

Postmodernism

- Postmodern was conventionally taken to be inclusive of poststructuralism and of critical theory
- American term used in diverse areas to the collapse between distinctions (binaries) related to high and popular culture
- Term refers to a set of literary and artistic practices, a set of philosophical traditions aimed at rejecting realist epistemology and the Enlightenment project and as a neoliberal term (entrepreneurial capitalism)
- Linked to Western consumer culture
- Postmodern discourses seek to distance us from and make us sceptical of about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, history, self and language which are taken for granted
- Postmodernism critiques discourses and institutions that routinely exclude women and other marginalised groups because of modernist thought (reason, logic, universal truth as basis for action in the world)
- Ironically, tenets of modernism has been hostile to women - the modernist individual that can autonomously act in the world is a masculine subject



- **Modernism is part of Western conceptual legacy and produced humanist ideals of social justice and equity that has been taken up by feminists**
- **Modernism is therefore kept alive in feminism**
- **Postmodernists argue that knowledge is contextual, historically situated, and discursively produced and subjects are constituted within networks of power and knowledge**
- **Postmodernism is contested – like feminism**
- **In postmodernism the idea is to resituate the individual subject – not as central heroic and active agent shaping her own destiny but as a subject constituted through discourses in particular historical moments**
- **Judith Butler: “I don’t know about the term ‘postmodern’ but ... [I know that] power pervades the very conceptual apparatus that seeks to negotiate its terms, including the subject position of the critic”**
- **Many feminists who used postmodern have left the term for poststructuralism because of categorical problems**

FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF MODERN SCIENCE

- Western modern science was presented as value-free and objective generating disinterested facts about nature;
- Feminist research has proven the opposite – Western science permeated with gendered values and interests;
- Western modern science and their logics form the basis for the ideals of modernity, democracy, progress and what is viewed to be civilisation;
- Science is a site for political struggle: who benefits and who bears the costs?
- Gender relations in science include class, race, sexuality and empire;
- NB: also no monolithic feminism and method;
- Gender used 2 ways: 1) Objects of empirical study; 2) Analytical framework



- **Feminist analyses show modern sciences are integrated with gender relations of their different eras. The key points of criticism from a feminist point of view are:**
 - 1) Scientific sexism: Sexist and androcentric discrimination through the processes and results of scientific research – science perpetuating women's subordination to men as the natural order of things – feminist biologists and social scientists contested empirical and theoretical inadequacies;**
 - 2) Discriminatory social structures: A history of women and girls' discrimination in educational fields such as mathematics, medicine, science and engineering;**
 - 3) Science education: Early equity approaches addressing women's underrepresentation in science based on the idea that women did not have the same abilities to make a career in these fields – recent approaches focus on deficiencies in pedagogy, curriculum and agendas of science education;**
 - 4) Gender and technology: Women's movement (1970s) projects to give women access to technological skills from which they have been excluded, i.e. car maintenance, household repairs, entering construction, IT, agriculture, engineering etc; social constructivist analyses that technologies were gendered (who gets to design what?);**



- 5) Epistemological androcentrism:** Epistemologies are not culturally neutral – standards of science are androcentric and sexist - ideas of universal values and objectivity; androcentrism is the practice to place male humans or masculine point of view at the centre of a worldview, culture and history; gendered dualisms in science – objectivity (male) vs. subjectivity (female), rationality (male) vs. irrationality/emotionality (female), mind (male) vs. matter (female), 'hard' natural sciences (male) vs. 'soft' social sciences (female) – feminists critique such dualisms – offer feminist standpoint epistemologies that focus on the lives of women and exploited men (studying up) and not the lives of elite men only – critiques of Eurocentrism remain;
- 6) Southern feminist science and technology studies:** Southern women want the same access to science and education as Northern women; critiques of Northern development policies, practices and philosophies – focus on IPRs for IKS, women's positionality in the world, aftermath of science and empire (deeply intertwined – without these two the development of Europe not possible); only investing class in the North and elites in the South benefit from development – not 70% of people living in the South – development has increased the vulnerability of women and children;
- 7) Feminist futures:** Expand fruitful relations between diverse feminist projects in the North and the South



