

Theory of Feminism

Poststructuralism and contemporary feminism have emerged as two of the most influential political and cultural movements of the late twentieth century. The recent alliance between them has been marked by an especially lively engagement with the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. Although Foucault makes few references to women or to the issue of gender in his writings, his treatment of the relations between power, the body and sexuality has stimulated extensive feminist interest. Foucault's idea that the body and sexuality are cultural constructs rather than natural phenomena has made a significant contribution to the feminist critique of essentialism. While feminists have found Foucault's analysis of the relations between power and the body illuminating, they have also drawn attention to its limitations. From the perspective of a feminist politics that aims to promote women's autonomy, the tendency of a Foucauldian account of power to reduce social agents to docile bodies seems problematic. Although many feminist theorists remain critical of Foucault's questioning of the categories of the subject and agency on the grounds that such questioning undermines the emancipatory aims of feminism, others have argued that in his late work he develops a more robust account of subjectivity and resistance which, while not without its problems from a feminist perspective, nevertheless has a lot to offer a feminist politics. The affinities and tensions between Foucault's thought and contemporary feminism are discussed below.

Background: Foucault's Genealogy of Power, Knowledge and the Subject

Foucault presents disciplinary power as productive of certain types of subject as well. In *Discipline and Punish* he describes the way in which the central technique of disciplinary power – constant surveillance – which is initially directed toward disciplining the body, takes hold of the mind as well to induce a psychological state of 'conscious and permanent visibility' (Foucault 1977: 201). In other words, perpetual surveillance is internalized by individuals to produce the kind of self-awareness that defines the modern subject. With the idea that modern power operates to produce the phenomena it targets Foucault challenges the juridical notion of power as law which assumes that power is simply the constraint or repression of something that is already constituted. On Foucault's account the transition to modernity entails the replacement of the law by the norm as the primary instrument of social control. Foucault links the importance assumed by norms in modern society to the development of the human or social sciences. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* he describes how, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sex and sexuality became crucial political issues in a society concerned with managing and directing the life of individuals and of populations. On Foucault's account, the spread of bio-power is intimately connected to the social science discourses on sex and sexuality which proliferated during this period. These discourses, he claims, tended to understand sex as an instinctual biological and psychic drive with deep links to identity and, thus, with potentially far-reaching effects on the sexual and social behavior of individuals. The idea that the sexual drive could function in a normal, healthy manner or could be warped and perverted into pathological forms led to a project of classification of behavior along a scale of normalization and pathologization of the sexual

2. Between Foucault and Feminism: Convergence and Critique

From the perspective of contemporary social and political theory, the originality of Foucault's genealogies of power/knowledge resides in the challenge they pose to traditional ways of thinking about power. It is this challenge that has made Foucault's work both a significant resource for feminist theory and generated heated debate amongst feminist social and political theorists. While there is broad agreement that Foucault's redefinition of how we think about power in contemporary societies contains important insights for feminism, feminists remain divided over the implications of this redefinition for feminist theory and practice.

An analysis of power relations is central to the feminist project of understanding the nature and causes of women's subordination. Drawing on the traditional model of power as repression, many types of feminist theory have assumed that the oppression of women can be explained by patriarchal social structures which secure the power of men over women. Increasingly, however, this assumption is being called into question by other feminists who are concerned to counter what they regard as the oversimplified conception of power relations this view entails, as well as its problematic implication that women are simply the passive, powerless victims of male power. In the context of this debate, Foucault's work on power has been used by some feminists to develop a more complex analysis of the relations between gender and power which avoids the assumption that the oppression of women is caused in any simple way by men's possession of power. On the basis of Foucault's understanding of power as exercised rather than possessed, as circulating throughout the social body rather than emanating from the top down, and as productive rather than repressive (Sawicki 1988: 164), feminists have sought to challenge accounts of gender relations which emphasize domination and victimization so as to move towards a more textured understanding of the role of power in women's lives. Foucault's redefinition of power has made a significant and varied contribution to this project. Foucault's notion that power is constitutive of that upon which it acts has enabled feminists to explore the often complicated ways in which women's experiences, self-understandings, comportment and capacities are constructed in and by the power relations which they are seeking to transform. The idea that modern power is involved in producing rather than simply repressing individuals has also played a part in a controversial move within feminism away from traditional liberationist political orientations.

