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Feminism/Post-structuralism

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Summary

- Three feminisms: liberal; radical; post-structural
- Relations of power
- Gendered discursive practices
- The rational conscious subject is de-centred
- Grand narratives are challenged
- Key theorists and writers
 - Judith Butler
 - Bronwyn Davies
 - Patti Lather
 - Betty St Pierre

Key concepts

Feminist post-structuralist theory can be taken as a third feminism, historically following on from, but not replacing, liberal feminism and radical feminism (Kristeva, 1981). Whereas liberal feminism mobilizes a discourse of individual rights in order to gain access to the public domain, and radical feminism celebrates and essentializes womanhood in order to counteract the negative constructions of women and girls in masculinist discourse, feminist post-structuralism troubles the binary categories male and female, making visible the constitutive force of linguistic practices, and dismantling their apparent inevitability.

Post-structuralist analysis begins, then, with the discursive and regulatory practices in the texts of science, of literature, of philosophy and of everyday life. It calls into question the grand narratives through

which the humanist/modernist individual is made into the heroic, creative origin of him- or herself, and it shows, in contrast, how individuals and their social and geographical worlds are made possible in relation to each other. Feminist post-structuralist theorizing focuses in particular on the specific processes whereby individuals are made into gendered subjects.

Feminist post-structuralism makes visible, analysable and revisable, in particular, the male/female and straight/lesbian binaries, which are, in turn, mapped on to other binaries such as adult/child, normal/abnormal, rational/irrational. Through analysis of texts and talk, it shows how relations of power are constructed and maintained by granting normality, rationality and naturalness to the dominant term in any binary, and in contrast, how the subordinated term is marked as other, as lacking, as not rational. Through examining the ways the social inscribes itself on the individual, and by calling into question the construction of the individual in the essentializing terms of humanist and modernist theories, post-structuralist theory shows how it is that power works not just to shape us as particular kinds of being, but to make those ways of being desirable such that we actively take them up as our own.

This approach troubles 'foundational ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies' (St Pierre and Pillow, 2000: 2) and opens up the possibility of a different kind of agency. That agency is no longer the defining feature of the successful, powerful, heroic, lone individual, retracing well worn narrative trajectories, but that of the subject-in-relation who is, in Deleuzian terms, open to the not-yet-known (Deleuze, 2004). That subject-in-relation is an ethical

subject, who is reflexively aware of the constitutive force of her discursive practices, and of the particular social, historical moments, and material contexts in which her ongoing differentiation (becoming other than she was before) is made possible. She is thus capable of disrupting the signifying processes through which she constitutes herself and is constituted. As Butler (1992: 13) says, the 'subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process'.

In this way post-structuralist feminism breaks with theoretical frameworks in which gender and sexuality are understood as inevitable, and as determined through structures of language, social structure and cognition. The *agency* that feminist post-structuralism opens up does not presume freedom from discursive constitution and regulation of self (Davies, 2000). Rather it lies in the capacity to recognize that constitution as historically specific and socially regulated, and thus as able to be called into question. Agency is contingent on the discourses at play and on our positioning within them (Davies, 2008). Not only are we constituted through multiple and contradictory discourses, but how those discursive positionings are read opens up or closes down the possibility of agency. Through writing we can open up strategies for resisting, subverting, decomposing the discourses themselves through which we are constituted (Barthes, 1977; Davies and Gannon, 2009).

In post-structuralist analysis the rational conscious subject is decentred, and the play of desire and the unconscious are made relevant. Old ways of knowing, such as through master or grand narratives, are resisted as arbiters of meaning, even while they are recognized as having constitutive force. It is not that the grand narratives with their rational, agentic heroes no longer have force, but they are read against the grain of dominant ways of seeing.

New subjectivities may be generated through post-structuralist activities of reading and writing, not through opposition and resistance but through a series of escapes, of small slides, of plays, of crossings, of flights – that open (an other, slippery) understanding. (Cixous and Derrida, 2001). Agency in post-structuralist writing is not understood, then, in terms of an individual standing outside or against social structures and processes. Agency becomes instead a recognition of the power of discourse, a recognition of one's love of, immersion in and indebtedness to that discourse, and also a fascination with the capacity to generate life; not just the endless

repetition of old habituated practices, but the generation of new life-forms, life-forms capable of disrupting old meanings of gender, even potentially overwriting or eclipsing them. We are thus subjects-in-process, subjects-in-relation, and through ongoing processes of differentiation we may eclipse the gendered discourses and regulatory practices through which we are constituted (Davies and Gannon, 2009).

