

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender. (Butler, 1990, p. 17)

1.1 Introduction

In this qualitative study I set out to explore the discourses that construct the gendered and sexualised subjectivities of a group of South African women who identify as bisexual. In societies where heterosexuality remains normative, those who claim sexual identities that do not maintain the presumed “natural” relationship between sex, gender and sexuality are often considered unintelligible (Butler, 1990). It is this rupture from heteronormativity and its consequences that the current study will explore. In conducting the study I assume a poststructuralist feminist approach and use a discourse analytic framework for the analysis of the texts resulting from interviews with self-identified bisexual women. This chapter begins with a brief note on the role of language in constructing categories of identity such as “bisexual”. This is followed by an introduction to the academic and personal contexts within which the research question was formulated. I then provide the aims and objectives that guided the study and conclude the chapter with an outline of the structure of the dissertation.

1.2 Language and identity

In assuming a poststructuralist position in this study, I resist universalising tendencies in research that posit categories such as bisexuality as fixed and essentialised. A poststructuralist approach to language and subjectivity is critical of the reification of categories of identity. Instead, subjectivity is regarded as fragmented and in flux (Weedon, 1987). Categories of sexuality are socially constructed and do not reflect an inherent fixed nature of individuals. While I value such resistance to the reification of categories of identity, I also support the need to (cautiously) draw on such categories in a manner that is always provisional, in order to allow for increased visibility of bisexuality in research accounts. Consistent with this position, I am not concerned with identifying “real” bisexual women in this study, nor to depict a totalising account of bisexual experiences. Instead this study is concerned with how meanings around bisexuality are created and negotiated, and how such meanings position participants who self-identify as bisexual.

A widely used description of bisexuality is as an “experience of erotic, emotional, and sexual attraction to persons of more than one gender” (Firestein, 1996, p. xix). James (1996) provides a description of bisexuality as “the sexual or intensely emotional although not necessarily concurrent or equal, attraction of an individual to members of more than one gender” (p. 218). Firestein (1996) further indicates that the terms “bisexual identity” and “bisexually-identified” commonly refer to individuals who have made a conscious decision to adopt a label indicating their bisexual orientation. The implication of this is that some individuals might demonstrate what could be considered bisexual behaviour but might not identify themselves as bisexual, while others might self-identify as bisexual without engaging in bisexual behaviours. These descriptions point to the contested nature of the term bisexual and subsequent chapters will further explore the various ways in which bisexuality has been constructed in dominant discourse.

1.3 Locating the study

In this section I consider the academic context in which the current study is located. I briefly describe how bisexuality is positioned in research conducted in different academic domains – that of traditional psychological and social science research; the field of LGBTI psychology and queer studies; and finally the emerging subfield of bisexuality studies. Through this brief contextualisation, I highlight a number of oversights in the research landscape. I conclude with a consideration of my personal context, as it informs the current study.

1.3.1 The monosexual assumption and bisexual invisibility

The international academic context in which this study is conducted is one in which heteronormativity remains pervasive. Historically, research in the field of sexualities has had an implicit focus on heterosexuality with little consideration of other expressions of sexuality (Bullough & Bullough, 1997). However, as this research focus has expanded to consider sexualities that do not conform to the heterosexual norm, a heterosexual/homosexual binary has emerged (Fox, 2004). Such a monosexual binary, within which heterosexuality and homosexuality are posited as the only legitimate categories of sexuality, has pervaded much of the research conducted in sexuality studies broadly and psychology specifically (Fox, 2004). As the literature review in subsequent chapters will indicate, bisexuality is not easily conceived of as a legitimate category of sexual identification and research studies have perpetuated this through assigning research participants that do not neatly fit binary categories, as either heterosexual or homosexual. An example can be found in the often-encountered tendency in anthropological research in African contexts to describe same-sex

behaviour in otherwise “heterosexual” individuals as situational bisexuality (e.g., Evans-Pritchard, 1970; Herskovits, 1938).

This monosexual assumption is also reflected in many social science studies, with Rust (2000) noting that much of the research prior to the 1980s conceptualised bisexuality as “a lesser degree of ‘homosexual’ experience, as the intermediate range on a heterosexual-homosexual continuum, or as a matter of ‘diversity among homosexuals’” (p. 5). Data on bisexual individuals were often “forced” into a heterosexual/homosexual conceptualisation of sexuality, regardless of individual self-identification of sexuality (Carr, 2006; 2011). In this manner sexuality is persistently organised into the two discrete categories that constitute the monosexual binary, causing bisexuality to be erased from social science research accounts.

1.3.2 Bisexual practice and HIV risk: The threat of “bisexual infectors”

Through a narrow focus on bisexual practice and risk, bisexuality has attained a measure of visibility in “mainstream” academic research, with “the vast majority of research on bisexuality focus[ing] only on behaviour in the context of sexually transmitted infections and HIV” (Elia & Eliason, 2012, p. 9). Consequently a large body of research investigates the “threat” of bisexual men introducing HIV to their female heterosexual partners (e.g., Millet, Malebranche, Mason, & Spikes, 2005; Montgomery, Mokotoff, Gentry, & Blair, 2003; Stokes, McKirnan, Doll, & Burzette, 1996). Worth (2011, p. 488) refers to a construction of “the bisexual infector” as dangerous, secretive and promiscuous and as informing much of this research. In addition to stigmatising effects, this focus on sexual behaviour and risk has restricted the focus of international studies and has consequently excluded research related to bisexual identity construction, as opposed to bisexual practice.

A similar narrow focus is evident in South African research, with the impact of the HIV and AIDS epidemic resulting in research exploring sexualities predominantly doing so in relation to HIV risk (Shefer, 1999). Considering that the present nature of the epidemic is such that HIV transmission occurs mainly through heterosexual intercourse (Walker & Gilbert, 2002), research interest in groups claiming other sexual identities has been limited. The emerging exception to this is a renewed interest in research focusing on men who identify as heterosexual but engage in sexual activity with men (e.g., Knox, Yi, Reddy, Maimane, & Sandfort, 2010; Lane et al., 2011; Smith, Tapsoba, Peshu, Sanders, & Jaffe, 2009), mirroring the international focus on male bisexual behaviour. This has resulted in the limited attention that bisexuality receives in South African research being almost exclusively directed to male bisexual practice and the implications thereof for HIV transmission.

Consequently, studies that explore bisexual identities instead of bisexual practice, with female samples as opposed to male, are entirely absent from the South African context, motivating my choice to focus on female bisexual identities in this project.

1.3.3 Bisexuality in the context of LGBTI psychology and queer studies

While a monosexual binary traditionally informed much of “mainstream” social science research, LGBTI¹ psychology as a subfield within psychological research has largely perpetuated such a binary. Petford (2003) cites the following excerpt from an editorial in the journal *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, to illustrate how bisexuality (and transgender psychology) has generally been marginalised in LGBTI psychological research:

When the BPS [British Psychological Society] Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section was established in 1998, some criticism was voiced about its failure to include transgender and bisexual psychology in its title. The reason for this was that in order to meet the criteria for a Section, we first had to identify a substantial British psychological literature on the proposed Section’s focal topics. While we could do this for lesbian and gay psychology, we were unable to do the same for transgender and bisexual psychology. We therefore decided to proceed with the attempt to establish a Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section and resolved that, once this was achieved, we would work to foster the development of transgender and bisexual psychology in Britain, with the ultimate aim of ensuring that they qualify for inclusion in the section title. (p. 6)

In addition to such a general exclusion of bisexuality, LGBTI psychology has also been characterised by a male bias in that most studies are concerned with the realities of gay men, at the expense of those of lesbian and bisexual women (Phillips, Ingram, Smith, & Mindes, 2003; Sell & Petruccio, 1996). The focus on male homosexuality has rendered women’s same-sex sexualities largely invisible, with Wilton (1995) describing how women “have been effectively ‘written out’ of the academy, whether as scholar or object of study, for centuries” (p. 17).

In the small body of work that constitutes South African LGBTI psychology, a similar dearth of research with a specific focus on bisexuality is evident. Topics explored in South African LGBTI psychology include lesbian family configurations (Lubbe, 2007; 2009); mental health of gay men and lesbians (Nel, Rich, & Joubert, 2007; Polders, Nel, Kruger, & Wells, 2008); issues around gay and lesbian relationships (Blythe & Straker, 1996; Henderson & Shefer, 2008); gay and lesbian disclosure

¹ LGBTI refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex.

(Butler & Astbury, 2008); experiences of “black” lesbians (Arndt & Hewat, 2009; Potgieter, 2003); and violence against gay men and lesbians (Nel & Judge, 2008; Reddy, Potgieter, & Mkhize, 2007). Only two South African studies related to bisexuality could be identified: First, Blumberg and Soal (1997) conducted a focus group discussion with seven self-identified bisexual women, the findings of which are reviewed in Chapter 4. Second, De Bruin and Arndt (2010) explored attitudes towards bisexual men and women among a sample of university students in South Africa. This study did not however focus on the subjectivities of self-identified bisexual men and women and was a quantitative exploration of attitudes towards bisexuality more generally. A search of the *South African Journal of Psychology* as well as the database PsychINFO yielded no South African studies with a focus on bisexuality, indicating a marked silence in South African research. The male bias of international research in LGBTI psychology is also reflected in South African research, with De Bruin and Arndt (2010) noting that “existing studies in South Africa have dealt mainly with White middle-class gay men” (p. 235).

