

Female-Focused Theory and Poststructuralism

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ABSTRACT

Feminist post-structuralist theory challenges the binary distinction between male and female, focusing on language practices and the interconnectedness of individuals and their social and geographical environments. It de-massifies gender differences, explores non-full male or female subjectivities, and examines power as both conceptually and physically situated. Post-structuralist ethics emphasize openness in research methodology, challenging the liberal-humanist control complex. Collective biography is an example of feminist post-structuralist work, drawing on anecdotes from participants and researchers. Post-structuralist research focuses on investigation rather than methodological adherence, allowing for a wide variety of methods. Scholars ground theory in lived experience and gender and sex discourses, finding remnants of the autonomous liberal humanist subject in some readings but also characters forged in social spaces where knowledge and power flow in unpredictable ways.

Introduction:

Feminist post-structuralist theory represents a unique strand of feminism that emerged subsequent to liberal feminism and radical feminism, rather than replacing them, as Kristeva observed in 1981. Liberal feminism advocates for individual rights to secure inclusion in the public domain, while radical feminism simplifies notions of womanhood to contest derogatory depictions of women and girls in male-dominated discourse. In contrast, feminist post-structuralism challenges the binary categorization of male and female, illustrating how language practices influence our perception of gender and disputing the idea that gender identities are immutable and inevitable.

The study of post-structuralism begins with an analysis of the discursive and regulatory practices present in scientific, literary, philosophical, and everyday writings. This critique challenges the dominant narratives that depict the humanist or modernist individual as the heroic and autonomous creator of their own life. Instead, it shows how individuals are interconnected with their social and geographical surroundings, mutually influencing each other. Specifically, feminist post-structuralist theory investigates the detailed mechanisms through which individuals are constituted as subjects with particular gender identities.

Feminist post-structuralism exposes, scrutinizes, and allows for the revision of binary divisions between males/females and heterosexuals/lesbians. These divisions are extended to other

binaries such as adults/children, normal/abnormal, and rational/irrational. Through an examination of written and spoken communication, this research illustrates how power dynamics are established and maintained by attributing normalcy, rationality, and naturalness to the dominant element in each pair, while simultaneously branding the subordinate element as different, deficient, and irrational. By analyzing the influence of society on individuals and challenging traditional theories that define people in fixed terms, post-structuralist theory shows how power not only shapes our identities but also persuades us to embrace these identities willingly.

This approach challenges the fundamental frameworks of ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies (St Pierre and Pillow, 2000: 2), while also presenting the potential for a new kind of agency. The concept of agency has shifted from being the defining trait of a successful, powerful, and heroic figure who conforms to established narratives, to that of a subject-in-relation who, in Deleuzian terms, remains open to the unknown (Deleuze, 2004). This subject-in-relation is an ethical individual who is aware of how her words hold influence and of the specific social, historical, and material contexts that continually shape her into someone different from her former self. She possesses the capacity to disrupt the processes through which meaning is created, thereby shaping her own identity and being shaped by others. According to Butler (1992: 13), "the subject is neither a

ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process.”

Post-structuralist feminism departs from theoretical frameworks that see gender and sexuality as fixed and governed by language, social structures, and cognition. Feminist post-structuralism challenges the idea that individuals are unaffected by language and societal norms in shaping their identities (Davies, 2000). However, the crux lies in recognizing that identity formation is contingent upon specific historical contexts and subject to social regulations, thus open to scrutiny.

Our ability to take action and make choices is influenced by ongoing conversations and our roles within them (Davies, 2008). We are shaped by diverse and often conflicting discourses, and how we interpret these positions either enables or constrains our potential for agency. Writing provides us with the tools to develop strategies to challenge, subvert, and dismantle the discourses that construct our identities (Barthes, 1977; Davies and Gannon, 2009). By emphasizing desire and the unconscious, post-structuralist analysis diminishes the centrality of the rational conscious subject. While traditional forms of knowledge, like master or grand narratives, are recognized as crucial, they are critiqued for their authority in determining meaning. Grand narratives featuring heroic protagonists who are both intelligent and proactive retain influence, yet their significance is contingent upon alignment with prevailing worldviews.

