Introduction

Not Talking about the Same Thing:
Introducing Conceptual Literacy

> In none of the sciences, and not even the perspectives within them . . .
> were people talking about the same thing.
>
> (Adam, 1990: 5)

For those who are new to social theory and research the multitude of meanings that are given to the same term gives rise to a certain amount of concern. Students feel muddled and confused as they search for the correct meaning of a particular term or try to sort out the variety of meanings from a wide range of literatures. Recourse to a dictionary is one response. Recourse to a tutor is of course another. Giving up and learning to live with confusion is perhaps a third. Giving up altogether is a fourth option! The search for a fixed, unified and indeed accessible meaning becomes something like the search for the 'philosopher's stone' that in myth promised to turn base metal into gold.

It is, of course, not only those who are new to an area or students more generally who have concerns about multiple and changing meanings. This is an issue that has been noted by researchers for a considerable time. In researching the literature on all the key terms used in this text – time, choice, experience, difference, care, equality, theory and research – there was an abundance of commentary on the variability of their meanings. Thus, the complete quote from Adam is:

> In none of the sciences, and not even the perspectives within them . . .
> were people talking about the same thing when they made use of the idea
> of time. They seemed to be talking about phenomena, things, processes,
> qualities, or a dimension, a category, and a concept, using the word
> unproblematically as if it had only one meaning. (Adam, 1990: 5–6)

Similarly Anderson (1998) comments that conceptualizations of choice are vague and ill-defined and thus methodologically fraught with

problems. Scott (1992) refers to the use of the term experience as ubiquitous and Barrett (1987) makes a similar comment about the use of the term difference. Thomas (1993) reflects on how conceptualizations of care tend to be presented as generic rather than taking into account that the meanings of care are domain specific. Evans (1995) suggests that there are two major conceptualizations of equality but these are not the same as those noted by Brine (1999). Poovey (1988: 51) comments, 'There are as many deconstructions as there are feminisms.' Butler and Scott (1992: xiii) note that '"Theory" is a highly contested term within feminist discourse.' They ask whether theory is singular or multiple. Or is theory defined in opposition to something that might be described as atheoretical, pre-theoretical or post-theoretical? Or is theory distinct from politics? In response to the question 'What is research?' my colleagues Loraine Blaxter and Malcolm Tight and I (Blaxter et al., 2001) identify 20 'views' of research. We also suggest that 'even a brief review of writings on research will uncover a lengthy and potentially baffling list of types of research' (ibid.: 5) and we offer four different representations of the research process.

One response to this diversity has been to try to work towards a unified schema of conceptualization. This is because if we are not 'talking about the same thing' (Adam, 1990) how can we be sure that our research is comparable or that our results are valid? Thus, Burgess (1984) explored the varied conceptualizations of terms such as 'race' and ethnicity, age, gender, health and illness, education, social class and occupation, leisure, politics and voluntary associations with a clear recognition of their ambivalent and transient meanings. The contributors to Burgess' text may have been initially concerned that researchers used the same meanings for the same terms. In this their aim was to improve the validity of comparative research. Nonetheless, in line with much thinking in the postmodern, they also recognized the impossibility of this. Thus:

> If the contemporary diversity of sociology and social research makes the emergence of a unified conceptual scheme unlikely, it is nevertheless essential to be aware of how one's work relates to that of others. Researchers need to consider how the concepts and indicators that they use relate to those used in local and national studies both now and in the past, in an attempt to find some common ground and with a view to enabling comparisons to be made. (Burgess, 1984: 261)

More recently postmodern and poststructural theorizing has brought to prominence the significance of language in understanding the changing

nature of meaning. Thus Scheurich (1997) comments on how post-modern theorization has illustrated how the relationship between language and meaning shifts in small and large ways, between people, across time and according to varied situations. What is shaping the difference between the approaches evidenced by Burgess and Scheurich is whether or not meanings can be fixed and whether a consensus could be achieved on the conceptualization of key research terms.

This text enters the terrain of conceptual meaning with some sympathy for Burgess' position. In this I would reiterate that researchers need to consider how the concepts they use relate to other conceptualizations. Indeed, I would go further than this and argue that researchers need to be conceptually literate. Conceptual literacy is no more, and no less, than an act of sensitization to the political implications of contestation over the diversity of conceptual meanings. In this it draws attention to the multiplicity of meanings that are invoked by the use of key terms; to the dualistic framing of language; to the art of deconstruction; and to the salience of focusing on language in use. However, more broadly, conceptual literacy is concerned to develop an understanding of the effect of epistemic games that surround conceptual contestation in producing warrantable knowledge that justifies the directions through which a field of enquiry and its associated political concerns may proceed.