One field of academic study in which one might expect a burgeoning of research focused on bisexuality, is queer studies. Queer studies is a body of work defined by its resistance to heteronormativity, where the term queer is used to refer not only to gay and lesbian identities, but to any position that resists the normalised sex/gender/sexual identity system (Seidman, 1996). It is described as a positionality that is “not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalised because of her or his sexual practices” (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). The inclusive character of queer studies indicates a clear potential for bisexuality to attain greater visibility within its ambit. However, as I will indicate in the literature review in subsequent chapters, queer studies has largely failed to contribute to greater bi-visibility precisely due to its inclusive character. The lack of specificity in the term has largely resulted in bisexuality being elided in the umbrella focus of queer. For instance, Namaste (1994) notes that queer studies often only includes bisexuality by name and that “most other scholars writing under the label consider only lesbian and gay subject positions” (p. 229).

1.3.4 The emerging field of bisexuality studies

Despite growing in prominence as a distinct academic field, bisexuality studies have “mostly existed in the shadows of gay and lesbian studies, and more recently it has been in the shadow of transgender studies as well” (Elia & Eliason, 2012, p. 4). Bisexuality as a field of academic study only emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, with most of the initial studies being focused on pleas for the legitimacy of bisexuality, or on accounts that resist negative stereotypes of bisexuality (Elia &

Eliason, 2012). During the last decade, its prominence has grown and in 2000 the *Journal of Bisexuality* was born from the need to have an explicit academic focus on bisexuality studies as distinct from gay or lesbian studies (Barker, 2007). To date this remains the only journal dedicated to research about bisexuality (Elia & Eliason, 2012).

With the emergence of bisexuality studies the narrow focus on bisexual behaviour that characterised mainstream social science research has been extended to include a broader array of research topics as they relate to bisexuality. A review indicates that the most commonly researched topics in the field of bisexuality studies include bisexual invisibility (e.g., Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Gurevich, Bower, Mathieson, & Dhayanandhan, 2007); bisexuality and non-monogamous/polyamorous relationships (e.g., McLean, 2004; Mint, 2004; Rust, 1996; Weitzman, 2006); bisexuality and HIV/AIDS (e.g., Kennedy & Doll, 2001; Lawrence & Queen, 2001; Miller, 2002; Rila, 1996); media representations of bisexuality (e.g., Barker, Bowes-Catton, Cassidy, Iantaffi, & Brewer, 2008; Capulet, 2010; Jonathan, 2007); negative stereotypes of bisexuality (e.g., Eliason, 1997; Israel & Mohr, 2004; Klesse, 2011); definitions of bisexual identities (e.g., Berenson, 2002; Fox, 1995; Rust, 2001); models of bisexual identity formation (e.g., Bradford, 2004; Brown, 2002; Knous, 2005); and bisexuality and transgender issues (e.g., Hemmings, 1996; Jonathan, 2003; Mathy, Lehmann, & Kerr, 2003; Weiss, 2003).

It appears that bisexuality studies has for the most part been able to avoid the overemphasis on male sexuality that has pervaded LGBTI psychology, with 25% of published studies in the *Journal of Bisexuality* being focused on bisexual women, compared to 13% that focus on bisexual men² (Elia & Eliason, 2012). Of the topics cited above that are most commonly researched in the field of bisexuality studies, those that relate to bisexual women specifically include the invisibility of bisexual women (e.g., Macalister, 2003; Stobie, 2003); media representations of female bisexuality (e.g., Diamond, 2005; San Filippo, 2007); negative stereotypes of bisexual women (e.g., Klesse, 2005; Ochs, 1996); and bisexual women and non-monogamous/polyamorous relationships (e.g., Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2004; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Lubowitz, 2003; Ritchie & Barker, 2007). Commonly researched topics that appear to be relevant to bisexual women specifically include bisexual women's friendships (e.g., Galupo, 2006; Thompson, 2007; Weinstock, 2006); and bisexual women and lesbian hostility (e.g., Hartman, 2005; Rust, 1993).

² These authors note that 62% of articles had a shared focus on both bisexual men and women (Elia & Eliason, 2012).

Notably absent from the commonly researched topics in bisexuality studies broadly as well as from research related to bisexual women in particular, is an explicit focus on how self-identified bisexual individuals treat notions of gender and sexuality. This absence becomes even more conspicuous when one considers the common construction of bisexuality that informs most of the studies cited here. The majority of these studies draw on a construction of bisexuality as transgressing gender and sexuality binaries (e.g., Hartman, 2005; Macalister, 2003; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Lubowitz, 2003). For instance, Hartman (2005) briefly notes that bisexuality appears to refuse binary classification, stating “while it is often difficult to survive in a binary system when one refuses to choose, there is agency in not forcing oneself into a category” (p. 66). Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz (2003) mention that for bisexually-identified individuals, sexualised and gendered identities are “not fixed and dichotomous, but rather fluid, transitory, fragmented [and] episodic” (p. 59). Yet such a construction of bisexuality as subverting dominant binaries remains implicit in these studies and is not further elaborated on in relation to participants’ accounts.

As I will argue in subsequent chapters, a similar construction of bisexuality as transgressive is echoed in theories of bisexuality. For example, Firestein (1996, p. xix) describes bisexuality as “a concept with the potential to revolutionise Western culture’s understanding of sex, gender, and sexual orientation” and Owen (2003) notes that bisexuality entails “a destabilisation of categories” (p. 44). Strikingly, empirical work exploring this potential in the accounts of self-identified bisexual individuals remains scarce, pointing to an oversight in research in the field of bisexuality studies. The current study aims to address this oversight through exploring how gendered and sexualised subjectivity are negotiated in the accounts of self-identified bisexual women.

1.3.5 A note on context: Sexual rights and hate crimes

In this section I conclude my efforts to locate the current study in the broader academic context by briefly considering sexual rights and the South African context. Research focusing on same-sex sexuality in South Africa is conducted against a backdrop of stark discrepancies between the legal protection of sexual orientation that has been secured and discriminative practices that occur at grassroots levels. In most African countries active prosecution and persecution of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals still continue (Anyamele, Lwabaayi, Nguyen, & Binswanger, 2005). South Africa differs in that sexual orientation was enshrined as a protected status in the constitution in 1996 and legal protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation is in place (Isaack, 2003). Same-sex civil unions are legally recognised through legislation introduced in 2006 (De Vos & Barnard, 2007). Such constitutional and legal protection however does not mean that everyday prejudice and

marginalisation based on sexual orientation does not occur - discrimination persists and there are “patterns of violent harassment” of women in same-sex relationships, particularly in South African townships (Motswapon, 2010, p. 103). More recently the occurrence of corrective rape - a phenomenon where lesbian and bisexual women are raped in an attempt to “cure” them of their “abnormal” sexuality - has increasingly received public attention (Actionaid, n.d.). Gender inequality also remains common in South Africa and female sexuality is mainly constructed in relation to patriarchal systems that privilege heterosexuality (Shefer, 1999). It is against this backdrop of stark discrepancies between a human rights discourse and gendered and sexual violence that the current study is conducted.

To summarise, considering the relative lack of South African studies exploring bisexuality broadly and bisexual women’s realities specifically, this study aims to contribute to increased visibility of South African bisexual women’s lives in academic accounts. Further to this, in light of the lack of international research that empirically investigates bisexuality’s challenge to dominant binaries, the study also aims to contribute to theories of bisexuality through exploring how gendered and sexualised subjectivity is negotiated in the accounts of self-identified bisexual women. To this end, I undertake a discourse analytic study with a small sample of participants to allow for in-depth and rich analysis of possible instances in which oppositional binaries are confounded in bisexual women’s accounts, to explore the conditions that allow such troubling moments, and to identify some of the constraints placed by dominant discourses on the subversive potential of bisexuality.

1.3.6 Researching bisexuality: The politics of self-disclosure

Research is never conducted solely in an academic context; my involvement in the research process and my personal context also shape this study. Feminist poststructuralist research promotes self-reflexivity in the research process and emphasises the necessity to reflect on how “the researcher’s social identity, investments in the research, ideological commitments and role in the research process” contribute to the research (Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006, p. 9). My own commitment to a conceptualisation of identities as fluid informed my initial interest in researching bisexuality. I have often questioned the feasibility of claiming a neatly defined and “fixed” identity such as heterosexual or homosexual and instead valued variability in sexual identities. My initial interest in researching bisexuality solidified into a clear focus when I conducted a preliminary literature search and could only find a handful of South African studies focusing on bisexual women, emphasising the need for more local academic accounts representing bisexual women’s realities. My growing investment in

feminist research and my desire to conduct research that is strongly related to women's lives further influenced by decision to conduct this study.