Poststructuralist approaches to reading and writing have the potential to cultivate new subjectivities. These subjectivities do not arise from opposition or resistance, but through a series of escapes, subtle shifts, playful interactions, crossings, and flights. These activities lead to the emergence of alternative and elusive understandings (Cixous and Derrida, 2001).

In poststructuralist literature, agency is not viewed as something external to or in opposition to social structures and processes. Instead, agency is redefined as an acknowledgment of the influence of communication, a recognition of one's deep engagement with and indebtedness to that communication, and an appreciation for the ability to generate new perspectives. This goes beyond merely repeating established practices; it involves creating new forms of life that can challenge and potentially replace traditional gender norms. As individuals constantly evolving and interconnected, we have the capacity to transcend gendered discussions and the controlling forces that shape our identities (Davies and Gannon, 2009).

Feminist post-structuralists have recently shifted their focus towards "spatiality" and "materiality," building upon the "discursive turn" of post-structural theory which examines how language constructs realities and provides effective tools to deconstruct gender binaries. Drawing on Deleuze-inspired ideas, subjectivity is understood as an expansive "assemblage" of desires and emotions, varying in intensity and speed, shaped by connections to other beings—both human and nonhuman—as well as to locations, moments, contexts, and occurrences. This perspective posits that the subject is "non-unitary" and exists in a continual state of becoming, actively engaged in ongoing transformations (Braidotti, 2002: 62).

The core aim of feminist post-structuralist inquiry is to transcend existing boundaries of knowledge. It seeks not merely to document gender differences but to explore new potentials, challenge fixed notions of "male" and "female," experiment with subjectivities that defy traditional gender categorizations, and understand power as both conceptually and physically embedded. Normative structures and the unknown are simultaneously shaped and exposed through discourse, or more precisely, through discursive activities.

When applying scientific principles and the favored "evidence-based practice" of contemporary managers who seek to regulate academic endeavors, certain pitfalls can arise when analyzing gendered discourses in texts and speeches. The following overview aims to provide guidance to mitigate these issues:

1. "Data" does not offer transparent and corroborative evidence of reality. Gendered narratives, descriptions, or expressions illustrate not the inherent nature of gender, but rather how gender is perceived or enacted within a particular text and context.

2. Studying how gender is perceived in performances, descriptions, or narratives is not merely intriguing for understanding the perspectives, intentions, or motivations of those interpreting it. Rather, it is valuable because it sheds light on how processes of subjectivity operate and reveals the range of gendered identities that can emerge within particular discourses.
3. The process of subjectification involves both internalizing and externalizing the gendered aspects of existence (Butler, 1997). Each individual adopts discourses as their own, defends them, seeks their perpetuation, and defines themselves in relation to these discourses, even though they are not of their own creation.
4. Textual and spoken language captures our attention not merely by revealing its own content, but because it can be analyzed and unpacked to uncover how reality is constructed. This phenomenon is fascinating because it can be deconstructed to reveal the mechanisms through which reality is shaped, including through binary classifications, habitual and uncritical repetitions, as well as specific recurring images, narratives, and explanations.
5. Data and researchers are inherently intertwined. Researchers must investigate gender directly because of the complexity involved in navigating the intersections of facts, authority, and subjectivity. They interpret data through their own physical experiences, emotions, and relationships with others, both actual and conceptual.
6. The term "science" encompasses both the results and the methodologies of systematic discourses that produce knowledge, which are not inherently superior to alternative approaches despite their widespread acceptance (Lather, 2007). Furthermore, it can be argued that scientific language and methodologies shape the very phenomena they aim to quantify. For example, Henriques et al. (1998) suggest that the psychological sciences contribute to constructing the gendered subject within a framework of liberal humanism.
7. The meaning of a text cannot be conclusively determined by either the researcher or the gendered subject who authored it. The construction of gendered experience involves multiple discourses, leading to ambiguous interpretations and effects. Acknowledging ambivalence and contradiction is crucial for comprehending gendered experiences, whether one's own or those of others. Insisting on interpretations that avoid duality, conflict, and complexity is a method used to create the illusion of a rational subject.
8. In feminist poststructuralist analysis, the aim is not to uncover the inherent simplicity of sex and gender, but rather to question what is conventionally accepted as true.
9. Gendered subjects are shaped by multiple overlapping discursive strategies. None of these sites or positions rigidly define individuals. People not only navigate these spaces but also the meaning of their movements is contingent upon their relationships with others—both real and imagined—as well as the context of time.
10. Lines of force serve as the standard for discussing power dynamics, which are not the exclusive domain of any particular gender. The strategies, tactics, maneuvers, and procedures of power are continuously evolving and uncertain (Deleuze, 1988; Foucault, 1980).
11. A central concern of feminist poststructuralist theory revolves around the continuous unfolding of history, whether it involves the evolution of feminist theories (Kristeva, 1981) or changes in gender roles (Davies, 2003), and the potential paths towards the unknown. Rather than simply observing others' movements, a researcher employing poststructuralist theory may find themselves actively contributing to these movements (Deleuze, 1988).

