Post-structuralism and Postmodernism

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Definitions

Post-structuralism is an ontological and epistemological position that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century within the humanities and social sciences. It reflects a move beyond structuralist ontologies of the social world, including Marxism, structuralist anthropology and psychoanalysis, in which core social, cultural or psychological structures are considered to constrain strongly the possibilities of human action. Post-structuralism retains structuralist concerns with power relations, but emphasises the role of knowledge and textual processes in achieving and sustaining relations of power.

Postmodernism is closely associated with post-structuralism, and might be thought of as the "political wing" of the latter perspective, in the sense that is suspicious of, and seeks to undermine the grand narratives of modernist social organisation and domination including capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism and heteronormativity. It adopts post-structuralist epistemologies and ontologies in preference to structuralist explanations, to expose the contradictions within these grand narratives of control or domination. In so doing, it also suggests means to resist and refuse domination.

The underpinning principles of post-structuralism and postmodernism are most closely associated with Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Helene Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Jean-Francois Lyotard. The epithets "post-structuralist" and "postmodern" are increasingly interchangeable, and most theorists now prefer the former attribution to describe their work. An alternative definition of postmodernism as a period after modernism has now generally fallen out of usage.

Principles of post-structuralism and postmodernism

Post-structuralism covers a number of associated analyses of the relationship between power, language and knowledge, which have in common the view that knowledge is always contextual, partial and fragmentary, but also is never neutral and shapes the power relations between individuals or groupings. Post-structuralists reject the notion of a single "truth", and criticise grand theories or systems of thought that make claims to uncover truth, including religion, science and social scientific realism. They also suggest that this relationship between power and knowledge can have consequences for subjectivity and identity.

The fundamentals of the post-structuralist perspective can be found in the literary theories of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Barthes' concept of *intertextuality* and Derrida's *différance* provided the basis for a radical epistemology that addressed how language and abstract concepts stand in the way of ever gaining knowledge of the "real world". Although concepts supposedly refer to "real" objects, they can only be signified through symbols (signifiers) such as words or other notations, which are necessarily constituted through reference to other signifiers. Thus, for instance, a bean may be described as a "kidney-shaped seed", while a kidney could be defined as a "bean-shaped organ". This chaining of signifiers leads to the intertextual play of one text upon another, in an endless process of referentiality, and led to Derrida's statement that "there is nothing beyond text". The Internet provides the definitive manifestation of intertextuality: hypertextual links theoretically offer a reader an infinite chain of texts from the starting point of any signifier.

Derrida's (1976) notion of *différance* (a neologism that suggests both difference and deferral) describes two consequences of intertextuality: semantic undecidability and deferred meaning. Intertextuality may easily distort, obscure or fragment meaning rather than provide access to the reality behind the concept, and slippage occurs as soon as concept definition or specification is attempted. Because signifiers can only refer to other signifiers, definition offers not reality, but a further approximation that, regardless of effort to make it more "real", is always already deferred and irrecoverable.

From a post-structuralist perspective, intertextuality and *différance* are insurmountable barriers to ever knowing the world beyond texts authoritatively; indeed post-structuralism and postmodernism accept this limit to knowledge and recognise a multiplicity of realities, as will be seen below. This is the fundamental epistemological position underpinning post-structuralism.

Recognising the impossibility of direct knowledge of reality is important, Derrida argued, because in most cultures, claims to know the truth or *logos* is a means to establish authority, status and control over others. Thus, for example, in cultures guided by religious principles, the authority of the hierarchy may be invested in their knowledge of the holy books of the religion, or in concepts such as papal infallibility, or the divine right of a monarch to rule. Secular laws may enshrine the claims of a ruling elite to define right and wrong, and to punish those who breach these edicts. Science similarly makes claims to have access to truth about reality through observation and experiment; in modern societies such claims may influence systems of thought, allocation of resources, and (for instance, concerning mental

health or racial origin) how the object of study is assessed or treated. In the post-Enlightenment period of modernity, the proposition that humanity can know the truth of nature, society and polity through the application of reason and scientific method has been the basis for a new secular authority that displaced religion, and led to the emergence of disciplines from biological and physical sciences to psychology, sociology and economics. These claims to know the truth, Derrida argued, are *logocentric* propositions that underpin the authority of their claimants, and their consequent access to power, resources and domination over others.