3. Power, the Body and Sexuality

There are a number of aspects of Foucault's analysis of the relations between power, the body and sexuality that have stimulated feminist interest. Firstly, Foucault's analyses of the productive dimensions of disciplinary powers which is exercised outside the narrowly defined political domain overlap with the feminist project of exploring the micropolitics of personal life and exposing the mechanics of patriarchal power at the most intimate levels of women's experience. Secondly, Foucault's treatment of power and its relation to the body and sexuality has provided feminist social and political theorists with some useful conceptual tools for the analysis of the social construction of gender and sexuality and contributed to the critique of essentialism within feminism. Finally, Foucault's identification of the body as the principal target of power has been used by feminists to analyze contemporary forms of social control over women's bodies and minds.

Rather than focusing on the centralized sources of societal power in agencies such as the economy or the state, Foucault's analysis of power emphasizes micro level power relations. Foucault argues that, since modern power operates in a capillary fashion throughout the social body, it is best grasped in its concrete and local effects and in the everyday practices which sustain and reproduce power relations. This emphasis on the everyday practices through which power relations are reproduced has converged with the feminist project of analyzing the politics of personal relations and altering gendered power relations at the most intimate levels of experience 'in the institutions of marriage, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality, in the 'private' relations between the sexes and in the everyday rituals and regimens that govern women's relationships to themselves and their bodies (Sawicki 1998: 93). In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault develops an anti-essentialist account of the sexual body, which, however, doesn't deny its materiality. At the heart of Foucault's history of sexuality is an analysis of the production of the category of sex and its function in regimes of power aimed at controlling the sexual body. Foucault argues that the construct of a supposedly 'natural' sex functions to disguise the productive operation of power in relation to sexuality: 'The notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate' (Foucault 1978: 155). Foucault's claim here is that the relationship between power and sexuality is misrepresented when sexuality is viewed as an unruly natural force that power simply opposes, represses or constrains. Rather, the phenomenon of sexuality should be understood as constructed through the exercise of power relations. Drawing on Foucault's account of the historical construction of sexuality and the part played by the category of sex in this construction, feminists have been able to rethink gender, not as the cultural meanings that are attached to a pre-given sex, but, in Judith Butler's formulation, 'as the ... cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as...prior to culture' (Butler 1990: 7). Following Foucault, Butler argues that the notion of a 'natural' sex that is prior to culture and socialization is implicated in the production and maintenance of gendered power relations because it naturalizes the regulatory idea of a supposedly natural heterosexuality and, thus, reinforces the reproductive constraints on sexuality. In addition to his anti-essentialist view of the body and sexuality, Foucault insists on the corporeal reality of bodies. He argues that this rich and complex reality is oversimplified by the biological category of sex which groups together in an 'artificial unity' a range of disparate and unrelated biological functions and bodily pleasures. Thus, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains that: 'The purpose of the present study is in fact to show how deployments of power are directly connected to the body – to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures; far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another ... but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective. Hence I do not envisage a "history of mentalities" that would take account of bodies only through the manner in which they have been perceived and given meaning and value; but a "history of bodies" and the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested' (Foucault 1978: 151-2). Because Foucault's anti-essentialist account of the body is nevertheless attentive to the materiality of bodies it has been attractive to feminists concerned to expose the processes through which the female body is transformed into a feminine body. Thus, in claiming that the body is directly targeted and

‘produced’ by power and, thus, unknowable outside of its cultural significations, Foucault breaks down the distinction between a natural sex and a culturally constructed gender.

4. Subjectivity, Identity and Resistance

Although the use that Bartky and Bordo make of Foucault’s insights into the operation of normalizing disciplinary power is a corrective to his failure to recognize the gendered nature of disciplinary techniques, some feminists have argued that their work reproduces a problematic dimension of Foucault’s account of modern disciplinary power. Jana Sawicki explains that the problem faced by this kind of feminist appropriation of Foucault is its inability to account for effective resistance to disciplinary practices. Like Foucault, Bartky and Bordo envisage modern disciplinary power as ubiquitous and inescapable. Foucauldian power reduces individuals to docile and subjected bodies and thus seems to deny the possibility of freedom and resistance. According to Sawicki, ‘Bartky and Bordo have portrayed forms of patriarchal power that insinuate themselves within subjects so profoundly that it is difficult to imagine how they (we) might escape. They describe our complicity in patriarchal practices of victimization without providing suggestions about how we might resist it’ (Sawicki 1988: 293).