In this chapter, we will illustrate feminist post-structuralist work using collective biography as an example. The post-structuralist method of "collective biography" involves gathering anecdotes from both study participants and researchers. Going beyond individual interpretations of memories, it emphasizes the idea that subjects are shaped within shared discursive, relational, and material contexts. In group research settings focused on specific topics, memory narratives are shared, written, read aloud, and often revised after careful listening in collective biography workshops. Each storyteller aims to convey the unique essence or haecceity of the remembered experience. Haecceity, integral to what Deleuze describes as smooth space, evades the rigid boundaries of territorialized spaces.

In our work on collective storytelling and writing in *Doing Collective Biography* (Davies and Gannon, 2006), we introduced the term "mo(e)ment" to describe the dual process: first, fully experiencing the present moment; and second, remaining open to new perspectives. As we share, reflect, inquire, write, read, and rewrite our stories, a transformation occurs where our memories become more than just autobiographical details distinguishing one person from another. They become portals through which the unique sensory and personal details of each subject reveal our shared humanity and our interconnectedness as humans in relationships.

Consequences for research methodology

According to post-structuralist ethics, researchers should approach the unknown or poorly understood with an open mind. Current funding agencies and institutional ethics reviews are entangled in a control framework rooted in liberal humanism, which assumes that adhering to rules and conducting model-based research ensures ethical practices. They argue that scientists cannot make ethical judgments independently of this oversight. This perspective relies on assumptions about fundamental human rights and traits, viewing others as inherently vulnerable, passive, and in need of protection.

In contrast, post-structuralist ethics advocates for a new form of respect for others by recognizing the interconnectedness between the researcher and the researched through language and power dynamics, rather than seeking to separate them. While this approach implies that research cannot be predetermined, it encourages openness towards others and the ethical complexities that arise from engaging with them. This process transforms the researcher into someone different from who they were before.

Every study requires a well-defined research question. Grounded in post-structuralist philosophy, this approach offers a new viewpoint on existing knowledge and literature. The question should remain adaptable to evolve along with the researcher and participants as they gain new insights, reflecting the dynamic nature of the research process itself.

The post-structuralist tradition opposes positivist norms that rely on methodology to establish validity as a measure of truth. Instead, truth arises through engagement with others, through the specificity of events that researchers interpret in relation to those others, and through a unique form of listening that challenges the listener to embrace diversity and gain a fresh understanding of the world (Badiou, 2001; Nancy, 2007).

Feminist poststructuralist research prioritizes exploration over strict adherence to methodology, accommodating a diverse array of methodological approaches. In Heidegger's sense, it utilizes tools rather than mere instruments (1993). These tools of feminist poststructuralist inquiry evolve into something novel as they are applied in research. While we outline our approach to conducting collective biography here (Davies and Gannon, 2006), we emphasize that the tools of collective biography are dynamic and can change with each application.

To ensure the collective biography workshop is effective, it is crucial for all participants to collaborate in analyzing the narratives to explore their contributions to the original research topic and offer fresh perspectives. Writing, seen as an inquiry process, reveals opportunities for utilizing these narratives, both during the workshops and in the collaborative paper writing process (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005).