My point of divergence with Burgess is his starting point that there might be some common ground in the operationalization and conceptualization of key terms. As a sensitizing act the exploration of conceptual literacy in this text does not aim for closure on conceptual usage in the sense of offering a 'last word', a complete review or a definitive operationalization of any term or any theorization of language and its meaning. Indeed, my purpose is quite the reverse. Rather, I imagine that you will enter into the analysis at many points in terms of your own experience, knowledge, politics and purposes. At most, I hope that some of what I have to say will provide food for further thought as part of an open-ended and ongoing exploration for understanding conceptual usage in your own work and intellectual development.

I make these points because if my own experience is relevant, the existence of divergent and plural meanings not only has implications for the development of a field of knowledge but also for our learning careers. For all its postmodern provenance, plurality stands in contradiction to a more modernist desire for fixity and boundedness, for neatness and framing. It contradicts, in fact, a desire for absolute knowing that is a mark of scientific enquiry. Thus, when, for example, I come across a new term or theory my response is very similar to those of

my students. I want to know what it 'really' means *as if this were possible*. My desire for the boundedness of knowing also leads to a sense of muddle and confusion when that feeling of safe boundaries, clear frameworks or absolute meanings is absent. And, this sense of muddle quickly moves into a sense of self-blame. Somehow it is my fault there is this confusion and this is probably due to some personal failing in my education, my IQ, the fact that I haven't read enough, and so forth. In terms of my learning career, therefore, I experience confusion and failure. I want to give up. I am inclined to close down rather than open up to this veritable array of diversity of meaning.

Relatedly, my concern that the text is perceived to open up, rather than close down, understanding is not simply due to a commitment to these elements of postmodern discourse. Rather, it is because I am acutely aware of what I have not said, what I have edited out and, of course, what I do not know. In this I am drawn to Crick (1976: 11) who, in the introduction to the publication of his doctoral thesis, comments on how his work was to a large extent 'the result of a situation brought about by the naiveti thesis'. Naiveté is a relative term that is usually used with pejorative overtones. As such one's naiveté can only be understood by looking back from some point of greater and more respectable wisdom. The ignominious nature of naiveté means that we have a tendency to refuse it a place in our learning careers. Rather, we focus on the progressive myths of learning that are concerned with the acquisition of expertise as the only credible prize. Such myths focus us on the end points of education – the book, the thesis, the dissertation, the exams passed – as ends in themselves and ultimately as acts of closure. A phrase that was popular in Britain a couple of years ago rather sums this up. 'Been there. Done that'. In this progressive myths disallow the importance of foolishness, naiveté and not knowing as moments of continual beginnings that absolutely require openness and openings.

It is, therefore, for these reasons that I offer the term conceptual literacy as an act of sensitization that opens us to the variety of ways that we can understand the evidence of multiple meanings. Fuzzy, blurred and multiple meanings are not signs of the personal failure of the naïve. Their recognition is a prelude to unveiling the broader political significance of conceptual contestation. As such, this text explores the contested and varied meanings of equality, difference, choice, care, time experience within their usage in feminist theory and research. To this end I now offer an overview of my pedagogic approach to the construction of this text and, of course, a brief commentary on what is to come.

Pedagogic Concerns

As the brief review of the contents of this text will indicate, an analysis of key concepts draws on a range of theoretical and methodological terms. I am conscious that for many students even the word 'theory' is off-putting and acts as a point of closure. Many students comment that they do not understand theory, they are not 'theoretical' people or they are more concerned with practice. My response is usually to say that theory simply means explanation and how are we to explain our social worlds or what we find in our research if we do not have some kind of theory? However, I am also conscious that any form of writing is a pedagogic act. By this I mean that it is an opportunity for teaching and learning. For this reason I need to say a few words about how I have responded to my pedagogic concerns.

Whenever I hear a student say that they are not interested in theory, I understand this as reflecting on the mental barriers that are set up by the expectation that theory is a difficult subject. I agree that it can be. However, I would also suggest that finding many and varied ways into a topic can greatly facilitate understanding. Texts such as Brooks (1997), Beasley (1999) and Freedman (2001) that outline key theoretical positions are an excellent way of developing knowledge about the social theory that underpins feminism. Yet they are only one genre through which knowledge can be enhanced. In turning to this text I appreciate that readers may focus their attention on single chapters because of their particular relevance or importance. However, I would suggest that you may find it valuable to consult those chapters that are not necessarily of immediate or primary concern. This text offers an alternative approach to understanding some of feminism's more formal theoretical concerns because particular theoretical perspectives give rise to alternative conceptual meanings and implications for how to proceed. These theoretical perspectives form cross-cutting ties within the text. Therefore within the discussion of each of the concepts you will find commentary on, for example, liberal, cultural, materialist, postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial feminism.

