Foucault's Disciplinary Society and Gender Dynamics: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

This paper assesses Michel Foucault's idea of a disciplinary society and its connection with gender dynamics. Foucault's contributions to different fields of knowledge, with philosophy, sociology, and gender studies, are emphasized and his major publications, such as "Discipline and Punish," "The History of Sexuality," and others, are discussed as per the significance. The context of Foucault's disciplinary society theory is explored, underlining its implications for understanding power relations and social control. Gender dynamics are presented as the social, cultural, and political characteristics inducing the structure, performance, and regulation of gender identities. The paper critically evaluates the intersection of Foucault's disciplinary society and gender dynamics, considering the strengths and limitations of his theories in focusing on power and gender associations. Methodology comprises a wide-ranging review of academic resources, analysing Foucault's work and other concerned works. Foucault's disciplinary society suggests the shift in power from sovereign to disciplinary, the practices of discipline, and the effects on individuals and institutions. The analysis reveals how disciplinary power functions in several societal spaces, such as classrooms, prisons, and health facilities, inducing gendered norms and expectations. Foucault's concepts are useful to explore power and gendered disciplinary practices, surveillance of gendered bodies, technologies of gender, and the potential for resistance and subversion. However, the paper also concedes limitations in Foucault's dealing of gender as a social construct, insufficiency of an intersectional perspective, and incomplete analysis of resistance strategies. In conclusion, Foucault's concept of a disciplinary society offers valuable visions into power dynamics and gender relations within societal structures. Combining his concepts with intersectional feminist perspectives can

develop our understanding of power mechanisms and the complications of gender dynamics in modern societies.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, gender dynamics, power dynamics, disciplinary society

Introduction

Michael Foucault was a world-renowned French philosopher and social theorist recognized by his contribution to the understanding of the notion of power dynamics and its especial effects on the modern societies. Regarding philosophy, sociology, study of history and culture, gender studies, critical theory, and many more, his contribution to the contemporary world is enormous. Major publications of Foucault include Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, 1961; The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception (2002); The Order of the Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences (1966); Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975) and The History of Sexuality (1976) among others.

'Madness and Civilization discusses Western thought on the history of madness that he compares with civilization during the post-renaissance period (Foucault, 1961). 'The Birth of the Clinic' mainly discusses the idea of medical geography. He mentions that the book is "about space, about language, and death; it is about the act of seeing, the gaze" (Foucault, 2002; p. ix). Likewise, 'The Order of the Things' focuses on our modern understanding of how the change in knowledge production happens in society (Foucault, 1966). Discipline and Punish considers the structures of punishment and control mechanisms that prevail in Western societies and traces the shift in the philosophy of punishment from one based on a paradigm of sovereign power to one defined by disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975). In The History of Sexuality, Foucault examines the psychoanalytical discourse on sexuality and, moving against the hypothesis of repression, illustrates how power acts at both the macro and the micro levels (Foucault, 1976). The scope of this paper is, however, based on the disciplinary society and its association with gender dynamics.

The idea of a disciplinary society is central to Foucault's work. This view examines how power works through the concepts of discipline and control. This paper attempts to discuss Foucault's (1975) study of disciplinary society with regard to its main features, methods, and effects. Specific attention is given to Foucault's work, especially "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison," and related writings to connect the idea of disciplinary society with gender issues.

The Context

Foucault's disciplinary society theory emphasises on understanding the issues of power relations and social control. The focus here is on how Foucault studied rules

and control in places such as prisons, schools, and hospitals. The context shows that Foucault wanted to trace how power functions and impacts conduct in society.

Moreover, gender dynamics refers to the social, cultural, and political aspects that contribute to the creation, performance, and control of gender identities. This calls for the examination of gender norms, roles, inequalities, and power relations within different social contexts. So, this paper seeks to illuminate the power and control dynamics involved in constituting and regulating gender identities, examining the intersection between Foucault's conception of the disciplinary society and the dynamics of gender.