Shefer (1999) notes that researchers studying sexualities are often sexualised themselves through their association with and interest in the research topic. She describes the sense of transgression when asked about her research dealing with heterosexual subjectivity:

When I was asked, as one is frequently, what I was researching, I found myself always hesitating - a brief, surprising moment tinged with embarrassment - before responding. And then, my words were rapid, attempting to explain, to contextualise the research interest, as if somehow I had to excuse myself and legitimate this questionable focus. This was achieved through outlining the research within the context of AIDS, STDs, violence against women, and I would work towards this point with some urgency. (p. 15)

Shefer's (1999) description struck a chord as, in the process of conducting this study, I often found myself in a position where I felt I had to justify the academic merit of researching bisexuality when discussing this project with others. I had the sense that the discomfort in explaining my research topic was heightened by my focus on a sexual identification that differs from "normal" heterosexuality. At times I would resort to vague descriptions of a broad interest in studying female sexuality or "gender issues", in an attempt to avoid the often-encountered awkward responses when mentioning my specific focus on bisexuality.

Researching sexualities opens up one's own sexual identification and experiences for questioning in a way that, perhaps significantly, does not occur when researching more "traditional" topics. The researcher becomes visible as a person "with sexual interest, sexual desires [and] sexual experiences" in a manner that compels further explanation (Shefer, 1999, p. 16). While conducting this study I found this process of heightened visibility of my identity invasive and uncomfortable at times, particularly as a woman in my late twenties attempting to establish my identity as an academic. I wanted to achieve academic credibility and felt frustrated when I discussed my research and found others focusing more on aspects of my own sexual identification than on the value of my research focus. However, at other times I appreciated the manner in which such an awareness of my presence in the study forced me to interrogate my constant involvement in the research. Perhaps a benefit of the sexualisation of researchers in this field is that it helps to resist a view of research as removed from the identity and experiences of the researcher and forces a self-reflexive praxis in

research. I comment on relevant aspects of my positioning in the study throughout the dissertation and particularly in Chapter 5.

In the following section I detail the aims and objectives guiding the study.

1.4 Aims and objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to explore the gendered and sexualised discourses drawn on by a group of South African women who self-identify as bisexual, using semi-structured interviews to generate data. Specific objectives include:

- To explore the discourses that construct bisexuality as a discursive object in the talk of self-identified bisexual women;
- To explore how gendered and sexualised subjectivity are negotiated in the accounts of self-identified bisexual women;
- To explore the relationship between the discourses present in participants' accounts, and the institutions (such as social, political and material structures) encountered in their contexts.

1.5 Outline of the dissertation

In the current chapter I introduced the research topic and described aspects of the academic and personal contexts in which it developed. I also presented the aims and objectives guiding the study.

In Chapter 2 I discuss the theoretical framework that informed the study. I discuss some of the main tenets of feminist poststructuralism and the manner in which subjectivity is theorised from such a position. The focus in this chapter is on Foucauldian and Derridean theory, as it informs my approach in the current study. I also consider the role of discourse in knowledge production.

In Chapter 3 I provide an overview of the manner in which sex, genders and sexualities have been theorised in social science. I particularly attend to Judith Butler's poststructuralist challenge to theorising these constructs in an essentialist manner. Her interpretation of Foucauldian and Derridean theory concludes my discussion of the theoretical footing of this study. Finally, I also review how female sexuality in particular has been constructed in social science research over time.

In Chapter 4 I review existing literature about bisexuality with the aim of describing how bisexuality has historically been constructed.

In Chapter 5 I describe the research process with a specific focus on the process of recruiting participants, data collection and data analysis.

In Chapter 6 I elaborate on the participants and the interview contexts. I also present the first section of the results and discussion of the discourse analysis.

In Chapter 7 I present the second section of the results and discussion of the discourse analysis.

In Chapter 8 I extend my discussion of the discourses presented in Chapters 6 and 7. I focus the discussion on key theoretical debates in bisexuality studies, as these relate to the findings of the current study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, as well as suggestions for future research related to female bisexuality.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I provide an overview of the ontological and epistemological influences that shaped my approach in the present study. Willig (2008) refers to the notion of epistemological reflexivity as the continual process during research of reflecting upon our assumptions about knowledge and about the world, and how these assumptions might impact on the research process and the findings. The theoretical framework that I employ in this study is that of feminist poststructuralism, a choice which had clear implications for the manner in which I approached the research topic. In this chapter I delineate the theoretical implications of assuming such an approach. I focus in particular on the work of poststructuralist theorists Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, while the subsequent chapter focuses on Judith Butler's engagement with Derridean and Foucauldian theory as it relates to her deconstructive critique of sex, gender and sexuality which informed the current study.

Feminist poststructuralism is heavily influenced by postmodernism. Namaste (1994) notes that postmodernism and poststructuralism do not refer to two monolithic theoretical positions but instead designate collections of diverse theoretical positions. Very few theorists who are assigned to the categories "postmodern" or "poststructuralist" agree on all theoretical issues, and some position themselves in startling contrast to other authors who might be superficially lumped into the same theoretical camp. Many texts also use the terms postmodernism and poststructuralism interchangeably (Namaste, 1994). This lack of clear definition is further encouraged by a shared disavowal of fixed boundaries promoted by the two positions (Gavey, 1997). For the purposes of this discussion, however, I will only briefly discuss some of the main tenets of postmodern theory before providing a more detailed discussion of poststructuralist principles useful in feminist research. In doing so, I follow a conceptualisation of postmodernism as a broader social movement with ontological implications for social science research, and a conceptualisation of poststructuralism as one of various schools of thought born out of the postmodern moment. Poststructuralism also informs epistemological and methodological considerations in the present study.

The impression that postmodernists and poststructuralists differ in focus is echoed by Rosenau (1992) who states that "postmodernists are more oriented toward cultural critique while the post-structuralists emphasise method and epistemological matters. For example, post-structuralists concentrate on deconstruction, language, discourse, meaning and symbols while post-modernists

cast a broader net” (p. 3). Agger (1991) describes the difference in focus in the following manner: “poststructuralism (Derrida, the French feminists) is a theory of knowledge and language, whereas postmodernism (Foucault, Barthes, Lyotard, Baudrillard) is a theory of society, culture, and history” (p. 112). These distinctions are of course to a large extent artificial, as both approaches share ontological and epistemological assumptions (Alvesson, 2002). However, poststructuralism, as the discussion below will illustrate, has clear implications for knowledge production and provides useful tools for analysing how meaning is created, negotiated and disrupted. In the context of the present study, it therefore made sense for me to conceptualise it as a movement existing within the broader postmodern project, and use it as an epistemological and methodological framework.

I start the discussion in this chapter by briefly noting some of the key developments in postmodern thought. These developments provide the context within which poststructuralism emerged as one of many groupings within the postmodern project. I then continue to discuss poststructuralist theory in more detail, focussing on Derridean deconstruction in particular. I also consider a Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourse and power before concluding with a consideration of how feminist theorists have appropriated poststructuralist theory.

2.2 Postmodernism and the turn to language

Defining postmodernism is problematic due to the resistance within postmodernism to treat theoretical positions in a foundationalist manner, and most theorists who can be regarded as working from a postmodern position eschew such a classification (Best & Kellner, 1991). In attempting to clarify postmodernist thought, many authors resort to contrasting it with modernity, as postmodernism emerged as a grouping of diverse theoretical positions that challenged modernist assumptions (Best & Kellner, 1991). Lyotard (1984) describes the modernist project as “any science that legitimates itself with reference to an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (p. xxiii). Postmodernism can then be described as a grouping of positions that resists the certainty espoused by the grand narratives of modernism (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernism rejects the modernist view that knowledge about the world represents reality in a direct manner and instead argues that reality is socially constructed through language (Gergen, 1985).

Gergen (1994, p. 414) argues that it is useful to resist regarding postmodernism as yet another totalitarian discourse and instead view it as “an invitation to reflexivity” whereby a communicative

space is created. Such an approach allows for the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge and about the world (Gergen, 2001). The discussion below will focus on a few core theoretical strands forming part of postmodern thought – the crisis of representation, the socially constructed character of reality, the postmodern commitment to anti-foundationalism, and the view of the subject as fragmentary.

2.2.1 The crisis of representation

Postmodern critiques of the correspondence theory of language question the taken-for-granted belief that the language we use to describe the world corresponds to an observed reality (Gergen, 2001). These critiques, referred to as the crisis of representation, posit that language cannot be taken as reflecting reality in a mirror-like manner.

Drawing on structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure's (1972/1983) conceptualisation of language as a system of signs, the idea that language represents reality in a direct and accurate manner is contested. Saussure critiques the supposedly natural relationship between the signifier and signified. In his description the signifier is the word (such as hat, chair, anger and so forth) which is used to refer to or correspond with an object or phenomenon in the world (Gergen, 2001). Saussure argues that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, in that the system of language in use at a particular time is inherited and based on socially accepted conventions – there is no predetermined logic or motivation for the coupling of a particular signifier with a particular object or phenomenon to which it is intended to refer, as in principle any word can be chosen to refer to any object (Gergen, 2001; Saussure, 1972/1983). A signifier does not relate an essence or true meaning of the signified. Instead, the meaning of a word (signifier) is always understood in relation to other words (Saussure, 1972/1983).

The structuralist effort to destabilise the fixity of meaning in language was extended by poststructuralists such as Derrida with his theory of the indeterminacy of language. Derridean analyses illustrate that there is no univocal, unchallengeable reading of a text; instead there are competing meanings (Agger, 1991). These meanings are always incomplete because the attempt to construct the meaning of a text as final and complete will always entail excluding other versions of meaning (Agger, 1991). When reading a text, the reader creates his or her own meaning and intent of the text - a process which is influenced by the reader's subjectivity. Postmodern theorists have argued that this is similar for all situations where meaning is created, and has the implication that meanings are multiple (Barthes, 1968/1977). Reading a text becomes an act of constructing meaning

and not a passive activity (Agger, 1991) and the certainty of a fixed, pre-existing meaning that corresponds to an underlying reality becomes impossible (Gergen 2001).

