

However, the external nature of the center reveals a contradiction. A center that is located outside the whole is by definition not inside and thus cannot be at the center of the totality. In other words, language is the totality of human existence—we think, feel, and see linguistically. But humans have always looked outside of language for the center of or reason for language. There's part of us that knows this, but we usually ascribe it to being "wrong." We say things like, "People used to talk about the earth being flat, but they were wrong." Poststructuralism wants us to see that there's never a chance of being "right" because those "truths" or "centers" are always and ever, by definition, outside of language. What we see in the idea of a center is a desire to master anxiety—anxiety about the human mode of existence. Since this is so, "the entire history of the concept of structure . . . must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center" (Derrida, 1967/1978, p. 279). Thus, logically, there is no center to language, no firm foundation upon which to stand.

The second issue that poststructuralists want to bring to our attention is that a rupture has occurred in the history of language. Amongst all the other critiques of capitalism, race, gender, and so on, there came a time when language itself was critiqued. Writing is a profound process. Through writing, we inscribe the world around us. That's what happens when we use language to understand and make meaning out of the physical world and our experiences—we put the meaning on it; the meaning isn't "there" for language to represent. Writing/language is so profound that it writes its own critique. Think of it this way: If you were a linguist and wanted to critique language, what's the only thing you'd use? You would have to use language; you would write the critique of writing by writing it. Here, language inscribes upon itself. The rupture is that moment in time when language itself was critiqued, and it without question reveals the absolute reflexive nature of language. Thus, rather than language being centered in an independent reality, language is inherently self-referential, creating a world of oppressive power relations (Foucault's point). The implications of this are as follows:

- Poststructuralism rejects the belief in essentializing ideas that conceptualize the social world or a portion of it as a universal totality—rather, the social world is fragmented and historically specific (General social theories are thus impossible and oppressive.).
- Poststructuralism denies the possibility of knowing an independent or objective reality—rather, the human world and knowledge are utterly textual or discursive.
- Poststructuralism discards the idea that texts or language have any true meaning—rather, texts are built around difference and carry a surplus of meaning (Humanity is thus left with nothing but interpretation and interpretations of interpretation—this book is an interpretation of others' interpretations of a social world, and as you read, you produce yet another interpretation.).
- Poststructuralism rejects the idea of universal human nature developed out of the Enlightenment—rather, the meaning of the human subject is historically specific and is an effect of discourse, with the discourses of an age producing the possible bodies and subjectivities of the person.

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Beyond that, Lemert (1990) points us to four uses of poststructuralism in sociology. He says that in the social sciences, we typically solve the problems or questions we pose with "reference to ideas like 'empirical reality'" (p. 244). Poststructuralism shatters the idea of a center; our texts therefore can't legitimately make reference to an empirical reality because every reality for humans is a written (inscribed) one. Thus, what we have isn't an empirical reality; it is a textual reality. What, then, can we conclude? Lemert gives us four propositions for poststructuralist sociology:

1. That theory is an inherently discursive activity
2. That the empirical reality in relation to which theoretical texts are discursive is without exception textual
3. That empirical texts depend on this relationship to theoretical texts for their intellectual or scientific value
4. That in certain, if not all, cases a discursive interpretation yields more, not less, adequate understanding (p. 244).

BUILDING YOUR THEORY TOOLBOX

- Using two additional sources, define the concept of class.
- Write a 250-word synopsis of the theoretical perspective of poststructuralism.
- After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to define the following terms theoretically and explain their importance to Foucault's theory of power: truth games, counter-histories, archaeology, genealogy, episteme, discourse, governmentality, objectification, panopticon, microphysics of power, medical gaze
- After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions (remembering to answer them theoretically):
 - Explain Foucault's connection between power and knowledge. How does he conceptualize power? How does knowledge function as power? What are the unique characteristics of modern power?
 - What does Foucault mean by "the order of things"? Explain how his "counter-histories" are used to expose this order.
 - Define discourse and explain how it provides a subjective position for the speaker.