Derrida also provided post-structuralism with a critical perspective on how logocentric claims can be made and justified. He argued that one way users of language attempt to overcome the limitations and circularity of signification (the bean/kidney problem described earlier) is to define concepts not in terms of what they are, but through their difference from other things. Specification can be enhanced through "binary oppositions" such as hot/cold; good/evil; health/illness; and male/female. Derrida suggested that logocentric claims to know the truth about how the world is (or how it should be) - be they derived from art, religion, science or a political dogma - will take one or more of these binary oppositions and privilege or elevate in status one pole of the opposition, ascribing to it some greater value, while downgrading or excluding the other pole. Thus in biomedicine, "health" is valued over "illness", while in patriarchal cultures, male is valued over female, and in racist societies, one ethnicity is privileged over another. In modern societies, "reason" is privileged over "superstition" or "God"; in democracies "equality" is elevated above class or caste differences. In each case, privileging one pole of the opposition deliberately obscures or silences the rival voices of the inferior pole, drowning out other claims to know the truth, or to offer an alternative reading of things.

Post-structuralist and postmodern theorists provide a range of means to analyse and criticise systems of thought, some of which have been adopted within social theory. Derridean *deconstruction* of literary texts or art objects uncovers and overturns the unequal privileging of binary oppositions that underpin a system of thought, and was the basis for post-structuralist feminist analysis to undermine patriarchal biases (for example, in psychoanalysis) and to offer a feminist alternative that might overcome oppression of women by men. Lyotard (1988) argues that the ascendancy of one system of thought over another marks (and thus can expose) the symbolic or actual violence done by the former to the latter. In Michel Foucault's genealogies of modernist institutions, "discourses" (authoritative texts)

and technologies of power such as the "gaze" and the "archive" are analysed, to identify the systems of thought and techniques of discipline that underpin a regime of truth at a specific point in history (Foucault 1970, 1984). Deleuze and Guattari (1988) assess the nexus of power relations between objects, bodies and ideas that shape the limits on human action and the subject positions that these make possible.

Post-structuralism and postmodernism in sociology

Post-structuralist and postmodernist theories within the social sciences criticise the truth-seeking aspirations of post-Enlightenment modernism, which apply rationalist methodologies, including humanism and science. They are suspicious of claims to truth made by scientific disciplines in the physical and biological sciences, social sciences such as economics and politics, and by professional groupings such as law, medicine and education that ground their practice in these bodies of scientific knowledge. Knowledge, post-structuralists argue, is always contingent and dependent on systems of power and control within scientific communities and wider society.

The emergence of post-structuralist critical approaches within the humanities, sciences and social sciences led Lyotard (1984) to announce the "postmodern condition" affecting scholarship in the latter part of the 20th century. This was defined by a suspicion of all grand or meta-narratives in science, social science and culture that made absolute claims to truth. Instead, the postmodern condition was marked by doubts over the validity of truth-claims, and a willingness to entertain multiple parallel explanations of the social world. It was reflected in a rejection of over-arching social models including Marxism and psychoanalysis, pessimism about progress through scientific advances, and in critiques of colonialism, racism, heteronormativity and patriarchy.

Unlike some other approaches within sociological theory, post-structuralist theory requires that its proponents also turn the spotlight on themselves, to question social theory objectivity about the systems of thought or power relations they uncover. Consequently, post-structuralism rejects notions of "social structures" as stable and deterministic constructs. The postmodern turn in social theory is characterised by reflexivity concerning the production of academic texts, a willingness to allow multiple voices to speak in these texts (including those of research "subjects") and an emphasis on empowering the dispossessed or silenced in societies.

This reflexivity and self-doubt concerning the outputs of post-structuralist interpretation has been a target for criticism of post-structuralism as relativist (the lack of any absolute foundation for truth). Critics argue that relativism marks post-structuralism's fatal weakness when applied to social theory, as it effectively denies any possibility of gaining definitive knowledge of the social world. Post-structuralist and postmodernism theorists counter that relativism is to be celebrated as recognition of the context-dependency of knowledge and the perniciousness of power relations underpinning claims to knowledge in modernity.