2.2.2 Reality as socially constructed

A significant implication of the crisis of representation is that language becomes central to the construction of objects (Alvesson, 2002). Postmodernism rejects a view of reality as revealing itself to us in a pure and direct manner through our descriptions of it. There is no essential meaning in our experiences or our perception of reality prior to language and discourse. Instead, postmodern theorists regard discourse as constituting experience (Alvesson, 2002).

The conceptualisation of discourse used in the current study is strongly influenced by poststructuralist theory, drawing on elements of Foucauldian and Derridean thought. Discourse can be described as an interrelated “system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values [that] are a product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual’s set of ideas” (Hollway, 1983, p. 231). Parker’s (1992) tentative definition describes discourse as “a system of statements which constructs an object” (p. 5). A Foucauldian use of the term discourse then includes not only linguistic features of social life but also includes the effects of broader structures in shaping subjective experience (Willig, 2008). Discourse structures our experience as well as our subjectivity, since experience only becomes intelligible through discourse (Alvesson, 2002). The implication of this is that reality does not exist independently of our observation but is instead constructed through the accounts we offer of it, i.e. through language (Gergen, 2001).

2.2.3 Anti-foundationalism

Postmodernism is critical of the manner in which positions have called on legitimising narratives or foundations (Lyotard, 1984). Theoretical positions have traditionally appealed to master narratives in order to present their grounding as secure and inevitable (Alvesson, 2002). For example, positivism has promoted a totalising view that stipulates that one can study the world without the imposition of theoretical or ideological assumptions (Agger, 1991). Through the process of scientific enquiry one can obtain knowledge that reflects the world like a mirror and that is not “tainted” by ideology. However, postmodernist critiques have illustrated that positivism is itself an ideology; the influence of positivism extends beyond scientific investigation to promoting the notion that one should accept the world as it presents itself uncritically (Agger, 1991). The grand narrative of positivism describes the current social order as natural and large-scale social change becomes unimaginable within such a view. Instead of viewing social processes as historically constructed, they

are regarded as inevitable and therefore not contested (Agger, 1991). The master narrative of positivism has then promoted a dominant view of the world which is falsely presented as secure and certain (Alvesson, 2002). Postmodern theorists are distrustful of such legitimising moves and argue that these grand narratives have lost their credibility (Lyotard, 1984).

Modernism compels a desire for certainty and specific legitimating criteria through which a grand narrative's claims can be grounded. Such certainty creates a "violence to the other" through marginalising certain groups of people, such as women or sexual minorities (Hepburn, 1999a, p. 3). In this manner modernism's grand narratives gain the assent of the masses in support of a specific view of reality and delegitimises other views that run counter to its ideology (Hepburn, 1999a).

The ability of grand narratives to gain consensus relies on upholding a view of knowledge as stable and universal. Postmodern analyses however illustrate that we do not have privileged access to reality, and therefore we cannot promote one version of the world over another (Lyotard, 1984). If one acknowledges that meaning is not universal or stable, then it follows that one cannot make generalising or universal claims about phenomena (Alvesson, 2002). Instead, postmodernism acknowledges that one can only tell "small" stories defined by the multiplicity of subject positions of individuals and groups, as they are constructed in a particular point in history (Agger, 1991). Knowledge about the social world is contextual and "social science becomes an accounting of social experience from these multiple perspectives of discourse/practice, rather than a larger cumulative enterprise committed to the inference of general principles of social structure and organisation" (Agger, 1991, p. 117). Instead of totalising accounts, postmodern social science then attempts to present local, fragmented narratives that are bound to particular contexts (Lyotard, 1984).

2.2.4 Fragmenting the subject

Within a postmodern formulation, reality is socially constructed through discourse (Gergen, 2001). This view also extends to how the subject is conceptualised. Postmodernism is critical of the Enlightenment (modernist) formulation of the subject, and instead promotes a view of the subject as constituted in multiple ways (Alvesson, 2002). Postmodernism holds that the self is not a separate and unitary identity but that it is constituted through discourse (Weedon, 1987). Mainstream psychology has typically upheld the humanist conceptualisation of the self as rational, stable and coherent (Gavey, 1997). The view of the rational subject implied a view of humans as free and fully conscious, and therefore self-knowable (Sarup, 1993). In this view of the subject, the individual exists separately from social or historical processes and is an autonomous agent (Sarup, 1993). There

is no consideration for the constitutive effects of discourse and individual identity is considered as having a coherent, stable core, or an essence (Alvesson, 2002).

Postmodernism decentres this notion of the self and suggests a subjectivity that is “precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). The subject is formulated as being constituted through discursive practices, and thereby as occupying varied, and potentially contradictory, positions in discourse (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984). Individuals are positioned by and also take up different subject positions available in discourse, with the implication that identity is fluid and fragmentary (Alvesson, 2002). Different strands of identity constitute what we regard as a person – discursively constructed aspects of social existence such as gender, race, sexual orientation and class contribute in complex ways to how identity is negotiated (Nicholson, 1990).

Having pointed briefly to some of the key tenets of postmodern thought, the rest of this chapter will explore poststructuralist theory, drawing heavily on the work of Derrida and Foucault. I begin by discussing some key ideas in Derridean deconstruction, followed by a discussion of Foucault’s work on discourse, power/knowledge, and disciplinary technologies.

2.3 Derridean deconstruction

Poststructuralism is a grouping of theoretical positions formulated to radically extend the claims made by structuralism. Poststructuralism expanded the structuralist focus on the linguistic to also include how power operates in the construction of social reality (Sarup, 1993). Poststructuralists agree with structuralists such as Saussure’s contention that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and that meaning is relational – words gain their meaning not from essential properties inherent to them but from the manner in which they relate to and are different from other words (Saussure, 1972/1983). They however extend this structuralist argument to also consider the deployment of language in the service of constituting particular versions of reality, human experience and subjectivity (Hepburn, 1999b). Poststructuralist deconstruction is a useful tool in analyses that attempt to illustrate how categories are constructed to appear natural, neutral and fixed, yet are deployed to create and recreate exclusions and marginalisations in the service of particular political aims (Hepburn, 1999b). To this end the principles of deconstruction proposed by poststructuralist theorist Jacques Derrida have proven useful to poststructuralist feminist theorists (Hepburn, 1999a).

Derridean deconstruction can be described as the “strategies and tactics which highlight potential disruptions *already contained within the text*” (Hepburn, 1999b, p. 641, emphasis in original). Deconstruction cannot be treated as a preformulated method that can be brought to bear on a text, or as the “taking apart of existing constructions” (Hepburn, 1999a, ¶15). Deconstruction relates more to an awareness of the manner in which a text already subverts its own logic; there is no underlying meaning independent of our own constructions that can be accessed through deconstruction (Hepburn, 1999a). Derrida (1976) notes that deconstructing discourse is a process of “explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself” (p. 289). One cannot escape from the heritage one is attempting to deconstruct and instead has to draw on the heritage itself for the tools to subvert it. By lifting out aspects of the text which are made invisible by the dominant narratives organising the text, the seemingly natural and neutral logic of the text is disrupted (Hepburn, 1999b). In this sense deconstruction is an approach to texts that allows us to subvert and disrupt the claims to truth made by texts while acknowledging that we cannot step outside of the understandings that inform those claims (Hepburn, 1999a).

It can be emphasised that deconstruction does not imply a simple obliteration of linguistic categories. Butler (1995) states the following in this regard:

To deconstruct the subject is not to negate or throw away the concept; on the contrary, deconstruction implies only that we suspend all commitments to that which the term ‘the subject’ refers, and that we consider the linguistic function it serves in the consolidation and concealment of authority. (p. 49)

Deconstruction attends to how terms are used in different contexts and what effects their uses have (Butler, 1995). Through deconstruction the terms used to construct subjectivity, such as “woman” or “bisexual”, can be subverted and redeployed in different ways and in the service of different political aims (Hepburn, 1999a).

In the following section I discuss the utility of deconstruction by referring to Derrida’s work on the undecidables of language, and specifically his conceptualisation of *différance* and supplementarity. I also consider the subversive potential of his undecidables for theorising bisexuality.

2.3.1 Différance

Derrida's notion of the undecidability of meaning is a critical response to the modernist belief in the representational nature of language. His argument for the undecidability of texts is informed by his theoretical notions of difference and *différance* (Derrida, 1976). Derrida (1976) argues that language operates on the principle that meaning is created only in relation to other meanings. A direct correspondence between words and an external reality is therefore not possible, as meaning is always produced in relation to other meanings and not in relation to a fixed reality to which it supposedly refers (Agger, 1991). In Derridean theory the elision *différance* is used to indicate how meaning is created in relation to other words and practices:

[One] cannot hope to arrive at a fixed or transparent meaning as long as one uses a necessarily deferring as well as differing language: Every definition and clarification needs to be defined and clarified in turn; meaning always lies elusively in the future. (Agger, 1991, p. 113)

As such, an object does not have an essential meaning that is signified by the name it has been assigned but instead derives its meaning from the "sets of oppositions and junctures, the relations that make it like and unlike other things" (Alvesson, 2002, p. 53). Language therefore functions as a symbolic "differencing" system, where signifiers depend on their dissimilarity from an absent trace for meaning (Derrida, 1976). In this manner categories such as the male/female binary have historically been constructed as oppositional but they are in fact interdependent as "they derive their meaning from a particularly established contrast rather than from some inherent or pure antithesis" (Scott, 1988, p. 37).