While the 'discursive turn' of post-structural theory has led feminists to attend to the constitutive effects of language, and to develop powerful strategies for deconstructing gendered binaries, recent work by feminist post-structuralists turns further towards 'spatiality' and 'materiality'. In work influenced by Deleuze, for example, subjectivity can be understood as an 'assemblage' of flows of desire and affect of varying speeds and intensities, not bounded but constituted in relation to other human and non-human subjects, spaces, times, surfaces and events. The subject is thus always 'non-unitary' and 'inhabits a time that is the active tense of continuous becoming' (Braidotti, 2002: 62).

Feminist post-structuralist research is focused on the possibility of moving beyond what is already known and understood. Its task is not to document differences between those categorized as men and those categorized as women, but to multiply possibilities, to de-massify ways of thinking about 'male' and 'female' – to play with the possibility of subjectivities that are both and neither – to understand power as discursively constructed and spatially and materially located. Discourse, or more properly, discursive practices, have the power to hold the normative order in place, and the power to open up the not-yet-known. In the analysis of gendered discursive practices in texts and talk, the following summary may be a useful guide to help avoid some of the pitfalls generated by adherence to scientific principles and 'evidence-based-practice' much loved by contemporary managerialists intent on controlling academic practice:

- (1) 'Data' do not stand as transparent *evidence* of that which is real. Accounts or descriptions or performances of gendered ways of being reveal not the truth of gender, but *the ways in which sense is being made of gender*, or *the way gender is being performed* in that particular text and context.
- (2) The way that sense is made of gender in accounts or descriptions or performances is not of interest because it might reveal something about the individual sense-maker, or about his

or her motives or intentions. Rather, interest lies in the insight it may give us into *the processes of subjectification and the kinds of gendered subjectivities that are available within particular discourses*.

- (3) Subjectification involves the simultaneous imposition and active take-up of the gendered conditions of existence (Butler, 1997). Discourses do not originate in the subject, yet each subject takes them up as her own, defends them, desires their maintenance, and understands herself in terms of them.
- (4) The language that is found in texts and talk is not of interest because it reveals something other than itself. It is interesting because it may be deconstructed and broken open to show *the ways in which the real is constructed*, for example through binary categorizations, through habituated, unreflected repetitions, and through particular repeated images, storylines and modes of explanations.
- (5) Researchers are not separate from their data. The complexity of the movement between knowledge, power and subjectivity *requires researchers to survey gender from within itself*. They use their own bodies, affects and relations with others (both human and not human) as texts to be read.
- (6) 'Science' is the product and practice of systemic discourses that produce knowledge in ways that are, notwithstanding the fact that they are generally highly regarded, not necessarily better than others (Lather, 2007). Furthermore, scientific discourses and practices may be seen to produce the very thing they set out to measure. The psy-sciences, for example, are themselves implicated in the production of the liberal humanist gendered subject (Henriques et al., 1998).
- (7) *Neither the gendered subject who produces the texts to be read, nor the researcher, is the final arbiter of meanings* in any text being read. Gendered experience is constituted through multiple discourses, which give rise to *ambivalent understandings and affects*. Understanding gendered experience (one's own, and that of others) is very often through the recognition of ambivalence and contradiction. The insistence on interpretations cleansed of doubleness, oppositions and multiplicity is a strategy through which the illusion of the rational subject is constituted.
- (8) The point of a feminist post-structuralist analysis is not to expose the hidden truth of sex/gender

in all its simplicity, but to *trouble that which is taken as stable/ unquestionable truth*.

- (9) Gendered subjects exist at the intersection of multiple discursive practices. *The individual is not fixed at any one of these points or locations*. Not only does the individual shift locations or positions, but what each location or position might mean changes with shifts in relation to others (both human and non-human others), and over space and time.
- (10) Power is understood in terms of lines of force. It is not the property of one gender. Its *strategies, its manoeuvres, its tactics and techniques* are always contingent and unstable (Deleuze, 1988; Foucault, 1980).
- (11) Feminist post-structuralist theory is interested in the folding and unfolding of history, in the movement from one configuration of feminism (Kristeva, 1981) or of gender (Davies, 2003) to another, and in the lines of flight that may open up the not-yet-known. The researcher working with post-structuralist theory may contribute to those lines of flight rather than remain simply an observer of others' lines of flight (Deleuze, 1988).