5. Freedom, Power and Politics

The key problems identified by feminist critics as preventing too close a convergence between Foucault’s work and feminism – his reduction of social agents to docile bodies and the lack of normative guidance in his model of power and resistance – are indirectly addressed by Foucault in his late work on ethics. Whereas in his earlier genealogies Foucault emphasized the processes through which individuals were subjected to power, in his later writings he turned his attention to practices of self-constitution or ‘practices of freedom’ which he called ethics.

The idea of practicing freedom is central to Foucault’s exploration and analysis of the ethical practices of Antiquity. It refers to the ways in which individuals in Antiquity were led to exercise power over themselves in the attempt to constitute or transform their identity and behavior in the light of specific goals. What interests Foucault about these ethical practices and ancient ‘arts of existence’ is the kind of freedom they presuppose. He suggests that the freedom entailed in practicing the art of self-fashioning consists neither in resisting power nor in seeking to liberate the self from regulation. Rather, it entails the active and conscious arrogation of the power of regulation by individuals for the purposes of ethical and aesthetic self-transformation. In her reflections on Foucault’s positive account of freedom, Sawicki notes that it offers a more affirmative alternative to his earlier emphasis on the reactive strategy of resistance to normalization (Sawicki 1998: 104). For the late Foucault, individuals are still understood to be shaped by their embeddedness in power relations, which means that their capacities for freedom and autonomous action are necessarily limited. With the introduction of a notion of freedom in his late work, Foucault also clarifies the normative grounds for his opposition to certain forms of power. In his discussion of ethics, Foucault suggests that individuals are not limited to reacting against power, but may alter power relationships in ways that expand their possibilities for action. Thus, Foucault’s work on ethics can be linked to his concern to counter domination, that is, forms of power that limit the possibilities for the autonomous development of the self’s capacities. By distinguishing power relations that are mutable, flexible and reversible, from situations of domination in which resistance is foreclosed, Foucault seeks to encourage practices of liberty ‘that will allow us to play ... games of power with as little domination as possible’ (Foucault 1988b: 298). Sawicki argues that Foucault’s notion of practices of freedom has the

potential to broaden our understanding of what it is to engage in emancipatory politics. In Foucault's conception of freedom as a practice aimed at minimizing domination, Sawicki discerns an implicit critique of traditional emancipatory politics which tends to conceive of liberty as a state free from every conceivable social constraint. Following Foucault, Sawicki argues that the problem with this notion of emancipation is that it does not go far enough: 'Reversing power positions without altering relations of power is rarely liberating. Neither is it a sufficient condition of liberation to throw off the yoke of domination' (Sawicki 1998: 102). If, as Foucault suggests, freedom exists only in being exercised and is, thus, a permanent struggle against what will otherwise be done to and for individuals, it is dangerous to imagine it as a state of being that can be guaranteed by laws and institutions. By insisting that liberation from domination is not enough to guarantee freedom, Foucault points to the importance of establishing new patterns of behaviour, attitudes and cultural forms that work to empower the vulnerable and, in this way, to ensure that mutable relations of power do not congeal into states of domination. Thus, for Sawicki, the value of Foucault's late work for feminism consists in the conceptual tools that it provides to think beyond traditional emancipatory theories and practices.

Synthesis in sociological theory

The idea of synthesising theory is receiving attention within public health as part of a drive to design theoretically informed interventions. Theory synthesis is not a new idea, however, having been debated by sociologists for several decades. We consider the various methodological approaches to theory synthesis and test the feasibility of one such approach by synthesising a small number of sociological theories relevant to health related risk-taking. The synthesis consisted of three stages: (i) *synthesis preparation*, wherein parts of relevant theories were extracted and summarised; (ii) *synthesis* which involved comparing theories for points of convergence and divergence and bringing together those points that converge; and (iii) *synthesis refinement* whereby the synthesis was interrogated for further theoretical insights. Our synthesis suggests that serious and sustained risk-taking is associated with social isolation, liminality and a person's position in relation to the dominant social group. We reflect upon the methodological and philosophical issues raised by the practice of theory synthesis, concluding that it has the potential to reinvigorate theory and make it more robust and accessible for practical application. The notion of taking a systematic approach to the synthesis of theory predates the current public health interest, however, and has been a subject of discussion within sociology since at least the 1980s, where it is commonly referred to as 'metatheorising'. [Ritzer \(1990\)](#) notes that a systematic approach allows a deeper comprehension of theories as well as the possibility of evaluating, critically analysing and improving them. He suggests that metatheorizing would benefit sociology by generating new theories, better understood theories, and overarching perspectives. Confusingly, however, Ritzer outlines a very wide-ranging approach to metatheoretical activity, including within its purview three different tasks: First, metatheorizing to attain a deeper understanding of theory, which he refers to as M_u . This is the identification of major cognitive paradigms within sociology and the study of theories, theorists, communities of theorists and the larger intellectual and social contexts of theories. Second, metatheorizing as a prelude to theory development (M_p), which entails the study of existing theory to produce new sociological theory. Third, M_o , which is the practice of studying theory in order to produce a metatheory that overarches some part (or all) of sociological theory.