2.3.2 Supplementarity

Supplementarity is another of Derrida's undecidables and can be mobilised as a strategy to disrupt the logocentric claims to fixed meaning made by texts. In order to discuss supplementarity, I will first discuss what Derrida refers to when he describes texts as logocentric. I will also discuss the oppositional binaries evoked by texts in support of logocentric claims, before moving on to a discussion of what Derrida refers to as his "logic of supplementarity" (Derrida, 1976, p. 215).

Derridean deconstruction focuses on disrupting the dominant stories, or discourses, of fundamental truth created and recreated in texts (Hepburn, 1999a). This modernist desire for a centred truth, or logocentrism, is mobilised in texts through legitimising claims, which Derrida attempts to subvert

through deconstruction (Hepburn, 1999a). Derrida (1976) argues that the meaning of a term is constructed through a process of subordinating other terms that contribute to its meaning. Hepburn (1999b) notes that “this subordination of certain terms gives the *appearance* of some ordinary meaning or *logos*: the ‘presence’ or centre is privileged by hierarchical binary oppositions” (p. 643, emphasis in original).

Logocentric thought relies on such binary constructions which are drawn on and constructed by texts. Derridean deconstruction allows for the identification of the binary oppositions that construct seemingly natural categories, such as male/female, and the explication of the manner in which further related dualisms are called upon (such as rational/emotional or strong/weak). These binaries are typically employed in support of a particular construction of reality: a patriarchal worldview, for example, would employ “male”, “rational” and “strong” as positive terms with their oppositions being located in the negatively evaluated terms “female”, “emotional” and “weak” (Hepburn, 1999a). The value of a term then depends on the manner in which it supports the dominant reality or logocentric thought. Derridean deconstruction aims to recover the excluded term and reinscribe it as privileged (Hepburn, 1999a).

Binary thinking creates an either/or distinction that falsely assumes a fixed or complete point of reference for a signifier. In such binary thinking the privileged term is described as grounded in a foundational truth or *logos*, for example “male” or “rational”. This privileged term is considered as closer to the “full presence of meaning” (Hepburn, 1999b, p. 644) while its opposite term is described as completely “other” and as disrupting the order of logocentrism. Within the various dualisms used in modernist thought, the marginalised term (of negative value) is only seemingly separate from the dominant term as it in fact contributes to the meaning of the dominant term. Hepburn (1999b) articulates this clearly: “One side of an opposition does not exist in its own right, although the binary structure and logic create this illusion, obscuring the reliance of each term on its opposite” (p. 643). Derrida’s undecidability of meaning contests the logocentric construction of either/or binaries. He argues that signifiers have a supplementary character in that they are meant to add to some original absence (Hepburn, 1999b). However, since there is no fixed point of reference for a signifier, supplementarity takes on a double meaning in that the supplement “adds only to replace” (Derrida, 1976, p. 145). Derrida (1976) explains this in the following manner: On the one hand the supplement operates as a measure of presence, implied by the notion that it is a surplus added to something that is already complete; on the other, it is an indication of a void. The

supplement highlights how meaning is always constructed through a play between presence and absence:

As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can be filled up *of itself*, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself. (Derrida, 1976, p. 145, emphasis in original)

In Derridean deconstruction, the supplement is used to “expose a lack of completeness” (Hepburn, 1999b, p. 647-648). As a strategy in deconstructing texts, Derrida replaces the either/or distinction with his logic of supplementarity that relies on a both/and, neither/nor construction (Derrida, 1976). This allows one to illustrate the supplementary quality of terms that are presented in logocentric thought as fully present and already complete (Hepburn, 1999b). Important to note is that undecidables function to undermine the premise of binary constructions. I turn to this point in the next section, where I elaborate further on the implications of Derrida’s undecidables for deconstruction.

2.3.3 The subversive potential of undecidables

The subversive potential of Derrida’s undecidables of language lies in the manner in which undecidables defy binary logic. Undecidables are fusions that disrupt binary oppositions through inhabiting both sides of the opposition; in that manner, “it is not just the binaries themselves that are undermined but the logic on which they are based” (Jagger, 1996, p. 195). Collins (2005) offers the zombie as an example of Derrida’s undecidables, in that the zombie is neither alive nor truly dead – it functions as an undecidable in that it slips across both sides of binaries, such as presence/absence, life/death and good/evil, without properly fitting either.

In Derrida’s (1992) own work, an example of an undecidable can be found in his description of the virus, in that it is “a parasite that disrupts destination from the communicative point of view – disrupting writing, inscription, and the coding and decoding of inscription – and which on the other hand is neither alive or dead” (p. 12). Another example is in Derrida’s (1981) use of the word “hymen”, based on his account of its use in a text by Mallarmé. Derrida (1981) draws on the double meaning of the word, where it signifies both “membrane” and (in its more ancient use) “marriage”, to illustrate how it functions to designate “both the virginal intactness of the distinction between the inside and the outside” as well as “the erasing of that distinction through the commingling of self

and other” (Johnson, 1981, p. xxix). In this manner, Derrida’s deconstructive analysis of the use of “hymen” functions to deconstruct the “binary either/or logic of opposition and differences because it is a fusion, a both/and” (Jagger, 1996, p. 195). It functions as an undecidable in that it is able to at once inhabit both terms of an opposition while at the same time also confuse them, through being both interior and exterior to the opposition (Jagger, 1996, p. 195). Derrida (1992) articulates this as follows:

The undecidables, a theme often associated with deconstruction, is not merely the oscillation between two significations or two contradictory and very determinate rules.... The undecidables is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions; it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obliged.... to give itself up to the impossible decision, while taking account of law and rules. (p. 24)

It can be argued that bisexuality similarly functions as an undecidable through its relation to the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary – Hemmings (1997) notes that the history of bisexuality is marked by its presence in lesbian, gay and straight communities and that bisexuality “expresses itself in relation to those other terms” (p. 20). In that sense, bisexuality inhabits both heterosexuality and homosexuality and is both interior and exterior to these terms, but at the same time does not fit either category properly. I return to the transgressive potential of bisexuality in subsequent chapters. However, it can be emphasised that Derrida’s undecidables provide valuable tools with which to interrogate the production and regulation of borders in gendered and sexualised identities, particularly where these borders are blurred by non-normative sexualities such as bisexuality (Namaste, 1994).

In the following section I explore Foucault’s account of the social production of identities, with particular concern for how power is implicated in this process.

2.4 Foucault’s theory of discourse

Weedon (1987) notes that Foucault’s conceptualisation of discourse integrates two central aspects of poststructuralist thought - the instability of meaning and the acknowledgment of a discursively constituted subjectivity - into a theory of language that explicitly accounts for the role of power. It is Foucault’s extensive theorisation of power that has been particularly useful for feminist theorists in resisting and transforming oppressive discourses (Deveaux, 1994). In the following section I discuss Foucault’s (1976/1990; 1980) conceptualisation of power as diffuse and inextricably bound up with

knowledge. I also consider the possibilities for resistance within a Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourse and subjectivity.

2.4.1 Discourse and power

Foucault's analysis of power signalled a radical departure from more traditional social science conceptualisations of power as a property that can be identified and studied in its own right (Nicholson, 1990; Sawicki, 1986). Foucault rejects such a juridico-discursive view of power where power is regarded as having an essence that can be located and fixed; instead he regards power as existing in relationships and actions (Foucault, 1976/1990, 1982). His analysis is critical of modernist conceptions of power as residing in macrostructures or particular classes of persons – for Foucault (1980) power is not something that can be possessed or held onto. Instead, he provides a useful critique illustrating that power is diffuse and “resides in the discursive formation itself – the combination of a set of linguistic distinctions, ways of reasoning and material practices that together organise social institutions and produce particular forms of subjects” (Alvesson, 2002, p. 56). In this view power is productive in that power relations constitute subjects; discourses of sexuality, for example, create “acceptable” and “unacceptable” subjects through distinctions of what is regarded as normal or deviant. Individual subjectivity is then the effect of power (Foucault, 1976/1990).

For Foucault (1976/1990), power is not only a negative force that oppresses, subordinates or prohibits. Rather, he focuses his analysis on the productive character of power as it creates socially constituted versions of reality and subjectivity through discourse. Foucault (1976/1990, 1980) argues that the mechanisms of power are at their most effective through their productive effects. His description of the disciplinary power of the human sciences illustrates how objects of knowledge, such as “sexuality” or “madness”, are constructed through a historically situated process of creating distinctions and classifying “symptoms”. These forms of knowledge, such as psychology or psychiatry, are created as part of historically specific social processes of regulation and reform (Foucault, 1976/1990). Due to their claims to authoritative knowledge, these disciplinary practices become “effective means of normalisation and control” (Sawicki, 1986, p. 27).