Methodology

The paper is primarily based on secondary literature sources. This is specifically evidenced by considering the methodology, which involves exhaustive review of scholarly documents such as Foucault (1975) and secondary literature analyzing his work. Different steps were involved in the process of review which included conducting systematic search using academic databases of JSTOR, Google Scholar, and the reference management software Endnote using keywords on Foucault, disciplinary society, and gender dynamics. The selected resource materials were evaluated based on their importance, reliability, and depth of analysis concerning Foucault's disciplinary society. Inclusion conditions involved academic articles, books, and a book chapter from Seidman (2017) that offered a considerable understanding of Foucault's concept of disciplinary society and its theoretical foundations.

Results and Discussion

The paper critically examines the relationship between Foucault's disciplinary society and gender relations. Specifically, exploring how disciplinary power constitutes, regulates, and reproduces gender norms that form individual selves and society's expectations is the focus of this paper. Through integrating gendered organization theory, social constructionism, intersectionality, and, feminist theory the paper attempts to assess the utility and limitations of Foucault's work in interpreting gendered power relations. Further, the research discusses Judith Butler's critique of Foucault, i.e., her argument that gender is performative rather than merely a construction of disciplinary power.

Major theoretical contributions

Foucault's theory of disciplinary society covers numerous key theoretical contributions that have greatly influenced social theory and critical analysis. Firstly, he stressed the alteration from sovereign power to disciplinary power, underscoring

how power functions through surveillance, normalisation, and resistor mechanisms within several institutions. Foucault's concept of the panoptic arrangement, represented by the Panopticon, served as a symbol for the persistent surveillance and assumed discipline within disciplinary society (Foucault, 1975).

Secondly, Foucault (1975) explained the practices of discipline employed within a disciplinary society. These techniques involved inspection, hierarchical observation, normalising verdicts, and individualization. The inspection involved meticulous scrutiny of individuals' behaviours and capabilities, while hierarchical observation involved continuous supervision and classification. Normalising judgements or verdicts established social customs and morals, categorising individuals as "normal" or "deviant." Individualization is directed at changing people into docile bodies for obedience to disciplinary power.

Moreover, Foucault's analysis of disciplinary society underlined its effects on individuals, institutions, and social relations. At the individual level, disciplinary society produces docile and self-regulating subjects who internalise the norms and expectations of disciplinary procedures. He asserts that institutions within disciplinary societies become instruments of control, preserving power relations and supporting dominant ideologies (Foucault, 1975). Also, disciplinary society leads to social fragmentation as individuals become isolated within the disciplinary framework, resulting in alienation and a loss of social bonds.

Foucault (1975) discusses 'docile bodies' concerning the soldiers' example. He illustrates, "… discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (p. 138). The notion of the docile body here indicates that the sovereign with power dictates over the suppressed and wants the subject to be controlled and managed. Exemplifying the situation of eighteenth-century Europe, he asserts, "… in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, or obligations" (p. 136).

Foucault's concept of the Disciplinary Society has made several contributions to contemporary social theory and our understanding of power dynamics. The major contributions from his literature can be summarised as the development of the power-knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1977); disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975); technology of the self (Foucault, 1976); genealogy and historical analysis (Foucault, 1975); and the critique of binary thinking (Foucault, 1976).

Some Theories on Gender Dynamics

The gender dynamics has been illustrated by various theories, however, some selected theories – gendered organisation theory, social constructionism, intersectionality, and feminist theory - have been discussed in the present context of gender dynamics.

Gendered Organisation Theory

Gendered organizational theory examines the ways in which gender relations establish workplace inequalities and organizational structures. It places gender at the forefront as a principal element of workplace differences while noting other social categories as determinants (Lindsey, 2020). The theory addresses gender intersection with social, economic, and technological aspects and its role in shaping shifting inequalities. By taking on feminist theories including intersectionality, decolonial feminism, ecofeminism, and queer theory, it enhances its understanding of fluid and dynamic gender roles in organizations and provides a more comprehensive analysis of inequality (Rodriguez & Guenther, 2022).