Synthesis preparation

Synthesis preparation involves extracting those parts of the theories that we are concerned with and attempting to clarify and summarise those parts. The presentation of each of the theories that follows has entailed this process of extracting, clarifying and summarising.

1. Societal integration

If suicide can be regarded as an extreme form of risk-taking then [Durkheim \(1952\)](#) perhaps provides the first sociological theory of risk-taking. Durkheim proposed that there were three types of suicide: egoistic, altruistic and anomic, the first of which concerns us here. (Fatalistic suicide, which is sometimes considered a fourth type, is mentioned only once in a footnote.) 'When society is strongly integrated', wrote Durkheim, 'it holds individuals under its control, considers them at its service and thus forbids them to dispose wilfully of themselves.' (1952: 209) Durkheim suggested that Catholics had a lower suicide rate than Protestants because their religious community was more strongly integrated and cohesive. He concluded: '... suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part.' (1952: 209) In the case of egoistic suicide '... the bond attaching man to life relaxes because that attaching him to society is itself slack.' (1952: 214–215) For Durkheim then, egoistic suicide was a result of low levels of societal integration and cohesion.

2. The deviant career

[Becker \(1963\)](#), partly on the basis of research with marijuana users, developed a theory to explain how deviance may become a way of life for some people. He suggested that for a person to progress from casual experimentation to a more sustained pattern of deviance, one of the most crucial steps is the experience of being caught and publicly labelled as deviant, since this brings about a drastic change in identity. That person is now assumed to be generally lawless and deviant in other respects and is cut off from participation in more conventional groups, perhaps becoming unemployed and drifting into marginal occupations. Becker suggests that unless the person quickly returns to the conventional community, they will continue down a path of ever increasing deviance and will be less and less subject to the impact of convention. The last step in the deviant's career is to become a member of an organised deviant group. Members of deviant groups feel a sense of common fate, Becker contends, since they are all in the same boat and face similar problems. Thus a deviant subculture grows, with a set of world views and self-justifying rationales for neutralising conventional norms. The person learns how to carry on the deviant behaviour with ease because all the problems of avoiding trouble have already been worked out and there is a stock of lore which the new member learns. Thus, suggests Becker, a person who enters an organised deviant group is highly likely to continue on that path.

3. The architecture of social groups

[Lightfoot \(1997\)](#), who developed her theory on the basis of research with teenagers, identifies two primary clusters of risk. One is a cluster of mildly mischievous, exploratory or transitional risk-taking (e.g. experimenting with alcohol), which she regards as 'normative'. The other is a cluster of health-compromising, destructive or pathogenic behaviours (e.g. crack cocaine addiction), which she notes are legally and culturally sanctioned as 'deviant'. Lightfoot found that it was rare for individuals to engage in both risk clusters. She describes the latter, more serious type of risk taking as 'marginal risk behaviour'. Her theory is that the marginality of risk

coheres with the marginality of groups, i.e. those engaged in the more serious, marginal risk behaviours also belong to more marginal and isolated groups. In her view marginal risk patterns do not so much cause social isolation as *manifest* it. Lightfoot proposes that cohesion and permeability are key features to be considered. In her study, the one group characterised by a major involvement in marginal risk behaviours was also the only group with both a high degree of internal cohesion and a low degree of permeability to the wider social network. This group was more private about its risk taking and was also disengaged from the larger teenage community. By contrast, the group most active with respect to normative risk-taking was also internally cohesive but its boundaries were much more permeable and there was frequent contact with wider social networks.

