anthropologist Rita Segato (2021), makes a proposal that we find particularly interesting: in the face of the hegemonic

pretensions of narratives that render places of enunciation invisible, she invites us to counter them with situated knowledge.

Segato proposes constructing rhetorics of value for our knowledge, that is, she encourages us to think about the discursive strategies we need to employ to convince others, and ourselves first and foremost, that what we do and what we think about what we do is valuable in epistemic terms. In other words, Latin American music therapists can assert our epistemic privilege to account for what happens when we practice music therapy in the region.

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