The example of feminist post-structuralist work we will draw on in this chapter is collective biography. Collective biography is a post-structuralist methodology that works with the memory stories of both researchers and research participants. It moves beyond individualized readings of the subject's remembered stories towards a sense of subjects who are constituted in common discursive, relational and material spaces. In collective biography workshops convened for the purpose of collaboratively researching a particular topic, memory stories are told, then written, then read out loud and usually re-written following the careful listening to the read story by the group. Through this process, each storyteller works to express the very 'this-ness', or *hæcceity*, of the remembered moment. *Hæcceity* is integral to what Deleuze calls smooth space – the space that escapes the over-coded striations of territorialized space. In *Doing Collective Biography* (Davies and Gannon, 2006), we coined the term *mo(ve)ment* in order to evoke the doubled action involved in our collective storytelling and writing, of dwelling in and on particular moments of being, and of movement towards, or openness to, new possibilities both of seeing and of being. In telling, listening, questioning, writing, reading and

rewriting our stories, a shift takes place such that the memories are no longer told and heard as just autobiographical (that mark one individualized person off from the next), but as openings through which each subject's specificity in its particularity and sensory detail becomes the collectively imagined detail through which we know ourselves as human, even as more human – as humans-in-relation.

Implications for research design

Post-structural ethics requires the researcher to remain open to the not-yet-known, the not-yet-understandable. Funding bodies and the apparatus of institutional ethics review are gripped by a liberal-humanist desire for control that assumes that ethical practice will be guaranteed by adherence to rules and prior modelling of the research process. They presume researchers are unable to make ethical decisions without this surveillance. Such thinking is based on universal notions of general human attributes and rights accompanied by assumptions of the irreducible alterity of the other—that other being fragile, passive and in need of protection. Post-structural ethics in contrast struggles toward a different kind of respect for the other, one which does not divide researcher from researched, but comprehends their mutual embeddedness in discourse and relations of power. The research cannot thus be totally planned in advance but maintains its openness to the other, and to the ethical demands that arise in the encounter with the other, where the researcher will become someone-she-was-not-already.

The research question is vital. It is theoretically well-grounded not just in the substantive literature, but in the post-structuralist philosophy that may help to open up a completely new way of envisaging what it is that might become known. Once again, however, it is vital that the question itself be open to evolution through the research process, as the researcher, in relation with her research subjects, comes to think differently about what it is possible to know.

Post-structuralist theorizing does not hold with positivist conventions that rely on method as a guarantor of truth or 'validity'. Truth arises, rather, from engagement with the other, from the particularity of events that the researcher is able to apprehend in relation to the other, from a specific kind of listening to the other that stretches the ears of the listener, that requires the listener to be open to

becoming different and in that difference, to know the world differently (Badiou, 2001; Nancy, 2007).

There are many methodological approaches to feminist post-structuralist research – since the emphasis is on the process of exploration rather than the following of a method. Its instruments are not so much instruments of measurement, but equipment in Heidegger's sense (1993). The equipments of feminist post-structuralist research emerge through the research, becoming something other in their use. Although we outline the steps we have taken in conducting a collective biography (Davies and Gannon, 2006), we emphasize that the equipment of collective biography will become something else each time it is used.

Ideally all the participants in the collective biography workshop will work together on the analysis of the stories to see in what way they can be used to generate new understandings desired by or imagined within the originating research question. The ways in which the stories can be used emerges both in the workshops and in the writing of the stories, as well as in the writing of the collaborative paper since writing too is a method of inquiry (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005).