4. Cultural theory' of risk-taking

[Douglas and Calvez \(1990\)](#) argue that the self is risk-taking or risk-averse according to a predictable pattern of dealings between the person and others in the community. Their theory is that the ongoing dialogue about how to achieve the ideal community engages four different kinds of culture, each of which has a different attitude towards the self, risk-taking and the knowledge professions: 1. The 'central community' holds strong views on the correct norms of behaviour, is hierarchical and has developed consensus for dealing with the boundary against the outside. The authority of the established professions is accepted. The centre community is very risk-averse; when faced with a threat it will aim to consolidate the community and exclude all outsiders and repress all deviants. 2. The 'dissenting enclaves' protest against the central community which has rejected their principles. These enclaves espouse equality, reject the knowledge base and authority of the central community and suspect professionals. They may deride the culture of safety. 3. The 'entrepreneurial individualists' are highly idiosyncratic regarding health and diet but are generally risk-takers. 4. The 'isolates' find their activities and autonomy restricted by the other cultural types. They tend to be eccentric, which reinforces their isolation. Being isolated there is no one to challenge their ideas; they are loners who expect conspiracy and reject interference. Isolates are idiosyncratic or fatalistic in their attitude to risk. Many are explicit risk-takers in that they may be drug users and/or prostitutes. Each of the four cultures has a relationship with the centre community except for the isolates (of particular interest to this synthesis), whom the centre community expels to its margins.

5. Social resistance

The thrust of Factor et al.'s [\(2011\)](#) theory is that non-dominant minority groups (NDMGs) tend to have greater involvement in high-risk behaviours (e.g. smoking, alcohol and drug use, poor diet, low exercise) and that these behaviours represent a form of resistance, whether conscious or unconscious, to the dominant group. The authors argue that discrimination may result in NDMGs feeling a degree of alienation from, and low attachment to, the larger society. By engaging in high-risk behaviours NDMGs are able to express their defiance of the dominant group and signal the limits of its power. Since large-scale opportunities for public resistance are few, everyday acts of resistance are more common and may act as a safety valve, enabling NDMGs to express their dissatisfaction with their status while avoiding direct negative consequences. Furthermore, argue Factor et al., NDMGs may develop a collective identity in opposition to the dominant group and may feel pressure to resist the attitudes and behaviours of the dominant group. So if healthy behaviours are associated with the dominant group, NDMGs may engage in them at the risk of hostility from their peers. The authors suggest that the power relations within society

encourage members of NDMGs to actively engage in every day resistance activities which may include unhealthy behaviours.

Synthesis

The process of conducting a synthesis involves 'immersion' in the theories, allowing an opportunity to explore their meanings and possibilities in greater depth. In its careful, step by step approach it is similar to some of the activities undertaken in qualitative synthesis, particularly the process of reciprocal translation ([Noblit and Hare, 1988](#)), in which concepts are systematically compared and translated into one another. However, it is not exactly like this, since theories are broader in scope, less detailed and more abstract than qualitative findings.

Comparison of theories for points of convergence and divergence

The theories were compared with each other and points of convergence and divergence were noted ([Table 2](#)). To enable this comparison, the theories were broken down into simple propositions and rendered abstract. For example, a proposition belonging to Becker's theory is: 'Sustained deviant behaviour is more likely if a person is excluded from society

Synthesis refinement

The 'synthesis refinement' stage is similar to the final stages of qualitative synthesis in which the aim is to generate a novel interpretation or conceptual advancement ([Pound et al., 2005](#), [Campbell et al., 2011](#)). Within meta-ethnography this is sometimes called a 'lines of argument' synthesis ([Noblit and Hare, 1988](#)) or a 'third-order interpretation' ([Britten et al., 2002](#)). In the same way, theory synthesis has the potential to generate an end product greater than the sum of its parts.

We reviewed the synthesis to consider whether any further theoretical insights might be gained. We began by illustrating the causal processes suggested by the theories so far, as [Turner \(1990\)](#) advises, and try to bring together this next level of interpretation ([Fig. 2](#)). It is only if less serious risk-takers are labelled as deviant and/or join a marginal group that they become increasingly cut off from mainstream society and engage in serious or sustained risk-taking. This serious or sustained risk-taking is likely to reinforce the label of deviance and lead to an increasing spiral of isolation and serious risk-taking. Reintegration into mainstream society would appear to become increasingly more difficult and unlikely for those engaged in serious or sustained risk-taking. Similarly, the greater the degree of separation from mainstream society, the greater would seem the potential for serious and persistent risk-taking. Those engaged in less serious risk-taking, however, may be able to re-enter mainstream society fairly easily, perhaps as they move from childhood to adulthood, or gain status through employment. Those who gain in power have fewer reasons for resisting the dominant group, or indeed may become members of the dominant group themselves. It seems possible that reintegration into mainstream society would decrease the likelihood of engaging in serious or persistent risk-taking.

