

Home economics: poststructural theory and the politics of feminism

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This paper will outline feminism, poststructural theory and finally the cumulative feminist poststructural theory, as forms of social critique of home economics.

Feminist theory, the family and home economics

The links between home economics, the family, and feminism cannot be overlooked as trivial, particularly if we accept statements such as *'The central focus of home economics education is the wellbeing of families and individuals in their everyday activities'* (Curriculum Corporation 1996:3). Combined with the historical origins of the field of study to the appropriate preparation of women for their future life roles within patriarchal society (Apelt, 1989; Badir, 1990; Bielski, 1987; Logan, 1981; Meighan, 1981; Pendergast, 1991; Reiger, 1990) and the focus on optimising the wellbeing of individuals and families, home economics has been a ready target of critics, especially feminists. Indeed, as Smit warns:

Without doubt, one of the greatest challenges to home economics is that being raised by the women's movement...At the centre of the antagonism between both feminists and home economists appears to be the issue of the 'family' (Smit 1991:11).

So why is 'family' such an issue for feminists particularly since receiving such a high profile in 1994, the International Year of the Family designated by the United Nations General Assembly? The UN International Year was about stimulating local, national and international actions to strengthen families as *'the smallest democracy at the heart of society'* (The National Council for the International Year of the Family, 1994:1).

Sociologists often utilise a range of constructions in order to conveniently articulate perspectives of the family from differing standpoints. Each of these perspectives brings out differing characteristics of the family, and it is these aspects which feminists begin to question. For example, one of the issues that is often raised is that of women and work, both paid and unpaid. Feminists would argue that:

...women today are still largely socialised in a manner that sees housework and associated family responsibilities as principally a female

area. Accordingly, the majority of Australian women conform to a lifestyle that involves prolonged periods at home (Draper 1989:85).

For this reason, along with many more, feminists have been critical of the family as a social construction, because it disempowers and marginalises women. For many feminists the family represents the most oppressive force of patriarchy, designed by men to keep women powerless. For some, the family represents the power difference between men and women, with the sometimes physical, social and economic dependence of women on men. For some critics, the family develops a dependency in otherwise independent, functional individuals.

Feminists who oppose the patriarchal family believe that it is in the role of mothering that women are most oppressed, frequently being left alone in isolated households to support and care for children. Women's mothering role originates in their biological ability to conceive and bear children and to suckle their young. It is this biological function that precedes the commonsense view that women are naturally placed as nurturers and carers of young. But some feminists argue that mothering is not biologically determined but, rather, is socially constructed, ideologically produced (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Wearing, 1984). In this way, the role of mothering serves to support patriarchal society in which men dominate women.

So what then is feminism, and why does it challenge such taken for granted social institutions as family? To many, the overt, visible, historically located and radical version of feminism is all that they are aware of. The stereotypical bra-burning, male-hating lesbian is the image that is considered by some to be representative of feminists. But is that what feminism is about? Are all feminists male-haters? Do all feminists burn their bras? Do you have to be a woman to be a feminist?

According to Badir (1990), there are four themes central to feminist theory:

1. women are oppressed by patriarchal society;
2. gender is a sociological category of possible significance in understanding the social production of knowledge;
3. the personal is political;

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4. there is a need to create a feminist consciousness among women.

Such general principles as those outlined by Badir provide a guide to the intentions of feminism. The purpose or goal of feminism, as explained by Weedon (1987:1), is '*...a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society*'.

There are many different forms of feminist politics based on the various possible perceptions of relations between men and women. These range from the socialist to the separatists and Marxists, to the liberal and humanist, and the poststructural and eco-feminists. Each form of feminism subscribes to different views of the relationships which should ideally exist between the sexes and consequently has different goals, methodologies, values and theories.

Davies (1989), employing the principles of Kristeva and Moi, has argued the importance of a three-tiered approach to understanding the usefulness and potential of feminist theory. In a sense, this three-tiered approach can also be used to represent the historical evolution of feminism in three overlapping generations:

1. the fight for equal access to the male symbolic order;
2. the rejection of the male symbolic order and the celebration of femininity;
3. the rejection of the male/female duality.

The first tier aims at providing females with equal access to the male symbolic order which is characteristic of patriarchal society. It does not question the existence of male/female duality, but assumes the legitimacy of its existence. In this way, women are expected to become empowered through the adoption of masculine identities.