In addition, and somehow, theory is often viewed as detached from empirical research. One either 'does' theory or one 'does' research. Moreover, there is another form of detachment that operates across this binary. This is that theory is abstract and empirical research is concrete. Because of my concerns about these kinds of false separation, you will find interleaved within the discussion of the varied conceptualizations of equality, difference, choice, care, time and experience a number of

illustrative case studies. These are drawn from contemporary research in the fields of education, employment and family and have been selected to concretize the more abstract nature of the discussion. As I am primarily concerned to illustrate how concepts are applied in different forms of research I mainly focus on the methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks of these case studies. This allows us to understand the 'results' of research with the necessary contextualization of how these results were obtained and theoretically framed.

Finally, as a text focused on developing a form of literacy, I have included suggested further readings. This text provides an introduction and an overview of the central issues of meaning, as I see it, in the varied definitions of feminism's key concepts. The further reading has been selected to provide examples of work that can build on the material that has been presented here.

Conceptual Concerns

Any text is built on some kind of theoretical or conceptual framework that may or may not be made explicit. This places the knowledge presented in a broader epistemological and ontological field. This further allows us to judge its claims and justifications. Chapter 1 therefore outlines the field of language theorizing that has informed my own development of conceptual literacy. A key point to note here is that this review is necessarily selective because it is based on what has been personally relevant in terms of my own learning journey. In developing your own conceptual literacy other theorizations may well be equally if not more relevant. As part of opening up rather than closing down, therefore, this chapter provides a useful starting point to which further theoretical frameworks might be added.

Chapter 1 includes a number of issues related to the analysis and theorization of multiple meaning. I begin by discussing Derridean notions of diffirance and analyses of meaning that focus on language dualism. I next turn to Wittgenstein's analysis of language with particular attention to his conceptualization of language games. This is to illustrate the place of context as giving meaning to specific discourses within language. Finally, I explore the politics of conceptual contestation. Here I illustrate the conditions for contestation in terms of Connolly's (1993) analysis of cluster concepts. In addition, I discuss how contestation may masquerade as a simple issue of accurate

description that requires the correct indicators. However, as Tanesini (1994) comments, such descriptors also invoke particular judgements about what is warrantable knowledge that have a justificatory role in terms of how a field of study should proceed. In these ways a particular field changes direction or extends its purview both in respect of its empirical and political concerns.

One of the consequences of the changes that arise from debates about what counts as adequate ways to proceed is that there is a tendency that *post-hoc* analyses and thus the veracity of earlier work are primarily read within the terms of these later debates. My concern that any development of conceptual literacy takes account of situating meaning within historical and cultural contexts is therefore taken up in Chapter 2 by illustrating how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century feminist theorizing of *equality* drew on Enlightenment ideas of liberalist rights. In Chapter 2 I explore two basic conceptualizations of equality. These are equality as sameness and equality as difference. In respect of equality as sameness I explore the problems of measurement that are central to such conceptualizations and the policy and legislative outcomes of rights-based equality arguments. In respect of equality as difference I focus on the centrality of motherhood to such conceptualizations and illustrate the varied meanings of this in terms of the eighteenth-century writings of Wollstonecraft and more contemporary Italian feminists' conceptualizations. Because it is becoming a neglected area, my final concern in Chapter 2 is to discuss material inequalities. Here I specifically focus on Fraser's (1995) theoretical conceptualization through her analysis of the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution that are part of post-socialist political life.

As will be evident from Chapter 2, it is impossible to talk of equality without invoking issues of difference. In Chapter 3 I explore a variety of conceptualizations of difference. These include difference as sameness, identity differences, sexual difference, poststructural and postcolonial analyses of difference. Difference has, of course, been of enormous importance to feminism with the consequence that there is a plethora of writings that could be drawn upon to illustrate its meanings. The question for any academic or student, then, is 'How does one organize and manage this wealth of material?' I begin Chapter 3 by comparing two conceptual schema of difference (Barrett, 1987, and Evans, 1995). One of my purposes here is to illustrate how feminists approach a field as rich and diverse as difference in terms of the imposition of alternative organizing frameworks. For example, Barrett separates experiential, sexual and positional difference and draws up her framework of three key differences accordingly. Evans draws on particular schools of

thought such as cultural, liberal and postmodern feminism as under-pinning her three key differences. I continue the discussion in Chapter 3 by exploring the key differences through a concern with conceptualizations of group difference, deconstructive approaches and postcolonial theorizing of multi-axial locationality.