Real-Life Anecdotes

This stems from a collective biography workshop aimed at exploring the impact of feminist poststructuralist theory on our conception of subjectivity. During these workshops, participants embody a post-structuralist subject-in-process who, while documenting their memories, also acknowledges the transformative influence of the act of remembering. One could contend that the post-structuralist subject exists at the intersection of a profound conflict—an inherent paradox crucial to comprehending subject formation. Butler underscores this fundamental ambivalence:

. . . the subject is itself a site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the effect of a prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency. A theory of the subject should take into account the full ambivalence of the conditions of its operation. (Butler, 1997: 14-15).

In this workshop, we revisited the divide between humanism and post-structuralism, recognizing humanist ideas that persisted despite our immersion in post-structuralist philosophy. Themes that emerged from our discussions before the workshop and our readings in poststructuralist theory guided our reflections during the sessions. Memories of "being someone," experiencing positive recognition, feeling misunderstood, and undergoing change were prompted by these overarching themes. These memories recalled specific instances when we perceived ourselves as unique individuals, separate from others, and valued in our own right—a perspective we associated with humanist studies. In response to each prompt, we shared personal memories with the group during workshop sessions. Subsequently, we collectively wrote and read these memories aloud, initiating discussions on the various "selves" portrayed in our recollections. After annotating our memory tales, our analysis continued online after the workshop ended. Finally, as we collaborated on an initial draft of an analytical paper, we deliberated between individual and collective insights, practical experiences, and theoretical frameworks, balancing narrative and analytical approaches.

Viewing our narratives through a feminist poststructuralist lens reveals them as accounts of femininity shaped by societal norms, demonstrating how individuals are constructed as specific gendered entities in particular times and social settings. This perspective contrasts with the liberal humanist view, which tends to portray narratives as snapshots of progress towards a stable and self-contained identity. As we reflect on this, we acknowledge that post-structuralist analyses embrace instability and fluidity, yet this does not negate the endurance of humanist perspectives. Here, we delve into two memories that exemplify our method of engaging with memory texts and the intricate subjectivities we explore within them.

When my school report card arrived, my parents quietly read through the neatly written comments in each box. Then, they handed it to me to review. Each subject had its own notes, and at the end, the term "conscientious" appeared in the final section. I had never encountered this word before and was puzzled by its meaning. Upon hearing my mother's explanation, I found it intriguing. It felt like a unique label for me, filling me with pride and a sense of importance. I repeated it to myself, relishing its pronunciation and meaning. Interestingly, my achievement of first place in class was not mentioned. My father gently reminded me not to feel superior to my older sister, whose choice of subjects earned her a B at boarding school. He praised her artistic aspirations and skill in tennis, foreseeing her potential to represent the school. Feeling inadequate about my own tennis skills, I tempered my pride. Nonetheless, I continued to cherish the term "conscientious" for its distinct spelling, pleasing sound, and the positive impression it left on me, often repeating it to myself throughout the day.

From a liberal humanist perspective, this memory, arising from being acknowledged in a positive way, might be interpreted as a marker of personal growth. According to a school psychologist, the girl likely comes from a supportive home environment with emotionally stable parents who emphasize empathy and

consideration for others, contributing to her academic success. The remarks on the report card are viewed as indicators of her actual existence, reflecting her adaptation to social expectations and highlighting areas where further development may be needed. Butler (1997: 20) argues that subjectivity is shaped through the recognition from others, revealing a fundamental vulnerability to external validation. A post-structuralist viewpoint would consider this narrative as a process of embracing the label "conscientious," which signifies a form of acceptance and internalization of societal expectations.