Acker (1990) challenges the idea that organizational structures are neutral, and they are gendered in nature. Organizational constructs embed gender assumptions, which are covered by defining work as immaterial and abstract. The ideal of a universal worker is actually men-centered, covering their bodies, sexuality, and work roles in waged work, at the cost of women. Organizational processes are constructed by masculine norms, confirming gender segregation. Such pretending to neutrality is a mechanism of control in capitalist industrial societies themselves organized on principles of gender difference (Acker, 1990).

Social constructionism theory

Social constructionism theory posits that gender is not a biological trait but a construct of society with cultural norms and socialization practices. This position emphasizes that individuals learn gender roles from societal expectations, which get internalized and externalized in daily life, a process illustrated by Berger and Luckmann's three stages of social construction (Burr, 2024). Those three stages constitute externalization, objectification and internalization (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Furthermore, the constructionist perspective emphasizes the active interaction between social forces and personal conduct, suggesting that gender is continuously negotiated within social settings (Mesquita & Parkinson, 2024). This argument challenges genetic determinism by asserting that social, ideological, and cultural factors heavily impact gender constructs, hence endorsing the fact that gender identities are fluid and context-dependent rather than stable characteristics (Ványi, 2024). Generally, social constructionism provides a critical approach to analyzing the complexity of gender as a culturally constructed entity based on active cultural discourses and practice (Tasos, 2024).

Intersectionality and Gender

Intersectionality is a critical tool for understanding the complex intersection of gender with other social categories and structural disadvantage that has significant

influence on the experiences of individuals in various settings. Research illustrates how gender norms intersect with other considerations such as age, race, and socioeconomic status, regulating health and wellbeing, especially among youth in low- and middle-income settings (Banati et al., 2024). At the workplace, intersectionality influences professional development programs, with an emphasis on addressing multiple identities and power relations in gender and sexuality (Rosette, 2018). Also, in higher education, the intersection of race and gender is at the centre of understanding the particular challenges faced by Black/African American women, and policies promoting diversity and equity are required (Johnson & Johnson, 2024). In addition, the reaction to gender violence in universities requires an intersectional approach that considers contextual factors, leading to more effective interventions (Humbert et al., 2024). All these studies stress on the necessity of an intersectional approach in addressing gender issues in various contexts.

Feminist theories and gender

Feminist theories comprise a wide variety of perspectives that critically examine the intersections of gender, power, and social structures. They challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for gender equality across disciplines, including criminology, social sciences, and legal systems. Feminist criminology, for instance, emphasizes how criminality and victimization are constructed through gender, race, and class, requiring a rich understanding of these dynamics within the criminal legal system (Whaley, 2024). Feminist theories have revolutionized traditional knowledge in social sciences by putting women's experiences first and advocating for policies that guarantee social justice (Bhandari, 2024). Feminist legal theory also seeks to deal with gender inequalities in legal systems by advocating for equal rights and policy-making access (Marita & Pramesti, 2023). Besides, contemporary feminist thought in organizational studies explores how intersectionality and feminist ethics can be employed to address systemic inequalities and environmental issues, thereby adding to the social change literature (Fotaki & Pullen, 2023; Arun, 2022).

Feminist theory has engaged critically with Michel Foucault's theories of power and sexuality, more specifically relating them to gender relations within disciplinary societies. Foucault contends that power is not merely repressive but productive in the formation of identities and social norms which resonates with feminist contentions regarding the social construction and regulation of gender and sexuality (Uprety, 2021; Järvinen, 1996). Feminist scholars have used Foucault's ideas to analyze the intersections of power, gender, and sexuality, illustrating how gender hierarchies are policed through social norms and non-conforming identities are excluded (Andreasson & Carlsson, 2022; Looser, 2016). Critiques, however, are made of Foucault's treatment of the body and lived experience, wherein some feminists argue that his focus on historical discourses neglects the lived experience of gendered

lives, for example, in the context of imprisonment (Erlenbusch, 2016). This discussion illustrates the problems of applying Foucault's theories to feminist frameworks, showing both the utility and limitations of his work for analyzing gendered power relations.