Post-structuralist approaches have been applied in many areas of social theory, including anthropology, education, medicine and healthcare, criminology and law, science and technology, the media, management, social class, gender and sexuality. While the origins of post-structuralism in philosophy and literary theory concentrated upon texts, social theorists have been comfortable with an extension to social practices and institutions, to be analysed both as social texts, and through their textual and knowledge-producing processes.

Michel Foucault has been the most influential post-structuralist writer upon social theory to date. His analyses of modernist systems of thought suggest a means for social scientists to interrogate a range of discursive practices and disciplinary technologies in modern institutions, including the workplace, educational organisations, health care and prisons; and the "technologies of the self" surrounding identity practices such as sexuality and professionalism. The work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988) is now emerging as a second major influence in areas of social theory concerning embodiment, with its radical anti-humanist ontology of assemblages of bodies, objects and ideas that shape an impersonal and undirected bodily desire, but also offer potential for resistance to power.

Social research methods have been strongly impacted by the postmodern turn. Whereas modernist methodologies seek objectivity and to exclude researcher biases, post-structuralist approaches acknowledge fully the researcher's own contribution to the interpretation of data. Post-structuralist research applies the methods suggested by Derridean and Foucauldian approaches and a re-invigorated interpretivism and hermeneutics. The voice of the researcher or writer is stronger; analysis is fragmentary and multivocal rather than unifying and systematic; and conceptions of validity and reliability are displaced by emphases on enabling, transgression of established values and power relations, and collapsing barriers between academic theory and social or political action.

Aspects of sociological theory affected by the postmodern turn include a focus upon consumption and identity rather than the traditional Marxist emphasis on production; the emergence of anti-humanist ontologies that de-privilege human agency and consider animate, inanimate and abstract entities as agentic; and a re-conceptualisation of class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality as identity assemblages rather than social structures.

Post-structuralism, postmodernism and health

Post-structuralist and postmodern approaches to health, illness and medicine have focused on the interactions between embodiment, power, knowledge and identity. Unlike structuralist analyses, these perspectives look at the micropolitics of power as it acts upon the actions and interactions of health professionals, patients and others in health settings. Thus, for instance, Derridean deconstruction of texts and practices concerning (for example) ward rounds, care pathways or health promotion question which voices can be heard and which are silenced, what types of expertise are cited to support the claims, and how authenticity of knowledge is asserted. Foucauldian studies have examined how technologies of power such as observation and record-keeping and the use of health technologies shaped health care institutions and the relations between patients, clients and professionals in clinics, hospitals and the wider community.

The post-structuralist critique of modernism and the claims of science and rationality question the biomedical basis of health care. Biomedicine is a dominant modernist system of thought concerning bodies, emphasising the relation between structure and function, and defining health as an absence of disease. By examining the micropolitics of health care, post-structuralism links the daily interactions between patients, professionals and technology with wider social and power relations in modern societies, to show how knowledge based upon the biomedical model empowered health professionals' authority over the body, and how the body itself is understood.

Post-structuralist and postmodern perspectives have re-invigorated study of the relationship between culture, embodiment and identity in healthcare; particularly in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Here, the body is no longer considered as an independent entity, but as situated within a network of biological, psychological, cultural, economic and abstract relationships to other bodies, objects, technologies, ideas and social organisations. These relations determine what a body can do, the limits on its capabilities, and upon the associated subjectivity, for

instance as "patient" or "recovering alcoholic". Changing or extending these relations offer possibilities for enhancing body capacities (for example, to enhance the quality of life of someone with a chronic illness or opportunities for sexual expression in people with physical impairments), and may enable new identity-positions, such as "health services consumer" or "independent citizen". Deleuze and Guattari applied this model of embodiment to mental health, while others have explored drug use, health technologies, human development, ageing, body shape and sexuality, and examined implications for how care may enhance possibilities and subjectivities.

SEE ALSO: Biopolitics; Foucault, Michel; sociology of the body

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