In Foucauldian theory there is then an inextricable link between knowledge and power; power can only be exercised through knowledge, and knowledge inescapably engenders power (Foucault, 1980). Foucault (1980) contends that “power and knowledge directly imply one another, that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (p. 27). This effect of

power on individuals extends beyond the imposition of institutional or cultural practices to include the internalisation of norms that dominate within a particular social order (Foucault, 1980). In the following section I take up Foucault's (1977/1995) theory of disciplinary practices where he proposes different strategies through which individuals come to internalise dominant discourses.

2.4.2 Disciplinary technology

From the preceding discussion, the question arises as to *how* individuals take on the tenets of dominant discourses and through which mechanisms power relations operate. Foucault's (1977/1995) critique of juridico-discursive power provides an account of a new form of power that is not repressive but instead productive. He describes this new form of productive power as becoming prominent during a period termed the "threshold of modernity", a period characterised by the transition between the classical age associated with the seventeenth century and the modern age (West, 1996). Foucault (1977/1995) describes this time as characterised by a double operation in power, as the repressive conceptualisation of power is slowly altered by the presence of a more productive power that shapes individuals and populations. This occurs through the emergence of what Foucault (1984) terms "disciplinary technology" which concerns "the government of individuals, the government of the souls, the government of the self by the self, the government of families, the government of children, and so on" (p. 256).

Macleod and Durrheim (2002a) add that "disciplinary technology has as its aim the regulation and normalisation of subjects" (p. 48). For normalisation to take place, it is necessary to create distinctions between individuals and categorise them in relation to the norm. Foucault (1977/1995) describes how hierarchical observation functions to assign subjects to categories through observing, measuring, comparing and classifying. Hierarchical observation allows for "progressive objectification and the ever more subtle partitioning of individual behaviour" (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 173). For instance, social science has created entire systems of observation and measurement, aimed at producing knowledge about individuals. When considered in relation to women's sexuality, it is possible to identify how power operates to "define, classify and categorise activities which establish fundamental 'truths' about our sexuality, shape the construction of our subjectivity and demarcate the boundaries of a normative (hetero)sexuality" (Forbes, 1996, p. 179). Through a proliferation of discourses of sexuality, knowledge of what is regarded as "normal" and "abnormal" is generated and on the basis of this knowledge, individuals are compared and hierarchically categorised (Foucault, 1977/1995).

Disciplinary power functions through such a process of hierarchisation and normalisation - it “compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises [and] excludes”, and in that way produces a desire for subjects to conform to the norm or to risk being categorised as abnormal and “other” (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 183). This hierarchisation, regulation and normalisation of subjects occur through different strategies, such as surveillance, bio-power and pastoral power (Foucault, 1977/1995). Below I discuss these strategies in turn.

2.4.2.1 Surveillance and technologies of the self

Foucault (1977/1995) uses the design of Jeremy Bentham’s model prison, the Panopticon, to describe how disciplinary power functions. The Panopticon, referred to by Foucault (1977/1995, p. 205) as “the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form”, is designed in such a manner that a supervisor in a central tower can observe all the inmates at all times, who are flooded with light and separated from each other in cells. This unequal gaze has the result that while the inmates are under constant surveillance, they are able to see neither the observer nor the other inmates. Foucault (1977/1995) uses the Panopticon to explain how this form of power functions to reform prisoners, but notes that discipline as an apparatus of power functions similarly in other contexts – it is “polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work” (p. 205). The panoptic schema allows for power to be exercised “spontaneously and without noise” (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 206). Through constant surveillance it induces in the subject “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 201).

Modern power, however, does not simply exert its influence on subjects; individuals also internalise disciplinary practices and police their own identities. In light of the possibility of being observed from the tower at any time, the inmates take over the duty of policing themselves (Foucault, 1977/1995). Thus, “the gaze which is inscribed in the very structure of the disciplinary institution is internalised by the inmate; modern technologies of behaviour are thus oriented toward the production of isolated and self-policing subjects” (Bartky, 1988, p. 106). Through submitting to a process of constant self-surveillance, the disciplining gaze of dominant discourse acts on individuals through their own self-monitoring and the individual becomes “the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 203).

From this Foucault concludes that power is not exerted simply through subjecting individuals to certain conditions; instead individuals come to accept and internalise the prevailing order as desirable and act in accordance with the prescriptions of dominant discourse (Sarup, 1993). The individual “invests in the tenets of a normalising judgment” and begins to regulate her practices to conform to the norm (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002a, p. 48). This internalised surveillance is enacted through different technologies of the self (Foucault, 1987). For instance, an individual who problematises her sexuality as deviant and seeks counsel or treatment is governing herself, described by Foucault (1982; 1988a) as the self acting on the self. Foucault’s technologies of the self thus entail “a process through which individuals come to construct their subjectivity and understand themselves” (Forbes, 1996, p. 180).

Dean (2010) describes four aspects involved in the analysis of such individual fashioning of identity, as proposed by Foucault. As a first aspect, analysis of self-governance “involves ontology, concerned with *what* we seek to act upon, the *governed or ethical substance*” (Dean, 2010, p. 26, emphasis in original). As a second aspect, “it involves ascetics, concerned with *how* we govern this substance, the *governing or ethical work*” (Dean, 2010, p. 26, emphasis in original). This governing work may entail surveillance and normalisation of subjects who do not conform to the norm. As a third aspect, it includes deontology, “concerned with *who* we are when we are governed in such a manner, our ‘mode of subjectification’, or the *governable or ethical subject*” (Dean, 2010, p. 26, emphasis in original). Here, the analysis is focused on the type of subject one has to be in order to engage with a process of self-governance - for instance, a sexual “deviant”. The fourth aspect involves “a teleology, concerned with *why* we govern or are governed, the ends or goal sought, what we hope to become or the world we hope to create, that which might be called the *telos of governmental or ethical practices*” (Dean, 2010, p. 26, emphasis in original). Governmentality, whether that of the self or of others, is always directed at a supposed goal that should be achieved.

This measure of agency implied in self-governance is of course mediated by the discourses that are “proposed, suggested and imposed” by the social and historical context in which an individual exists (Foucault, 1987, p. 122). Incitements by authoritative persons for subjects to participate in gendered and sexualised self-technologies draw on such dominant discourses and appeal to “normalised assumptions concerning femininity, sexuality and gendered relations” (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002a, p. 49). To this end, the success of incitements to gendered and sexualised self-technologies depends on the extent to which women identify with and invest in such normalising assumptions (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002a).

2.4.2.2 Pastoral power

Foucault (1982) first identifies pastoral power as a form of government exercised in early Christianity under the pastorate of the church, where intimate knowledge of subjects was gained through confessionals and other techniques and used to direct and regulate people. This form of power is not only concerned with the wellbeing of the community as is the case in political power, but instead is focused on each individual and his/her salvation (Foucault, 1982). Later, pastoral power spread and proliferated outside the institution of the church to inform the government of populations by modern states, enacted through techniques and strategies to regulate the health, wealth and wellbeing of their populations (Foucault, 1982). In this manner, pastoral power became desecularised to function as a form of bio-power, which I discuss in the next section. More recent forms of pastoral power are found in disciplines of knowledge such as psychiatry, medicine, economics and sociology that normalise and regulate behaviour from the individual unit of the subject through to populations (West, 1996).

Pastoral power functions in two main ways. Firstly, this individualising power is enacted through the care of a pastor (or a politician or another authoritative individual), where the pastor is regarded as a shepherd responsible for the salvation of his/her flock through “constant, individualised and final kindness” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 62). However, Foucault (1982) observes that “this form of power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it” (p. 783). To this end, pastoral power also functions in a second way, in that it encourages a developed form of conscience in the flock where, through techniques of self-examination, they achieve greater knowledge of themselves and strive to implement the lessons from the shepherd. In this manner self-technologies are involved in pastoral power “but are linked to the macro-strategies of government through guidance and care, rather than surveillance and normalising judgement as in disciplinary technology” (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002a, p. 51).

2.4.2.3 Bio-power

Foucault (1976/1990) uses the word bio-power to refer to the diverse ways in which disciplinary power acts on the body. He describes bio-power as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (Foucault, 1978/2009, p. 1). Bio-power is a pervasive form of power “because its logics, technologies, and experts offer, or at least purport to offer, tools for societal *self-government*”; through bio-power, “the welfare state sheds responsibility for its pastorate by shifting

risk and empowerment to its subjects” (Nadesan, 2008, p. 3, emphasis in original).

Foucault distinguishes between two interrelated sites of the exercise of bio-power, connected through intermediary clusters of relations (Foucault, 1976/1990). Firstly, bio-power is described as it relates to a micro-level of the control of the body (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002a). Here bio-power is aimed at creating docile and productive bodies, and is “centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increases of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls” (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 139).

Secondly, bio-power is described as it relates to a macro-level of control of the social body, or the population (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002a). This includes political strategies aimed at controlling populations through regulating domains such as health, reproduction, birth rates, mortality and longevity (Foucault, 1976/1990). It is in this way that the regulation and control of not only individual bodies but also of populations (through, for instance, the regulation of family structures, reproductive practices and sexualities) can be rationalised and justified as part of a political project that ensures healthy and productive populations (Foucault, 1976/1990; 1978/2009).