Disciplinary Society and Gender Dynamics

Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power provides a helpful lens for investigating how gender is produced and regulated through social norms. Through social constructionism, gender is not an innate quality but a performative identity established through cultural expectations (Butler, 1990). People are disciplined into gendered behaviours from birth, acquiring knowledge of what is "appropriate" for their assigned gender.

School, religious instruction, and social norms are all implicated in this gendered socialization, replicating distinctions between masculinity and femininity. Women are socialized, for example, to internalize standards of beauty, and men are socialized to suppress emotional vulnerability in accordance with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005).

The disciplinary society, according to Michel Foucault (1975), exercises the power that is termed disciplinary power. It focuses on how power is applied within social spaces such as schools, hospitals, prisons, and so on, to shape the behaviour of the people associated with them. Such disciplinary power acts especially in three forms, such as hierarchical observation or simply surveillance, normalising judgement, and examination.

The surveillance mechanism works in the form of physical observation, documentation, and technological control that facilitate institutions for monitoring and regulating people's behaviour. Similarly, normalising judgement involves developing ways to establish and implement certain norms and standards based on societal expectations. It makes people conform to and abide by those predefined norms and standards in society. Examination refers to the assessment process for measuring and classifying people by predefined norms and standards of evaluation. The examples of the application of disciplinary power here can be taken as educational institutions, prisons, and health facilities as disciplinary apparatuses.

Surveillance, normalising judgement, and examination as discussed above can be exemplified concerning classrooms, prisons, and health facilities in modern societies. In classrooms, disciplinary power is exercised in the form of surveillance, a standardised testing system, and a grading system that moulds and controls the behaviour of the pupils. In prisons, constant surveillance, restricted schedules, and hierarchical structures work as tools of disciplinary power, while in health facilities,

the process of subjecting the patients' bodies to medical surveillance (through the nurses in ICUs or in-patient wards), diagnosis, and treatment.

So, Foucault's analysis of power, discipline, and surveillance provides a lens through which we can observe and examine how gender operates in societal structures. By discovering the power dynamics integral to disciplinary practises and their impact on gender, it will be convenient to understand and evaluate the gendered customs, prospects, and disparities existent in modern-day society. The inter-relationship of disciplinary society and gender norms, based on Foucault's ideas, has been discussed in brief as follows.

Power and Gendered Disciplinary Practises

Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power and its operation within institutions deals with insights into how gendered customs and prospects are maintained and applied in societies. Disciplinary practises in academic bodies, for instance, contribute to the social construction of gender by recommending some behaviours, appearances, and roles that are supposed to be suitable for boys and girls (Letherby, 2002). Such activities and practises can strengthen gender stereotypes, emphasise dualistic ideas of gender, and exert pressure on individuals to adapt to socially agreed-upon or approved gendered standards.

In schools, disciplinary practices habitually emphasise gendered standards and expectations. For instance, dress codes may inexplicably target and control the dress choices of female students, recommending modesty and emphasising traditional gender roles. This disciplinary power functions through surveillance, imposing dissimilar criteria, and extending the gender binary.

Surveillance and Gendered Bodies

Foucault's idea of surveillance offers a framework for understanding how gendered frames are structured and controlled within the disciplinary society. The panoptic gaze, as described by Foucault, functions over persistent surveillance, influencing people's performance and suppressing customs (Foucault, 1975). In terms of gender perspectives, this surveillance demonstrates, utilizing societal anticipations and policing, gendered presence, performance, and sexuality. Women's bodies, for instance, are time and again, subjected to intensified examination and directives, disseminating gendered orders or hierarchies and highlighting objectification (Bartky, 1990).

The persistent surveillance of women's bodies in public spaces in our societies demonstrates the interrelationship concerning power and gender. Street intimidation and bullying, or body shaming, reveals how disciplinary power functions due to

surveillance, objectifying women and emphasising the concept that their bodies are subject to public scrutiny and judgement.