The second tier offers a route whereby women celebrate femaleness and reject maleness. As in the first tier, this option assumes the existence of patriarchal society which maintains the social order of gender, reinforcing the male/female dichotomy of essential difference.

The third tier presents a strategy which does not have the patriarchal principle of male/female duality central to its formulation. It rejects the assumption that there is an essential difference between men and women which cannot be accounted for through discursive and textual practices through which the constructs 'male' and 'female' are established and maintained as fundamental structures of society.

There are several internationally prominent home economists who argue for a feminist critique of home economics, and Thompson, in particular, has developed her own theory of home economics using a feminist perspective. The following briefly outlines her approach:

As a feminist and a home economist, I find feminist theory helpful in explaining our

present position. Our devalued, privatised, invisible world, the 'oikos' became a private sphere. The very thing that has happened to women in general has happened to home economists particularly, and even to home economics as a profession...The hermitian public sphere is the world. The bestial private world is something else (Thompson, 1988:11).

Thompson (1988) has developed a conceptual framework by which she explains the devaluing of home economics in society. Badir (1990) also makes links between feminism and home economics. She lists five issues of feminist relevance which home economists must deal with:

1. home economics is female intensive;
2. home economics is embedded in the context of the family;
3. home economics is seen as a suitable 'science' for women;
4. home economics is losing ground;
5. home economics has been accused, by feminists, of holding women back.

Poststructural theory, feminist poststructural theory and home economics

Poststructural theory emerged in France due to a disillusionment with scientific and macro-political theory, which is patriarchal in nature (Weiner, 1993). Theories of poststructuralism evolved to contest the assumption that structures do and must exist. Poststructural theory nestles in the third tier of Davies' three-tiered approach to understanding theory—the rejection of male/female duality. 'Post' very definitely refers to 'after' structuralism. Poststructuralism is the theoretical position which is evident in the works of Derrida, Lacan, Althusser, Foucault and others. Unlike poststructuralism, theories utilising patriarchal methodology and analytical methods do not question basic assumptions which privilege the discourse of universal structures, so are likely to reinforce the position that home economics is oppressive because of its perceived/real focus on the domain of unpaid women's work in the home (Kelly, 1981; Pendergast, 1991; 1995a,b). Patriarchal methodologies are unlikely to reveal the political power struggle which underlies this field of study.

In order to understand poststructuralism, it is prudent to explore its predecessor - structuralism. According to Gibson (1984) structuralism is a theory and a method which is characterised by six basic idiosyncrasies. The first of these is a sense of '*wholeness*' - the notion that it is the large collective, not the smaller parts which is determinate. The second is that '*relationships*', not things, are the focus of structuralism. The third is '*decentring the subject*', that the subcomponents are products and players of the larger system. The fourth characteristic is '*self-regulation*', the notion that the system maintains itself and perpetuates its own survival. The fifth dimension is the '*snapshot*' method. This is where a piece of evidence at one time is used to build a picture, in preference to developing a picture

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over time. The final aspect is '*transformation*', the possibility for change.

The theoretical concept of structuralism is defined more concisely by Scholes to be '*the idea of a system: a complete, self-regulatory entity that adapts to new conditions by transforming its features whilst retaining its systematic structure*' (Scholes cited in Gibson, 1984:12). The theory of structuralism evolved from the a priori assumption that structures exist in society. This theory looks for models which are there and constructs the world through these existing configurations. Acclaimed structuralists include Saussure, Piaget and Levi-Strauss.

Structuralists have been censored because they accept common sense assumptions about society as being the way society is structured. For example, scientific knowledge constructs the world through structures—lists, equations, formulas, theorems. These structures are given the status of truth, they are scientifically upheld notions of the truth. Truth regimes work through power and knowledge thereby identifying scientific knowledge as valuable knowledge, therefore scientific knowledge is valued as high-status wisdom. This in turn reinforces the 'structural' approach to knowledge because it can be defined and structured, it is valuable knowledge. The structuralist approach therefore becomes its own greatest validator and assumptions about the patriarchal nature of society are taken for granted bias inherent in theory, which then become tools for patriarchy. The existence of male/female duality is an example of an assumption of difference which becomes an underlying principle of structural, patriarchal society. This acts as a regulator for determining appropriate practices for males and females.