Chapter 4 explores the concept of *choice* within a broader framework of agency and structure. This enables me situate conceptualizations of choice within debates about these two concepts. I offer two conceptualizations of choice. The first is that of rational choice. Here I illustrate how rational choice most closely fits with common-sense, everyday conceptualizations and is also central to economic theory. By way of critique I explore feminist economists' analyses of rational choice theory in terms of its predominant assumption of agentic, rational personhood. I then outline poststructural conceptualizations of the choosing subject. These focus on the processes of subjectification through keeping in simultaneous play issues of mastery and submission. Whilst poststructural theorizing is critical of humanist conceptions of personhood, the primary aim is to go beyond the agency-structure 'ping-pong' (Jones, 1997) that has been a central feature of much theorization in the social sciences.

Thomas (1993) suggests that *care* is primarily an empirical rather than a theoretical category. Her point is important because it highlights how terms are conceptualized through the theoretical frameworks within which they are placed. For example, within sociological frameworks of care giving and care receiving, care has mainly been imbued with negative meanings. Within some philosophical and psychological writings, and particularly those of care ethicists, care takes on more positive evaluations. Care is also interesting because in some domains the empirical facets of care giving and receiving are renamed. In employment contexts, for example, caring is redefined as service or support (Tronto, 1993). However, one idea recurs. That is that care is primarily women's responsibility. In Chapter 5 I explore these meanings of care through an analysis of its economic character in both family and employment domains and its ethical implications for a deconstruction of rights-based discourses. A conceptualization of care as economic has enabled feminists to rename care as work whether this is unpaid work or paid work. A conceptualization of care as an ethic has facilitated a critique of individualist rights and associated policies that continue to neglect a further central feature of care. This is that we all need care and we are all equally capable of care giving (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

Time is feminism's latent concept. It is for this reason that Adam (1989) was able to write an article illustrating why feminist social

theory needs time. Time is so imbued in our everyday language that we most often fail to notice its expansiveness. When we do we tend to focus on clock-time as the all-encompassing only time. In Chapter 6 I explore three aspects to conceptualizations of time. The first is the linear time of the clock. This is the most predominant conceptualization of time in social theory and can be found in a body of research that ranges from historical analyses to adult development theories to work–family balance policies. Feminist research has primarily referred to linear, clock time as male time and has contrasted this with female time. Female time arises from women's relationship to the reproduction of family and organizational life. It is relational and repetitive as tasks, such as feeding, cleaning or counselling, regularly interrupt the linearity of the clock. I next turn to analyses of time that are concerned with the development of the self and I outline here conceptualizations of time that view the past, the present and the future as simultaneous. For example, I discuss issues of authenticity and the role of time in creating a sense of the continuous self. Finally, I turn to issues of time–space relationships. Here I particularly focus on Grosz' (1995) analysis of the body and Kristeva's (1986) conceptualization of feminist politics that both incorporate issues of time, space and identity.

Arising from feminist consciousness-raising and summarized within the phrase 'The personal is the political' *experience* is central to feminist politics. Experience also forms the cornerstone of empirical research as the very stuff of narrative and interview. In Chapter 7 I discuss the development of standpoint theory from its original conceptualization in the late 1970s to the present. Standpoint theory originally posited that the experiences of those who were positioned outside the dominant order gave rise to a more adequate, even superior, view of dominant social relations. Identity politics and postmodern theorizing subsequently raised significant questions about whose experience was being used as the normative standard and whether experience could have such a fixed, ontological status. By focusing on debates that surround standpoint theory this allows me to illustrate the theoretical roots of standpoint theory in materialist feminism and the impact of subsequent debate in developing alternative conceptualizations, and politics, which surround experience. Given the centrality of experience to feminist epistemology I also discuss feminist debates on objectivity and the role of the personal in feminist theory and research.

Chapter 8 forms the concluding chapter to the text. I have one primary purpose here. This is to offer ways in which conceptual literacy can be further developed. As will be clear, my primary purpose in writing this text is to offer an approach that will enable students to go

beyond simply learning to live with the multiple conceptualizations of key terms. It is to suggest that such multiplicity offers an opportunity for the development of conceptual literacy through which awareness and sensitivity are developed to the political implications of the diversity of conceptual meanings. Thus I am concerned to indicate that one of the dangers of viewing contests over meaning and the politics of language games is that it can suggest an anything goes, relativist and even cynical approach to debate. Conceptual literacy is a recognition that debate and contestation impact on the development of a field of study, on the production of different forms of knowledge and on changing the language of theory and research. Each of these, in turn, impacts on what is viewed as the necessary politics of that field. Thus the consequences of debate are real in very material and tangible ways.

And so all that remains for me to now say is that I hope some of the material in this text is useful to you. I know that I learnt a lot in researching it!

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