The case of feminism vs. positivism

- **Positivism – conventional scientific method emulating the natural sciences – accepts only one prescriptive logic of science – logic and empiricism**
- **Epistemology of knowing: truth lies ‘out there’ in social reality waiting to be discovered if the researcher is objective and value free in the pursuit of knowledge production**
- **Causal relationships between variables which means testing hypotheses deduced from general theory (deductive reasoning)**
- **Goal: generalize research findings to wider population – posit nomothetic laws re human behaviour**
- **Results: quantified patterns of behaviours reported in statistical results**
- **Feminists say that positivism can lead to bad science – researchers must consider the exclusionary nature of positivism**
- **Feminists critique positivism’s tendency towards dualisms: quan vs qual, subject vs object of research, rationality vs. emotion**
- **Creates an artificial separation between the researcher and researched and places the researcher in a more authoritative position of power – mimics patriarchy**



Poststructuralism

- Included in postmodernism in the USA
- Poststructural theory – discursive and ontological turn
- Recognised the constitutive power of discourse – especially the work of Michel Foucault – discourses articulate what we think, say and do and is historically contingent
- Discourse is the primary site of analysis
- Scepticism of realist social scientific approaches (positivism) that claim to describe real worlds which exist independently of researchers' observations and subjects (correspondence theory of truth)
- Troubles the individualism of humanist approaches – humanist individual is fictional and created through discourse
- Antitheses of global capitalism's and neoliberalism's emphasis on the individual
- Also question psychoanalytic metanarratives – pays attention to language and desire
- Authors like Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva



- **Ontology: turned to the subject of the body – embodiment in a material universe.**
- **Deconstructs human/nonhuman binary – limit our evolutionary capacity if we accept human as the dominant term and superior to other ontological systems**
- **Poststructural feminists re-envisage our past and future relations to the environment not as individual agents but as beings in relation to others**
- **Promotes close textual analysis as central strategy but text has a wider meaning than just written or spoken data – includes macro-texts such as capitalism (or Marxism, humanism, feminism, postmodernism), and micro-texts interview transcripts, literary texts**
- **Strategies for poststructural analysis are interdisciplinary – borrowed from over disciplinary borders**
- **Texts go beyond conventional perceptions of literary or linguistic texts – include bodies in space, spaces without bodies, texts comprised of non-linguistic semiotic systems**
- **Move from language as a tool for describing real worlds to discourses as constitutive of those worlds**



- **No right research method that will reveal reality – correspondence theory to truth**
- **In poststructuralism, reality does not pre-exist discursive and constitutive writing**
- **Individual subject is deconstructed - removed from its centrality**
- **Poststructural feminist theorising focuses on the processes of subjectification and the discursive regimes through which we become gendered subjects**
- **Gender and sexuality are not inevitable – poststructuralism rejects essentialism – i.e. that experiences of women reflect an underlying ‘womanness’**
- **Differentiation important**



Poststructural concepts

- **Discourses: complex interconnected webs of being, thinking and acting, in constant flux and often contradictory, always located on temporal and spatial axes (meaning they are historically and culturally specific)**
- **We are constituted through discourses**
- **Discourses brings language into the material world – it denaturalises what seems natural and disrupts essentialist thought**
- **It links power, knowledge, institutions, intellectuals, the control of populations and the modern state as these intersect in the functions of systems of thought**
- **Women's lives have been determined by influential discourses on femininity, heterosexuality, fertility and maternity**
- **Theorising agency is an important focus of poststructural feminists**



- **Power relations NB: power is productive rather than oppressive meaning subjects are constituted in power relations**
- **No freedom outside of power relations – no place outside discourse**
- **The concrete nature of power and how it becomes materialised in women's lives and bodies, in social structures and institutions is the focus of much poststructural feminist research**
- **Foucault toolbox of strategies: archaeology (studies the conditions of possibility through which disciplinary knowledge is formed and becomes sedimented – looks at discursive formations, at historical archives, searches for subjugated knowledges), genealogy (interrogating knowledge and power relations as they operate at the level of the body)**
- **The work of Foucault and Deleuze make possible alternative discourses**
- **Intersectionality inquiries: An approach to creating knowledge that has its roots in analyses of the lived experiences of women of colour – i.e. women whose lives reveal that their identity and social relations are shaped by the simultaneous operation of multiple systems of power – intersectional scholarship is interdisciplinary in nature and focuses on how structures of difference combine to create a feminist praxis that is new and distinct**



Poststructural strategies

Deconstruction (Derrida):

- Analytic strategies working into the inconsistencies and weaknesses in meaning that are inherent in any text
- Meaning is situated in texts but the meanings are multiple, shifting and deferred
- The text can be provoked to reveal its own contradictions and impossibilities through deconstructive analysis
- Deconstruction identifies and disrupts binary pairs
- Deconstruction can be applied to texts and institutions
- *Related to différence* from Derrida – the relationship between words and meaning is arbitrary