Stories from the Field

The collective biography workshop that we draw on here was one where we set out to understand more closely the implications of feminist post-structuralist theorizing for the meaning and experience of 'being a subject'. The post-structural subject-in-process that we invoke in collective biography workshops is one who plays between a close and detailed observation of what she finds in her memories *and* one who recognizes the constituting force of that same moment of speaking/writing such a description. The post-structural subject might be said to exist at the site of an almost intolerable contradiction, a contradiction that is necessary to comprehend subjectification. Butler says of this necessary 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 particular workshop we re-examined the 'break' between humanism and post-structuralism, since we had noted the persistence of humanist conceptions in our own thinking and writing, despite our immersion in post-structuralist thought. During the workshop sessions we generated memories around themes that had emerged from preliminary readings and discussions on the subject in post-structuralist theory. We used these themes as triggers for memories of: 'being someone'; 'being hailed as someone in a way that felt good'; 'being mis-recognized'; and 'changing'. They enabled us to re-remember particular moments when we recognized ourselves (and others recognized us) as *particular* selves, as unique and unitary individuals differentiated from others – qualities that we saw as productive of humanist subjects. In the workshop sessions we each told one or two memories, in response to each trigger, to the group. We then wrote them, read them aloud and began collectively interrogating the sorts of 'selves' we produced ourselves as in these memories. After we had parted, analysis continued online as we typed up and annotated the final versions of our memory stories. Finally, we took turns with the evolving draft of an analytical text using the memories as data. We moved back and forth between personal and collective knowledge, between lived experience and theoretical understanding, and between narrative and analytic texts as we continued to struggle towards a paper to which we could all put our names.

While liberal humanism might read our stories as snapshots of progress towards a more or less stable and self-contained personhood, reading through a feminist post-structuralist lens enables us to read them as stories of (in)appropriate(d) femininity, providing instances of the ways in which subjects are constituted as these particular (sexed) subjects, at these particular moments, in these particular social contexts. We found as we wrote that though instability and slippage mark post-structuralist analyses, they do not erase or displace the humanist analyses that are always already there. The two memories analysed below demonstrate our way of working with memory texts as well as the precarious, tangled subjectivities we constructed within them.

My school report card had arrived. My parents silently read the comments written in neat careful handwriting in each of the boxes. The report card was passed over to me to read. There was a comment in relation to each school subject. Then

at the bottom, in the seven or so lines of overall comments, the word 'conscientious' appeared. I'd never heard the word, or read it before. I wondered what it meant. I asked, and when my mum told me, I thought it sounded good. I had my own special word. I felt proud and important. I read it over and over to myself. I liked having that word on my report card. I savoured the word, the sound of it, the speaking of it, the meaning of it. There was no discussion about my coming first in the class. Then my father pointed out to me that I shouldn't think I was better than my big sister. She was in the B grade at her boarding school solely because of subject preference. She wanted to study art. And dressmaking was useful for a girl. She was coming near the top of her class, and she was excelling at tennis, which was very pleasing to him. She might be chosen to represent her school. I felt shamed about feeling proud, shamed that I was not good at tennis. But I liked that word, conscientious, its curious spelling, the sound of it, the virtuous feeling of it. I went around saying it to myself over and over.

This memory, generated in response to 'being hailed as someone in a way that felt good', can be understood in a liberal humanist reading as indicative of developmental progress. A school psychologist, for example, might conclude that the girl is emotionally well adjusted and from a good family. She is succeeding at school and her parents take care to ensure that she is sensitive to the needs and skills of other family members. The words on the page are taken as clues to the (real) existence of the individual subject with a particular eye to her adjustment to the social world and to any possible areas where her capacity to adjust might be flawed and in need of remediation. From a post-structuralist perspective the story might be read in terms of the process of subjection to the term *conscientious*: 'Subjection exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from elsewhere; it marks a primary vulnerability to the Other in order to be' (Butler, 1997: 20). The child experiences herself as willingly embracing the term, despite the lecture she receives from her father about not thinking she is better than her sister. She can therefore be read as the resisting subject, as well as the desiring subject. She can also be read as being taught by her father the precise and detailed embodiment of pleasure in her achievement – it will be quiet, not displaying itself as superior. She takes up these limitations in the correct form of desire and

attitude and bodily comportment in the dual act of being recognized and recognizing herself. In order to be, she is vulnerable to the report-writing teacher and the father. The story shows the process as *both* an imposition *and* an act of agency in which she seeks out and lives the meaning of herself, her subjecthood, within the terms made available to her. The girl did not first experience herself as conscientious and then learn the word for it. In hearing herself described as such, her experience is constituted as such. She is constituted (subjected) as conscientious and she actively takes up the constitution of herself inside the new term that she understands as a desirable way of being. At the same time she reads herself as already that kind of person.