2.4.2.4 Liberalism

Liberalism appears as a critique of “excessive disciplinary power in the name of the rights and liberty of the individual” (Dean, 2010, p. 133). As a form of government, it positions itself as critical of the regulation and control of populations enacted through bio-power, instead seeking to govern through rationality, autonomy and privacy (Rose, 1992). Liberalism constructs a subject that is afforded rights, is considered unique and is “obliged to be free”, and argues for an exercise of power over citizens that can be legitimated through claims to a rational basis (Rose, 1998, p. 100).

The contention that liberalism rejects disciplinary power is however false and obscures its very dependence on such power (Dean, 2010). Liberalism *appears* to privilege the individual as autonomous and free, but through such individualisation in fact incites the subject’s engagement in self-technologies to labour towards her “true self” (Foucault, 1979/2008). For instance, a liberalist appeal to psychological discourses that posit an inherent sexual identity makes it possible for an individual to “confess” or disclose her bisexual identity to others, to identify within her the barriers to accepting her sexual orientation as different from the norm, and to labour towards achieving a stable, integrated and healthy bisexual identity. In this manner, “the governmental wisdom of

liberalism is derived from the rationality of the governed rather than from the calculation of force or the truth of the human natural or divine orders” (Dean, 2010, p. 64-65).

From the preceding discussion it is apparent that Foucault’s conceptualisation of power entails distinct forms of power that function in interrelated ways to incite subjects to invest in the tenets of dominant discourse. I now turn to the utility of such a conceptualisation of discourse and power for feminist theorists.

2.5 Feminist engagement with poststructuralism

In this section I introduce some discussion of the extensive engagement of feminist theorists with poststructuralism. While the discussion of Derridean and Foucauldian theory thus far has already pointed to the utility of poststructuralist theory for feminist research (e.g., in the cited works of Butler, 1990; Hepburn, 1999a, 1999b; Macleod, 2002; Macleod & Durrheim, 2002a, 2002b), I introduce here a more explicit discussion of the manner in which feminist scholars have engaged with poststructuralist theory. This discussion extends into the subsequent chapter, where I detail Butler’s use of Foucauldian and Derridean theory in her poststructuralist treatment of sex, gender and sexuality, as it informs the current study.

For many theorists the utility of poststructuralist theory for feminist research is clear - a central aim of feminism is to disrupt and subvert oppressive gender systems and poststructuralism seems to support such an aim. However Hepburn (1999a) notes that it is precisely the uncertainty and subversion made possible by deconstructionist work that has been so troubling for modernist³ feminists. In this section I will first review the manner in which feminism initially treated the category “woman” through its assumption of a universal and shared female identity. Thereafter I will discuss the manner in which poststructuralist theory has informed feminist challenges to such an advancement of a singular identity of “woman”. The discussion will illustrate the utility of poststructuralist theory for feminist theorists wanting to challenge the historical construction of gender, “without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them” (Scott, 1988, p. 33).

Feminists initially cohered around the category “woman” as a shared identity, and subsequently a shared oppression based on gender, from which to resist patriarchal oppression. This treatment of “woman” as a singular identity, typically ascribed to first and second wave feminism, has been

³ Hepburn (1999a) acknowledges that the polarised positioning of modern and postmodern feminists sits uncomfortably with many, but uses the terms for rhetorical clarity.

critiqued for essentialising women's experience and ignoring differences between women (Cranny-Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos, & Kirby, 2003). Feminist resistance to mainstream psychology has mirrored this advancement of a singular identity of "woman" by adhering to the liberal humanist tradition that has dominated in the social sciences (Gavey, 1997). The liberal humanist assumptions that have informed mainstream psychology include, amongst others, an emphasis on experience as privileged. Within this tradition it is experience that provides us with authentic accounts of what we think and feel in any particular situation, and although experience requires language to be communicated to others, liberal humanism regards it as existing prior to language (Weedon, 1987).

Feminist consciousness-raising within psychology (and other social science disciplines) has mirrored the liberal humanist tradition by centring its activities on bringing women together to share their experience. It assumes a unitary female experience where women are considered to share an essential reality based on their female identity (Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006). By providing accounts of women's experience that are assumed to be universal to all women (Gavey, 1997; Weedon, 1987), it relies on a conceptualisation of women's experience as "pure and essential" (Gavey, 1997, p. 51). By supplementing mainstream psychology's androcentric knowledge base with authoritative accounts of women's experience, feminist critiques of mainstream psychology have in effect been framed in the same terms as the movement it is attempting to transform (Gavey, 1997; Hepburn, 1999a). Although these accounts frame women's experience positively, it remains inadequate in deconstructing the hierarchical relationship between men and women as it exists "parallel to hegemonic discourse" (Weedon, 1987, p. 110).

Third wave feminism, in which poststructuralist feminist theory has been influential, has been critical of such essentialist interpretations of gender. Poststructuralism is critical of feminist critiques that present a monolithic conceptualisation of "woman" and that lack awareness that experience can be interpreted in multiple and contradictory ways (Weedon, 1987). It questions the notion of a unitary female experience, as various social signifiers, such as race, sexuality, educational background and class, can influence one's experience (Shefer, 1999). Such lines of difference lead one to question how similar women's experiences are (Shefer, 1999). Instead of assuming a unitary female subject, poststructuralist feminism acknowledges that meaning is varied and is attributed to experience through the language that is used to describe it (Weedon, 1987).

Butler (1990) states that "rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women*, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a

site of contest, a cause for anxiety” (p. 3, emphasis in original). Poststructuralist theorists such as Butler (1990; 1993b) argue for the destabilisation of categories such as gender. Butler’s (1990; 1993b) argument rests on the notion that the continued adoption of categories such as “woman” is politically problematic as these categories are only intelligible within the binaries of masculinity/femininity that feminist politics are attempting to subvert (Butler, 1990). Beasley (2005) differentiates Butler’s approach from other feminist projects by emphasising her insistence on deconstructing categories of identity:

The task is not to enjoin a gender identity like women, which attends to singular *difference* from men, or even to invoke multiple identities like lesbian, black women and ‘Third World’ women, which acknowledge *differences between women*. Moreover, such an approach does not stop at the psychoanalytic focus on *differences within* individuals... Rather, the aim is to disrupt categories *per se*, to disrupt the fixity of identity, by showing up its non-natural incoherence. (p. 102, emphasis in original)

Because gender is always performed in relation to particular historical contexts and intersects with other aspects of socially constituted identities, it can never be separated out to arrive at a universal or cross-cultural identity that all women share (Butler, 1990). For Butler (1990) the insistence of feminist politics to construct a common subject through the category “woman” has resulted in the exclusion of those who do not conform to the unspoken assumptions of the meaning of such a category, and paradoxically undermines the emancipatory aims of feminism. Butler (1990) questions the continued utility of feminist politics that uphold the notion of a singular identity of which the meaning is presupposed:

If the stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal. (p. 5)

The political aims of feminism can then be best served by a continued insistence on the “undesignatable field of differences” evoked by the term “woman” (Butler, 1995, p. 50). Relinquishing the notion of “woman” as a fixed referent for identity and embracing the continually contested nature of the category, provides the “ungrounded ground” for feminist theory and political action (Butler, 1995, p. 50).

The debate about the political utility of mobilising around the category “woman” has also been taken up by feminist scholars in fields such as Critical Race Theory, where scholars have proposed a useful position by arguing that identities can be employed strategically (Sandoval, 1991). In this manner, a group can mobilise around a common cause without drawing on an essentialist identity as “woman” or “bisexual”. Cranny-Francis et al. (2003), referring to Sandoval’s oppositional politics, state that a category of identity “is not one which is based on some natural biological indicator, such as skin, or sex, or blood, but is rather a group which is united by affinity, by the decision to come together against a common cause” (p. 71). Sandoval (1991) suggests that it is possible to resist reification through cohering around a common political goal instead of an essential identity. Butler (1995) herself has not contested this point, as she acknowledges the political utility for feminists to mobilise around the category “woman” – she states that political activism necessarily relies on some recourse to identity politics in order to advance the feminist project. What can be reiterated, however, is her argument that the category “woman”, when strategically employed, should be continually contested and treated as a “site of permanent openness and resignifiability” instead of being advanced as a singular identity (Butler, 1995, p. 50).

One should then be clear that Butler’s (1995, p. 51) deconstruction of categories does not imply a “political nihilism”, but rather creates opportunities for terms to be freed up to signify different meanings and to be used to achieve different political aims. Butler (1995) states that “to call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it: rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to occupy and to serve very different political aims” (p. 51). By suspending one’s commitment to the fixed meaning of a term, it becomes possible to explore the manner in which a term is deployed and the political aims such a deployment serves (Hepburn, 1999a). To this end, poststructuralist theory provides strategies and tactics that can be productively employed in support of feminist efforts to disrupt and transform oppressive systems.

2.6 Poststructuralism and the possibilities for feminist resistance

The utility of Foucault’s (1976/1990, 1980) conceptualisation of power for feminist research lies in the fact that it sensitises us to the notion that power does not exist in a simplistic top-down manner, where subordination is described in uncomplicated terms of domination and victimisation (Deveaux, 1994). A theory of power cannot be limited to a description of those in authority that “exert various forms of coercive restraint upon the mass of more or less compliant subjects” (Sarup, 1993, p. 74). By theorising power as diffuse and as operating through multiple power relations, a more nuanced

exploration of how power is exercised through political, social and personal relationships becomes possible (Deveaux, 1994).

