

# 1. Constructions of ageing, sexuality and gender

## Overview

Knowledge is constructed, and as such is political. The way in which knowledge is constructed is known as epistemology. Different epistemologies form the basis of our world views, which may at times be held in a rigid fashion. In this section we will explore some of the epistemologies that underpin different ways of understanding and studying human development and social and cultural phenomena.

## Objectives

By the end of this topic you will:

- Be able to recognise essentialist, constructionist and poststructuralist epistemologies and the different ways in which each approach constructs ageing, gender and sexuality.
- Have reflected on how you position yourself in relation to these schools of thought in your work.
- Have considered the implications of how you position yourself for your work.

## Key Concepts

### *Required reading*

Burr, V. (1995). Introduction. What is social constructionism? In *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, Routledge, New York and London pp. 1-16.

### *Further reading*

Dzurek, LC (1989) The necessity for and evolution of multiple paradigms for nursing research: A poststructuralist perspective. *Advanced Nursing Science*, 11 (4).

## Lecture Notes

A critical reading of different approaches to sexually, gender and ageing will reveal different world views. These can be broadly described as essentialist, social constructionist and post-structuralist (or post-modern). Debates about why we behave differently have often been heated, and even polarised. Understanding the theoretical framework that has influenced and shaped your personal beliefs and work approaches can be helpful in your practice.

Each of the theoretical frameworks discussed in this lecture has an historical basis.

During the Mediaeval Period knowledge was dominated by the church and religious doctrine. The enlightenment project of the eighteenth century was the search for truth, to understand the nature of reality through the application of reason and rationality.

Science, as an antidote to church dogma, was born of the enlightenment. In sociology, internal logic, rules and underlying structures were explained by theorists whose work led to essentialist and structuralist schools of thought.

Rejection of structuralist notions led to post-structuralism and post modernism, terms which are often used interchangeably (Hepworth, 1995).

These three epistemologies, or schools of thought, will be explored in this lecture.

### ***Essentialism***

Essentialism is one of the central modes of representation. In its most stripped down meaning, it is based on the belief that people and/or phenomena have an underlying and unchanging 'essence'. Essentialist positions consider gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and even personal characteristics to be fixed traits. The essentialist position on sexuality argues that we are genetically predisposed to be either heterosexual or homosexual; on gender, that men are naturally more aggressive than women because of their hormones.

A popular book that takes this position on gender is *Brain Sex*, by Moir & Jessel (1992). Their position is that men and women are different because our brains are biologically different and that because of this, we process information in different ways and have different perceptions, priorities and behaviours. Those who take this position often use biology to argue that a particular difference and/or behaviour is unchangeable.

Essentialism as it is applied to ageing assumes that physical and cognitive decline will inevitably lead to a lack of interest in sex, although there are, in lived experience, vast variations in the rate at which decline occurs, and many older people remain interested in, and actively sexual throughout their lives.

### ***Consider the following questions and journal your responses:***

- If men are naturally more aggressive, why is there such variation between men?
- If women are naturally nurturing, why do some women never want to have children?
- If heterosexuality and homosexuality are pre-determined, how can bisexuality be explained?

Essentialism underlies the use of unified concepts – for example, assuming that the experience of ageing is the same for all people. Although broad assumptions are often applied to 'the aged', in reality, individual experiences are often varied in complex ways according to different social and economic conditions (Twigg, 2004).

### ***Social Constructionism***

Social constructionists posit that, while a behaviour or practice may appear to be natural, it is in practice an invention or artefact of a particular culture or society. Unlike essentialism, social constructionism suggests that differences are constructed, not innate. These constructions are the result of human choices rather than purely natural phenomena.

Social constructionism became prominent as a result of the work of Berger and Luckman in the USA, when they published *The Social Construction of Reality* in 1966. They argued that most taken-for-granted knowledge is derived from and maintained by social interactions. The key assumptions of social constructionists are,

- A critical stance on ‘taken for granted’ knowledge
- Recognition of difference across time and place,
- That knowledge is sustained by social processes (Hepworth, 1995).

Social constructionist theory suggests that through discourse and within culture, people come to understand and know themselves. This is a continuous creative process through language and many other forms of expression that shape how we know ourselves and others in an ongoing interactive process (Gross & Blundo, 2005).

Social constructionism is a school of thought that holds that categories of gender and sexuality like masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual derive from cultural influences, not from essential features of an individual’s biology or psychology, as essentialists hold. Social constructionists would argue that the way we express our gender is learned, not innate, and applied to sexuality, that people are not born straight or gay, but that sexuality is influenced by social conditions.