In the second story, told in response to the prompt of 'misrecognition', a young teacher is called into an undesired and abject naming by a student:

... 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 story enters volatile terrain. The teacher sees herself as sensitive and responsive to the needs of students, as professional and reasonable, as equitable. Yet, in her classroom practice, she falls into an old gender trap where – for diverse reasons – teachers tend to interact more with boys than with girls in classrooms. Although the teacher has the 'power' to select this student (Alex) rather than that one (Roslyn) to participate in the discussion, her authority is tenuous and depends on the more or less willing

subjection of students to the disciplinary regimes of the school and the classroom. Roslyn refuses this subjection and assumes authority in the class, bodily by 'standing up' and 'shouting' into a space where she is not authorized to stand or speak, discursively constituting the teacher as one who only attends to boys. The humanist question the teacher might ask herself in that moment is 'Am I really that person?' and she struggles to do this in the story by examining her conscience and her practice and beginning to rehearse answers to that question. But it is not possible to answer from this unspeakable place. These students are young men and women. Roslyn's accusation is that her excessive interest in the boys is because of their male genitals. She cannot debate this rationally with Roslyn/the class. It is a dangerous moment, as the violent reaction of her body reveals. In feminist post-structuralism, this embodied response is as relevant as the words that are spoken in mapping the dynamic relations and effects of power. In particular, post-structuralism questions the workings of relations of power – between the teacher and Alex, between the teacher and Roslyn, between the rest of the class and these subjects – and how they are constituted in the moment-to-moment interactions of that intense social space.

Binary categories slip and slide through this story. The teacher reads Roslyn as 'the students'. Although only one student speaks, the teacher leaves the room 'before they could see what *they* had done to her'. She positions herself in binary opposition to the whole class (whom she imagines aligned with Roslyn, though they too may be stunned into silence). Another binary fracture exists between the rational reflective teacher of her imagination and the sexist, capricious, even lascivious, woman that Roslyn names her as. In this story, she is not willing in her subjection to Roslyn's conferral of this new subject position but she lacks the resources to resist it. She *has* been favouring the boys. She *is* sexist in her practice, in effect if not in intention. And because her way of 'being' has been named in that way, so too her way of thinking (about herself, her practice, her students) is cast in that moment in terms of sex/gender rather than through any other possible categories. The binary shifts from teacher/students, to women/men. 'Woman' entails the (un)teacherly characteristics of emotionality and susceptibility to desire. But she *is* a woman as well as a teacher, and, as in other spheres of her life, these multiple subject positions are in delicate balance, fluid, and precariously achieved.

We could say much more about these stories but for now note that our analyses demonstrate the sorts of issues and approaches we are interested in as feminist post-structuralist researchers. Using lived experience as the ground for theorizing is central to feminist research, as is our particular interest in examining discourses of sex/gender. Post-structuralism enables us to attend to processes of subjectification and discursive regimes. In our analyses of the speaking subjects of these stories, traces of the self-contained liberal humanist subject remain in some readings but our subjects are called into existence in social spaces where power and knowledge circulate unpredictably and where subjects are always tenuous, in process, vulnerable and prone to decomposition.

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Elaborates sexual difference, materiality, embodiment and technology as it reworks feminism and post-structuralism through a 'cartography of becoming'.

Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing Gender*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Further develops theories of gender performativity and explores the consequences of undoing normative conceptions of sex and gender. Gender is understood as reiterative, unstable, citational and improvisational.

Davies, B. (2000) *A Body of Writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

An engagement with feminist post-structuralist theory that defies the boundary between theory and embodied practice. Concepts of subjectivity, agency, feminism and power are elaborated through vital depictions of life experience and empirical research.

Davies, B. (ed.) (2007) *Judith Butler in Conversation: Analysing the Texts and Talk of Everyday Life*. New York: Routledge.

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Davies, B. and Gannon, S. (eds) (2006) *Doing Collective Biography: Investigating the Production of*

Subjectivity. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press/McGraw Hill.

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Lather, P. (2007) *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts toward a Double(d) Science*. New York: SUNY Press.

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Demonstrates the creativity and breadth of research undertaken by feminist post-structuralist educators.

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Shows the limiting effects of the prevailing tendencies in science and in feminist studies to marginalize, and even to repudiate, the material body and the biological dimensions of the human subject. It asks instead how science can contribute to contemporary accounts of embodiment in the humanities and social sciences.

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