However, Deveaux (1994) describes Foucault's conceptualisation of power as a double-edged sword. While Foucault provides a more textured analysis of power that moves away from a dualistic top-down conceptualisation, his view on agency and resistance remains undeveloped (Deveaux, 1994). Critics of Foucault's conceptualisation of power state that according to his view power has no origin, no grounding, and therefore no "locus of opposition" (Sarup, 1993, p. 84). These critiques posit that if power is not centralised or grounded in anything, then resistance becomes impossible; Hartsock (1990) succinctly states that in Foucault's analysis "power is everywhere, and so ultimately nowhere" (p. 170).

Feminist poststructuralist theorists such as Hepburn (1999b), Butler (1995) and Fraser (1995) have responded to this claim by arguing that a foundational grounding of power is not a prerequisite for feminists' political engagement. In their view, advancing a new grounding to replace oppressive normative groundings is simply a case of committing the same violence of exclusion that feminism has worked to resist (Butler, 1995). Hepburn (1999b) goes further to argue that the resistance to assuming a foundational grounding is precisely what enables poststructuralism to be political: "To develop discourses less concerned with developing regimes of truth, more open and careful about their own modalities of writing, is surely a *precondition* for resistance" (p. 652, emphasis in original). Feminist poststructuralism then does not regard a lack of foundational grounding as problematic, instead it regards an anti-foundational stance as one of the strengths of conducting research within such a framework, as it "bring(s) into question any discursive move which attempts to place itself beyond question" (Nicholson, 1995, p. 5).

Feminist poststructuralist theorists have further responded to critiques of Foucault's conceptualisation of power by stating that although discourse exercises power over subjects, it is not a futile project to resist dominant or oppressive discourses (Weedon, 1987). Weedon (1987) argues that Foucault's analysis of power does not deny the possibility of resistance. She roots her response in Foucault's conceptualisation of discourse, arguing that the very existence of a dominant discourse implies the possibility of a reverse discourse emerging (Weedon, 1987). Weedon (1987) cites the example of Foucault's (1976/1990) analysis of the emergence of a discursively constituted subject position of the (male) homosexual in nineteenth century discourse. Foucault (1976/1990) details how various disciplinary practices contributed to the classification of a mode of sexual behaviour,

that is available to anyone, as belonging to (and defining) a particular group of people, i.e. the modern homosexual. At the same time, however, the emergence of this dominant discourse implied the possibility of subversion, of the emergence of a reverse discourse:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and 'psychic hermaphroditism', made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of 'perversity'; but also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 101)

While Foucault (1976/1990) clearly acknowledges the possibility of resisting oppressive discourse, he does also caution against a view that posits dominant discourses of power as existing in opposition to reverse discourses that run counter to them. Instead of describing discourses as existing in a bipolar manner, Foucault (1976/1990) emphasises the tactical productivity of discourses. Discourses operate as part of a field of force (or power) relations and serve to advance various strategies within such a force relation. Contradictory or opposing discourses can exist in support of the same force relation – discourses are not unambiguous but are instead complex and unstable. In this sense it is more useful to question the tactical and strategic *effects* of discourse, than to simply attempt to identify discourses as dominant or reverse, or as forming part of a "dominant or dominated" global strategy (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 102). Deconstructing texts through poststructuralist analysis would then focus on altering the internal systems of discourse and challenging the relationships between discourses, thus allowing "different spaces for manoeuvre and resistance" (Parker, 2002, p. 157).

Butler (1990) states that a poststructuralist feminist resistance to oppressive discourses relies on acknowledging the continued variability of all categories of meaning. Poststructuralist feminism states that discourses provide certain subject positions but it also acknowledges that individuals have a degree of agency in terms of which subject positions they take up (Weedon, 1987). Discourses might offer a preferred or more valued subject position but at the same time offer a reversal of that position. Individuals can negotiate, accept or reject the institutionalised versions of gendered or sexualised identity offered in a particular society (Weedon, 1987). A poststructuralist feminist analysis will then consider the manner in which individuals invest in certain subject positions, or resist adopting the dominant prescribed subject position (Weedon, 1987). I elaborate

further on Butler's (1990) theory of subversion in the next chapter, where I discuss her strategies for "troubling" regulative discourses of sex, gender and sexuality.

2.7 Conclusion

By describing the theoretical stance employed in the present study, I am acknowledging that all knowledge is situated. The theoretical approach assumed in this study shapes (and constrains) what kind of research questions can be asked and informs the methods used in addressing these research questions (Willig, 2008). In this chapter I outlined the theoretical position of feminist poststructuralism that informs the present study. I first discussed the context of postmodernism within which poststructuralism developed as a school of thought. I briefly discussed how postmodernism challenged the modernist assumptions of a world existing independently from our observation of it. Instead, postmodern theory argues that reality is socially constructed through discourse (Gergen, 2001). This view also challenges the modernist notion of a unified, rational subject, and instead proposes that the subject is continually constituted and reconstituted through discourse (Weedon, 1987).

It is within this context of postmodern challenges to modernism's grand narratives that poststructuralist theory developed a critique of the production of truths (Namaste, 1994). I discussed some of the tools for analysis provided by poststructuralist theory and argued that feminist researchers can productively employ these tools. Poststructuralist analysis allows for an exploration of the hierarchical binaries that structure gender as well as sexuality and can be employed in support of feminist aims to disrupt the deployment of these binaries in ways that are oppressive (Hepburn, 1999a). The chapter continued with a discussion of a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power as diffuse and as operating through complex systems of social relations (Foucault, 1980). I also discussed the possibilities for resistance within a Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourse.

From the discussion in this chapter it is clear that the conceptualisation of discourse that I draw on in the current study is predominantly informed by Derridean and Foucauldian theory. To conclude this chapter, some shared features of how discourse is conceptualised within such a theoretical stance can be summarised. In this summary, I adapt a framework used by Macleod (2002), who also employs poststructuralist theory in her approach to discourse.

Firstly, discourse can be described as having an underlying regularity (Macleod, 2002). Following Parker's (1992, p. 5) formulation of discourse as a "system of statements which constructs an object", discourses are conceptualised as coherent structures of meaning. This regularity is evident in how the statements in a discourse cluster around "culturally available understandings as to what constitutes a topic" (Parker, 2002, p. 146). Discourses are not static, discrete structures – discourses are historically situated and change over time (Foucault, 1976/1990; Parker, 2002). However, within the poststructuralist conceptualisation employed in the current study, discourses have regularity and can be identified as "socially organised frameworks of meaning" (Burman, 1994a, p. 2). A conceptualisation of discourses as implying an underlying regularity can be criticised as risking reification of discourses. However, there is a measure of utility in regarding discourses as coherent systems of meaning, in order for us to differentiate between discourses (Parker, 1992). By being able to identify discourses, we are provided "frameworks for debating the value of one way of talking about reality over other ways" (Parker, 2002, p. 145).

A second feature of discourse is that it is constructive - discourses are not simply descriptive but instead construct objects and subjects in particular ways (Parker, 1992). Discourses enable certain ways of construing reality – the systems of meanings that circulate at any given time in history construct particular categories of objects and subjects (Parker, 2002). Following this conceptualisation, discourses are also restrictive - discourses enable but also constrain certain understandings of the world and of ourselves (Parker, 1992). This enabling and restriction of meaning implies that discourse exists within relations of power (Foucault, 1976/1990). Discourse regulates subjectivity through processes of normalisation and control and in this manner discourse is tied up with relations of power in that it "transmits and produces power" (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 100).

Macleod (2002) notes that the duality of discourse as both productive and constraining is also evident in Derridean theory. Meaning is always created in relation to other meanings. Any term derives its meaning not only from the presence of the dominant term but also from the absence of the subordinated term (Derrida, 1976). Meaning is therefore constituted through a constant play on presence and absence since dominant constructions of meaning rely not only on what is said but also on what is *not* said (Derrida, 1976). Similar to this Derridean conceptualisation, a Foucauldian view considers opposing discourses as supporting dominant discourse in that dominant discourse derives its meaning from that which it is not (Foucault, 1976/1990). Such a conceptualisation of discourse has political utility, in that "while discourse excludes subordinate or contradictory

discourses, it simultaneously refers to them, creating the conditions for modification, for the undermining of its presence” (Macleod, 2002, p. 18).

A third feature of discourse that can be emphasised is that discourse has implications for agency. Towards the end of this chapter I noted that Foucault has been criticised for theorising a subject without agency, where the subject exists with “no intrinsic meaning or agency that might be identified, accounted for, or repressed”, aside from its historical constitution through discourse (Dean, 1995, p. 146). Feminist poststructuralist theorists such as Butler (1990) and Weedon (1987) have responded to such criticism by emphasising that Foucault’s (1976/1990) conceptualisation of discourse necessarily implies the possibility of counter-discourses. The approach employed in this study then follows Butler’s (1995) view that resistance is possible and individuals can reinscribe dominant discursive formulations in ways that resist oppression. Discourse constructs subjectivity through the provision of subject positions but individuals do have a measure of agency in the subject positions they adopt and dominant discourses can be challenged.

In the next chapter I review how sex, genders and sexualities have been constructed over time, focussing in particular on constructions of female sexuality.