Technologies of Gender

Foucault's notion of 'technologies of the self' can be associated with the creation and normalisation of gender identities. Technologies of gender include the social, cultural, and disciplinary practices through which individuals acquire and accept gender roles and identities (Butler, 1990). By scrutinising gender as an object of disciplinary power, it can be realised how people take part in activities that support societal anticipations of femininity and masculinity. These practises, whether conscious or unconscious, lead to the replication of gendered norms and hierarchies.

Gendered technologies, such as cosmetic products aimed at women and girls for makeup and grooming, demonstrate disciplinary practises that control and standardise gender identities. For instance, the beauty industry often extends narrow beauty standards that prescribe specific ways of imparting oneself based on gender, emphasising the societal anticipations of femininity and masculinity.

Resistance and Subversion

Although Foucault's analysis emphasises the instruments of power and control within the disciplinary society, it also advances the potential for resistance and subversion. The concept of resistance can be applied to gender dynamics as individuals and groups contest and challenge gendered customs and anticipations. Foucault argues that resistance functions within power relations, and with acts of resistance, people can interrupt and challenge disciplinary mechanisms (Foucault, 1976). Feminist movements, for instance, have instigated strategies of resistance to challenge patriarchal power structures and advocate for gender equality (Hooks, 2000).

The feminist movement offers an outstanding example of resistance and subversion within a disciplinary society. Feminist activism is provocative and disrupts the disciplinary power that defends patriarchal structures and standards. Activities that are in favour of gender equality, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ rights challenge gendered power dynamics and seem to act towards dismantling disciplinary practices that sustain gendered hierarchies.

These relationships between Foucault's concept of the Disciplinary Society and contemporary gender dynamics demonstrate the idea that power, discipline, surveillance, and resistance interconnect with gendered standards and disparities. By applying Foucauldian understandings, we can critically analyse and contest the

gendered power dynamics rooted within our societal institutions, practises, and discourses.

Critical analysis

Foucault's notion of a disciplinary society received a wider response from academic communities around the world. There have been both strengths and limitations to his ideas, drawing upon existing scholarly criticism and presenting original analysis. Some areas of critical analysis of Foucault's Disciplinary Society concerning Gender dynamics can be listed as both its strengths and limitations. At this juncture, his ideas have analysed gendered power relations. Foucault's exploration of disciplinary power focuses on how power drives surveillance, normalisation, and control in societies. This perspective can be applied to recognise how gendered power relations function in numerous social settings, such as education, health care, and workstations (Foucault, 1975). This perspective is one of the strengths of his idea of a disciplinary society.

Another strong point of his idea is his appreciation of the dynamic nature of power. His idea defies the perception that power is exclusively suppressive. It stresses that power is dynamic and functions through decisive knowledge and subjectivities. This frame permits an investigation of how gendered customs and expectations are shaped, sustained, and internalised (Foucault, 1977). Moreover, Foucault's investigation has explored the notions of resistance and subversion. His idea recognises the potential for opposition in power structures. This deals with space for inspecting gender dynamics and the ways persons and marginalised communities contest normative gender roles, customs, and practises, overlaying techniques for alternative methods of empowerment and gender manifestation (Foucault, 1982).

Some of the issues of the Disciplinary society in gender relations have inadequacies in terms of social constructs and gendered analysis. His idea is insufficient in focusing on gender as a social construct. Foucault's exploration of power relations often disregards the specificities of gender as a social construct. It does not comprehensively speak to how power functions through the creation and implementation of gender norms, how gender intersects with other forms of repression or the capabilities of marginalised gender identities (Scott, 1986). Another critique of Foucault's analysis is the lack of an intersectional perspective. Foucault's inquiry mainly explores power relations without overtly allowing for the intersections of gender with race, class, sexuality, and other social classifications. This omission limits the understanding of how power operates differentially on individuals based on their compound identities and social hierarchies (Collins, 2000). Furthermore, while Foucault identifies the potential for resistance, his analysis often lacks a thorough investigation of precise resistance strategies, mainly

those employed by marginalised groups. Accepting how gendered power relations are vigorously challenged and changed is important for predicting further unbiased gender dynamics (Mohanty, 2003).