Feminist poststructural theory is a framework which rejects the taken-for-granted assumptions and established meanings which reinforce the essence of patriarchal society as the only way to provide meaning and understanding. This theory seeks to illuminate the various constructions of subject positions without giving privilege to dominant structures which are found in patriarchal constructs and serve the interests of masculinity. Feminist poststructural theory identifies discursive practices and demonstrates where they come from; whose interests they support; how they maintain sovereignty and where they are susceptible to change (Weedon, 1987). In so doing, this theory alerts us to assumptions which discredit home economics from the outset, for example, patriarchal assumptions linked with family and family roles.

A central concept in poststructural theory is the role of language in defining social meaning, social organisation and individual consciousness (Weedon, 1987). Language is the major system through which and by which meaning is constructed, cultural practices are organised and individuals' understand their world (Scott, 1990). It is through language that a socially produced

sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed (Kress & Hodge, 1979). Subjectivity refers to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, their sense of self and their ways of understanding their relation to the world (Weedon, 1987). Hence their subject position is located; however, subjectivity is never fixed.

By applying the framework of feminist poststructural theory competing subject positions which are demonstrated in language can be located. From this point, it may be possible to locate discourse which liberates home economics. The theory emphasises that subject positions are not fixed and have social, cultural and historical specificity. This allows the individual to demonstrate complementary as well as contradictory subject positions and to continually evolve subjectivity using discursive practices emanating from life experience.

In research which I have previously undertaken, I investigated the relationship between language, social institutions and individual consciousness and how this was reflected in subject positions adopted by home economics educators in secondary and tertiary education sectors in Queensland (Pendergast, 1991, 1995a,b). This deconstruction of home economics utilised poststructural theory presented from a feminist perspective (Weedon, 1987). The study searched for specific forms of discourse which frame pedagogy, and these were categorised into subjectivities—with three distinct subjectivities being located. The results of the study found that the search to locate speaking positions was approached from many angles, including appropriating masculinity as a way of appeasing patriarchy and its mechanisms, and the celebration of home economics as a women's field of knowledge. These methods reflect the first two in the three tier approach to feminist struggle as conceptualised by Davies (1989) and outlined earlier in this document. The impact of discourses on the marginalised position of home economics within patriarchal society was then considered. Neither of the approaches evident in the data collected confronted the discourse and the practices which marginalise home economics, failing to offer long term solutions to the problematic nature of home economics by collaborating with patriarchal definitions of society. This research highlighted the need for a comprehensive deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the subject—if it is to retain a place in the education of students. It is only through rejection of male/female duality that marginalisation ceases to exist and enabling strategies become empowering.

The theory of feminist poststructuralism provided a framework for comprehending these observations based on an understanding of how social power is exercised in society and how social practices and institutions reinforce patriarchal society as the norm which privileges masculine traits. Hegemonic assumptions and the social practices they guarantee are reinforced in

the discursive practices of society, and gendered subjectivity results from this process. To maintain patriarchal power, an ongoing marginalising of contrary meanings which attempt to redefine hegemonic norms is constantly employed. This reinforces hegemonic gender norms. The discussions demonstrate that home economics is constituted in marginalised subject positions in the hierarchical network of dominant educational discourses.

Home economics is inevitably a reflection of predetermined power structures which are legitimated to conserve patriarchal interests and is therefore a site of constant struggle. This struggle is with the dominant discourse as well as within marginal discourse where it offers a range of subject positions to individuals.

Weedon (1987) notes that it is, typically, conservative discourses which fail to challenge patriarchal relations, thereby accepting discursive practices as parameters within which to function—a criticism often levelled at home economics and characterised by the findings of my research. These subjectivities are neither radical nor controversial, they are conforming. Fraser (1989) explains that reform in academic arenas must challenge conformist assumptions.

Weedon (1987) explains that the procedure for initiating potential change begins with individual subjectivity and gradually builds momentum as more and more individuals recognise the capacity for reform. The process exposes individuals to their potential, as opposed to accepting patriarchally defined bondage that limits potentiality. This poststructural approach uncovers and challenges regimes of power and knowledge which maintain current power relations, gradually undermining their power through the contestation of the assumptions which underlie them.

Conclusion

Feminist poststructural theory provides yet another tool for understanding home economics in its social, cultural and historical milieu. And this is very timely, given that the field of study is under incredible scrutiny, with name changes, the collapse of some tertiary courses of study, threats to related secondary school subjects and so on. It is time that we stepped beyond the patriarchal structures which are guaranteed to marginalise us, and break down the dualities which ensure our demise. Feminist poststructural theory provides that avenue.

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