**Consider the following questions and journal your reflections:**

- How do individuals ‘learn’ what is appropriate gendered behaviour their biological sex?
- What happens if a female’s gender behaviour is outside of what is seen as appropriate femininity? What happens if a male’s gender behaviour is outside what is seen as appropriate masculinity?
- Are these messages and expectations the same across cultures? Were they the same in the past? What changes can you identify that have happened in your (or your parents) lifetimes?
- What kinds of assumptions do you make about gender appropriate behaviour in others; how do you think this might influence your work?
- Have you ever been surprised by how others have responded to your assumptions?

***Post structuralism***

Post structuralism is a rejection of the idea that there can be an ultimate truth, as both essentialism and social constructionism suggest. In this school of thought, there is no simple grand or meta narrative that helps us to understand the world. Post-structuralists reject the notion that change can occur through identifying underlying structures. This is not so much a theory, as a set of theoretical positions which have at their core an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of texts and their meanings.

For post-structuralists, text refers to all modes of communication, be it written, representational, or spoken; thus art, advertising, drama, and interpersonal relations. Individuals are 'subjects' who are material beings, present in the physical world and influenced by the practices and structures of their society.

We are influenced by a range of social institutions and structures which govern our lives – for example, the family, education, religion, government, and the law. These institutions form culturally based meanings for subjects, that differ across sites – so the same person may have different social practices in their family, at work or in recreation settings, and this diversity is not limited.

Because we are social, we take meaning and value from the groups to which we belong. This influences our activities in society and our intimate relations. Rather than having one coherent identity, identity differs according to context, so one person might at the same time identify as a mother, lover, sister, actress and lesbian, depending on the social context. This does not imply that we are fractured, rather that as individuals we are multiple and complex.

Post structuralist theorists have argued that it is through discourse that regimes of power and knowledge are effectively internalised by the individual; culture thus produces and disciplines the body, and it is through this process that “subjectivity and consciousness arise” (Winter, 2001, p. 176).

### ***Material or discursive***

Essentialists such as Erikson defined identity as the development of individual personality involving a stable core sense of self, within the context of the social milieu. Here notions of stability and interiority are central. However, for social constructionists: “... identities are not something deep down inside the individual but are located in the interaction between the individual and society. Identities, thus, are always in process” (Esterberg, 1997, p. 14 – 15). One criticism of social-constructionism is that it ignores the physical body. Take to its extreme, some social constructionists have argued that everything is constructed in discourse.

Ussher (1997) represented this debate as material/discursive and argued that always placing the two in opposition to each other is counterproductive. In other words, material and discursive elements are always intertwined in how we negotiate our identity, and this includes our gender and sexuality.

The implications of the different positions are that:

- Those who view the body simply as a material entity, tend to focus on the physical aspects of experience. In this view, sexuality is seen as a set of drives and instincts.
- Those who focus on discursive elements have taken the view that the body is constructed externally by culture, power and knowledge. In this view, the body is seen as being subjected in and by discourse.

The view that material/discursive elements are always intertwined takes account of the existence of the physical nature of the body as well as the ways in which power is transmitted through discourse as we continually construct ourselves and the world around us.

Essentialism has been a useful tool for both radical and conservative political agendas. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent in the debate over the origins of homosexuality in human beings. A number of studies have posited that sexual orientation is not a choice, but is genetically predetermined. For those from the conservative side of politics, this has opened the possibility of finding a 'cure' and eradicating homosexuality. At the other end of politics, gay activists have used the same studies to argue that because sexual orientation is not a choice, but a difference that cannot be changed, that gay and lesbian people should therefore be tolerated by mainstream society (Dyson, 2007).

### **Activity**

Essentialist, constructionist and post structuralist schools of thought all take a different view of the same situation. Read the statement below and think about the assumptions that underpin your work.

**Statement:** as a person ages, is it inevitable to have to settle for what one has, rather than to entertain ideas about future possibilities.

**Essentialist position:** genetic make up inevitably limits levels of functioning as one ages, therefore one has to settle for what one has.

**Social constructionist position:** pre-determined expectations of what older people are or are not capable of, act to limit levels of functioning and therefore potential.

**Post structuralist position:** rather than the life course inexorably leading to limited functioning, there is a great deal of difference between individuals' potential for future possibilities. Some may be limited by their physical body, some by social expectations, and yet others may resist the discourses that seek to limit possibilities and entertain ideas about future possibilities. There is no one way of being, but many.

### ***Critical reflection***

Discuss how you position yourself in your journal, using the following prompt questions.

- In what ways might your position influence your own values and attitudes towards older people and sexuality?
- What are the implications of this for your work?