Rhizoanalysis and nomadism (Deleuze, Guattari), Braidotti, Haraway:

- Rhizome as metaphor links unexpected texts and events to make surprising new connections and unpredictable and unreplicable insights (extends in multiple directions)
- Feminist nomadic subjectivity rejects liberal individualism – promotes multiple connections instead – subjectivity is a socially mediated process
- Cyborgs as composite identities for women including symbolic representation of the exploitation of the underclass of workers



Deconstructive writing:

- Can include theoretical writing and radical play with form and genre
- Defying binaries of writing such as analytical or creative writing
- Disregarding conventional genres such as theory, prose, poetry, drama and film
- Pay specific attention to the politics, effects and rhetorical tropes of language
- No text is innocent – constitutive of certain truths and exclusive of others – must always be put under interrogation
- Involves highly creative feminist writing that pushes language to the brink
- Writing becomes a method of inquiry – not merely a means to represent data
- Can represent interview data in a poetic form
- Writing/film can bring together theory and fiction, analysis and creativity
- Collective biography: memory becomes the site for theorizing – process of collective biography becomes a means to read/write embodied selves to use reading/writing to produce material how we becomes subjects – move away from individual lived experience to collective readings and the deconstruction of discursive regimes – inviting multiple meanings

Embodiment:

- Knowledge and memory mediate through the body and its sensory perceptions



Critiques

- **Most critiques of postmodern and poststructural theories are related to relativism and their rejection of universal truths**
- **Relativism and social action: Relativism of poststructural feminism is seen by some critics as impossible to bring about social change – cannot really improve the lives of women because it is focused on discourses**
- **Relativism and ethics: The fact that they question any notion of an absolutist foundation of any form of ethics is critiqued**
- **Corporeality/materiality: Critique that they valorise discourses at the expense of the body – but discourses actually live in bodies – Butler rejects any notion that discourses and the lived body can be separated – actually a new material turn in feminist thought – similar to embodied realism – inevitable interconnectedness between body and discourses that say that discourses have material consequences that require ethical responses**
- **Poststructural feminism interrogates the embodied subjectivities of women and subordinated groups**



FEMINIST STANDPOINTS

- **Feminist standpoint: epistemological significance on the social position of the researcher in the knowledge produced – knowledge is materially grounded in lived experience-means the oppressed have access to a clearer, less biased understanding of social realities since they are less likely to benefit materially from the continued existence of the relations of oppression**
- **The local and lived lives of women provides a unique standpoint not covered in the normative masculine standpoint**
- **Critiques of relativism and essentialism – rather multiple standpoints, lack of consideration of hierarchies and difference amongst women**
- **Standpoints theory's aim is to enable researchers to understand the lives of women and men and the relations between the two**
- **Harding: Feminist standpoint theory does not argue that only women can produce feminist standpoint and knowledges**



FEMINIST EMPIRICISM

- Harding: identifies the sexism and androcentrism in traditionally empiricist accounts of women and gender based on dominant ideas of biological male superiority and universal male dominance
- Feminist empiricism – social identity of the researcher and context of discovery shape research findings and conclusions
- Major problems is the sexist bias of certain researchers – more women researchers may overcome some of these biases – it matters who conducts research not necessarily how it is done
- Nonetheless, empiricism offers feminists an important points of access to the dominant culture and the power of scientific resources
- Feminist naturalism: based on the assumption that people actually possess knowledge – feminists critically analyse the methodologies and basic concepts of contemporary cognitive sciences informing naturalism science is open-ended
- Empiricism is based on empirical investigation

- **Positivism per se is not the enemy of feminists – rather how it is deployed – many feminists use positivist approaches productively and strategically – provide credible numbers**
- **Critique of objectivity, neutral and universal science: inequalities cannot be overcome by simply adding women but by paying attention to women's lived experience**
- **Feminist objectivity offered by Harding and Harraway – situated knowledges which means all knowledge is partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational – cannot deny values, biases and politics**
- **Also, cannot avoid emotion in research – choices of what to study and how are imbued with human emotion and interests – cannot take a researchers own values and emotions out of the decision-making process in research – positivist fallacy**
- **Practice strong objectivity by being self-reflective of one's own values, attitudes, agenda, positionality, influence and biases**
- **Strong self-reflexivity will improve objectivity in positivist research – can never be completely objective**



FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGIES

- **Feminist research grounded in the experience of the oppressed: Marxists say knowledge is historically constructed and relative as it is based on the mode of production and elites own the means of production**
- **This means that the master's view is partial and distorted; the worker's perspective is more complete as they must navigate their own world and the master's world**
- **For feminists, women's oppressed position in the world means that their perspective of the world is more holistic – more nuanced understanding of social reality**
- **Therefore: start research from women's experiences and what happens when they have to fit their lives into the dominant structures – by looking at the differences between women's lives vs. dominant structures a researcher can gain a richer understanding/explanation of the lives of the oppressors and the oppressed**
- **Caution: Women's experiences are not the same – do not fall into a new trap of universalism – experiences vary based on race, class, sexual preferences, etc, therefore multiple standpoints**



- **What is the meaning of feminist epistemology?**
- **Epistemology means the philosophy concerned with the production of knowledge**
- **Feminist epistemology refers the branch of feminist theory and epistemology which explores the politics of gender in knowledge production**
- **Feminist critiques of conventional epistemology: Not disciplinarity – rather interdisciplinarity, isolated individual as agent of knowing, objectivity, universal knowledge, privilege of context of justification over context of discovery, emulating natural sciences in nomothetic science**
- **Different feminist epistemologies (Harding): feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, feminist postmodernism**



CRITICAL THEORIES, POSTMODERNISM, POSTSTRUCTURALISM

- **Critical theories, postmodernism and poststructuralism are radical strategies for bringing about change**
- **Not informed by positivist ideal of objectivity**
- **All three are interconnected.**
- **Positivist research aimed to predict – etic observer (removed from the research)**
- **Interpretivist research aimed to understand – the social world was independent of the researcher's gaze**
- **In response – critical approaches aimed at emancipating**



- **Emancipatory research sets out to make a difference in the social world**
- **Feminist paradigms emerged with emancipatory intentions and later included deconstruction which became important**
- **Accounts are written with specific audience in mind and always partial**
- **Cannot rely on objectivity but rather by being accountable for what and how we have the power to see**
- **The mode of writing is important – discursive strategies which produce certain accounts of the world**
- **New writing requires acute reflexivity – crucial in critical, postmodern and poststructural paradigms**
- **Acute reflexivity means examining the use of language in writing about the world and its possible consequences**
- **Relations of power are established and maintained through discourse**



- **Power is complex and unstable – agency, resistance, freedom and emancipation are always contingent and limited – treated differently in critical tradition, postmodernism and poststructuralism**
- **Important aspect of discourse scrutinised: binaries**
- **Be aware of binary categories – tendency to limit and constrain how we thinkg what we imagine to be possible, e.g. man-woman, good-evil – violent effects in the world, creates positions of power and inferiority**
- **Critical feminism seeks to emancipate people within subordinated categories**
- **Postmodern and poststructural feminisms find ways to disrupt the grip that binaries have on thought and identity**
- **Disruptive strategies include deconstructive writing drawing on rational argument, but also poetic writing, fiction, music and performing arts, e.g. rewriting figures from the past**
- **Through play with language and alternative forms of narrative and representation – writing can blur gender binaries, deconstructive either/or categories and troubling clichés and stereotypes of everyday thought and practice**



- **The binaries that postmodernism and poststructuralism wish to deconstruct are politically powerful and constitutive – deconstruction does not automatically meant that they are no longer applied**
- **Critical tradition, postmodernism, poststructuralism share deep scepticism towards assumed truths, taken for granted knowledges, as they are produced through language – these categories are powerful**
- **The power of these binary categories are immensely powerful and requires complex and continuous reflection on how subjectivities, realities and desires are made and maintained**
- **By making such discourses and discursive practices clear, deconstruction undermine the power of dominant discourses, countering the received 'truth' inherent to those discourses**
- **Critical feminism is upfront about countering existing power structures and deconstruction changes the norm**

Critical theories

- Emerged from Frankfurt School – work of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas – inspired by Marxism
- Rejection of fixed notions of hierarchies of social domination
- Disrupted disciplinary authority by critiquing the 'objective' view of positivism inherited from natural sciences – product of the Enlightenment – universal reason and objective thought
- While critiquing universal reason, did not abandon the Enlightenment ideals of reason and rationality – rather reconstructed these notions as sociocultural forms
- Critical theories influential in qualitative research – uses discourses of equity, inclusion and social justice which are compatible with the feminist ideals
- Real social change is contingent upon agency of subjects
- Power is viewed as oppressive and unilinear and based on binaries of dominator/oppressed
- Power is applied by certain groups to other less powerful groups – emancipation means to overturn these hierarchical relations of power