Despite her father's caution not to presume superiority over her sister, the young girl enthusiastically embraces the term. In doing so, she embodies both the subject who desires recognition and the subject who resists it. Meanwhile, she learns from her father the subtleties of quietly and precisely expressing satisfaction in her accomplishments. Section VIII: Research in Postmodern Contexts reveals her acceptance of these limitations with the appropriate enthusiasm, demeanor, and physical behavior as she undergoes the processes of both being identified and identifying herself (2-8-2010 p:316 c:0). To truly become, she must expose herself to both her father and the teacher who wrote the report. Throughout the narrative, the novel portrays this journey as both a constraint and an opportunity, allowing the protagonist to explore and define her subjectivity within the confines imposed upon her. The young girl doesn't merely adopt conscientiousness after learning the word; instead, hearing herself described in this manner shapes her experience. She embraces the new phrase as a way of being and intentionally molds herself into a conscientious individual, seeing it as a desirable quality that she already embodies.

In the second narrative, a student subjected a young instructor to an unwelcome and humiliating label, prompted by the query on "misrecognition".

. . . She asked a question and looked across the hands thrust up into the air to Alex over by the window, up to something, as usual. 'Alex', she said, calling him back to attention, 'What do you think of blah blah blah?' Suddenly, Roslyn stood up in the centre of the room and shouted 'You only ask the boys questions,' she said, 'because they've got penises'. Everyone stared at her as she stood at the front of the class, the tears in a burning rush up behind her eyes and her throat choking. She wanted to say, 'No, you've misunderstood'. Or 'No, that is the last thing I would want to do'. But she thought she would collapse, or explode, and she couldn't speak through her horror at these words. She turned and walked out of the classroom before they could see what they'd done to her, she marched briskly up the path, heart thumping, feeling like she might throw up. She marched straight into the staff toilets where she locked the door and sat on the seat and sobbed and sobbed until the bell rang.

This narrative traverses challenging terrain. The teacher, considering herself competent, rational, and fair, believes she is attentive and responsive to her students' needs. Yet, she acknowledges succumbing to an outdated gender bias in her teaching: for various reasons, instructors tend to engage more with male students than females in the classroom. While the teacher has the "power" to select Alex over Rosalyn for participation, her authority remains fragile, contingent on students' compliance with school rules. When Roslyn stands up and vocally challenges this hierarchy by asserting the teacher favors male students, she takes control of the classroom discourse. The protagonist, reflecting on her actions and beliefs, wrestles with existential questions of identity: "Am I truly this person?" Unfortunately, I am unable to respond from this repugnant location. The class comprises young adults, and Roslyn insists on her assertion about male students' genitals, disregarding any attempts at reasoning. Her visceral reaction underscores the contentious nature of this moment.

In feminist post-structuralism, exploring the dynamic interplay and effects of power involves considering bodily responses as crucial as verbal expressions. Post-structuralism specifically examines how power relations are established within social contexts and how they operate in interactions involving the teacher and Alex, the teacher and Roslyn, as well as between the class and these individuals.

The narrative shifts between dualistic classifications. When Roslyn speaks, the instructor interprets "the students" as directed towards herself. Despite only one student speaking out, she exits "before they could see what they had done to her," implying alignment of the entire class with Roslyn. The image Roslyn paints of her as sexist and irrational contrasts sharply with the composed, rational instructor in her perception. She resists being cast as such a figure but is unable to resist Roslyn's portrayal. The boys seem to have an advantage over her, revealing unintentional bias despite her reluctance to be seen as sexist. This characterization not only defines her identity but also influences her current thoughts about herself, her profession, and her students, filtered through the lens of gender rather than any other perspective. The gender dichotomy shifts from male/female to female/male. The term "woman" evokes notions of vulnerability and emotion, traits traditionally viewed as uncharacteristic of a teacher. Nevertheless, she adeptly navigates multiple subject positions—as both a woman and a teacher—with skill and finesse, as she does in other aspects of her life.

Conclusion:

Our analyses highlight the themes and methodologies that deeply interest us as feminist poststructuralist scholars, which we may explore further in subsequent discussions. Central to feminist research is the grounding of theory in lived experiences, a principle we apply especially to the study of gender and sex discourses. Understanding the processes of subjectification and discursive regimes is crucial within post-structuralism. While some readings reveal traces of the autonomous liberal humanist subject in the narratives we examine, we also observe these characters being shaped within social contexts where knowledge and power fluctuate unpredictably. Here, subjects are continually precarious, in flux, prone to disruption, and vulnerable.

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