Foucault has been criticised for presenting a deterministic view of power that leaves little room for resistance or agency. Fraser (1989) argues that his description gives too much prominence to power as an omnipresent force, with insufficient attention to ways in which individuals and groups resist and evade disciplinary practices. Likewise, Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework criticises Foucault for failing to account for how power affects individuals differently based on race, class, and gender. Foucault's ideas are applicable to social control in general, but fail to account for the particular experiences of marginalized gendered identities, such as trans individuals or women of colour.

Some critics contend that Foucault's focus on disciplinary power disregards other forms of power, such as financial power or resistance strategies (Gordon, 1980; Seidman, 2017). Others question the generalizability of his theory, proposing that disciplinary mechanisms differ across different historical contexts and cultural settings (Taylor, 1987; Seidman, 2017). Additionally, some argue that Foucault's emphasis on power relations overlooks agency and individual resistance, downplaying the potential for transformative action (Rabinow, 1984; Seidman, 2017).

Judith Butler offers a critical analysis of Michel Foucault's understanding of the body, in particular of how he writes about intersex individuals such as Herculine Barbin (Butler, 2005). Foucault's preface to Barbin's memoirs, for example, describes the early years of Barbin's life as a "happy limbo of non-identity," i.e., an undisturbed period prior to the gendered imposition of society (Foucault, 1980). This characterisation is denied by Butler, who argues that Foucault's romanticising of a free-form pre-discursive world sits uneasily alongside what he himself argues in The History of Sexuality, when he asserts that sexuality and identity are historically and socially constructed and not pre-discursive realities (Butler, 2005; Foucault, 1978).

By idealizing Barbin's childhood as identity-less, Foucault accidentally introduces a view of an "authentic" pre-social self that runs against his thesis of identities being totally constructed through power relations and discourse (Butler, 2005). The criticism of Butler points out the need to perceive that all embodied experiences are always mediated through cultural and social forms, and there is no such "natural" state of identity outside of them (Butler, 2005).

Conclusion

Foucault's investigation of disciplinary society offers a critical intuition to apprehend power dynamics that shift from sovereignty to disciplinarity in nature. Foucault's notion of disciplinary society has opened up possibilities for exploring gender dynamics within social institutions. However, its critical assessment exposes certain limitations in its treatment of gender as a social construct, its lack of an intersectional perspective, and its incomplete analysis of resistance strategies. Accompanying Foucault's analysis with intersectional feminist standpoints can enhance our understanding of how power functions and the complexities of gender dynamics within disciplinary societies. While Foucault's work provides fascinating perspectives on identity formation in and through discourse and power, Butler demonstrates the inadequacy of his model by illustrating the ways gender is negotiated and regulated continuously through social norms.

Foucault's texts remain profoundly relevant to understanding issues today, particularly today in the age of technology. Social media and technology have intensified mechanisms of surveillance and self-regulation, magnifying gender norms through algorithmic biases, policing of gender expression on the internet, and online beauty sites that perpetuate normative beauty ideals. Parallel, gendered expectations continue to shape gendered policies and routinized habits that affect marginalized genders and women, from labor discrimination to gender identity and rights arguments in the law. The ways in which these mechanisms persist demonstrate to us how disciplinary power continues to be institutionally inscribed deeply into everyday life and into day-to-day interactions.

Lastly, the relationship of disciplinary power and gender in practice is both exercised through seemingly and less-than-obviously evident methods of control. Institutions, cultural norms, and technological networks work together to normalize gendered behavior, legitimating dominant power relations. Both Foucault's and Butler's perspectives can be critically evaluated and thereby better resisted as a way of better understanding the continued regulation of gender in contemporary society.

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