

How post-structural feminism and its focus on the concept of gender provide an innovative challenge to the status quo within Security Studies

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Summary

This essay aims first to place post-structural feminism –as an intellectual current- within the theoretical debates of security studies, challenging mainstream approaches by including gender as a challenging concept. Analysis done by post-structuralism scholars has shown that language is ontologically significant, that the intelligible world is a social construct, and that there is no objective or true meaning of something. Post-structural feminism introduces the concept of gender to prove that the language used in security studies is men-biased and, hence, the main concepts of the field are characterized and structured in a gendered way (masculinized or feminized). The process of deconstruction of the masculinity that dominates the discourses in the field of security studies, undertaken by post-structural feminism scholars, challenges the way we think about security issues, and gives us another perspective that creates a brand new narrative.

1. Introduction

Security studies have often thought to be gender-neutral. However, as many feminist theorists have argued, the theory and practice of international security is permeated by gendered representations and suppositions, and the field remains in many ways a man's world. Feminist analysis of traditional approaches to security studies and their key concepts, shows the existence of gender bias in concepts such as state, violence, war, peace, and even security. It is true that women's presence in international security – in both the literature and policy-making – is

sparse, not to say inexistent. However, women play a significant role in international security, and gender is a key concept to understand and address security matters, including the use of sexual violence as a tool of war, women's participation in armed conflicts, and their engagement and anti-war activism.

Post-structural feminism, as a branch of feminism, pushes further the analysis of gender in security studies, by examining how societies shape masculinity and femininity (and how both concepts differ over time and between societies), especially through language. The

purpose of this essay is to show that the analysis of gender in security studies is essential to understanding security; and that also by adopting post-structural feminism perspectives we can discover the link between the discourses and the normalization of violence within society.

2. Post-structural feminism and the concept of gender in security studies

2.1. What is post-structural feminism?

Post-structural feminist theory is often referred to as a third feminism, that came after liberal feminism and radical feminism (Kristeva, 1981). The key element of this theory is that it highlights the relevance of linguistic practices by questioning the binary categories of male and female. Feminist post-structuralist theorizing emphasizes the relevance of specific processes in which individuals are made into gendered subjects.

Derrida and Foucault argued that language is ontologically significant. ‘Things’ are given an identity and a meaning through the construction of language. Therefore, beyond linguistic representation, there is no objective, or true meaning of something (Shapiro, 1981; 218). International Relations and especially security studies have been dominated by men, even though both fields are perceived as gender-neutral; as a consequence, the language produced and used in both fields is mainly masculine.

Feminism has highlighted and emphasized the role of women and gender, and that they have “practical, ontological and epistemological implications to the study of security” (Sjoberg, 2011). Post-structural feminism inserts gender as an essential element that deconstructs the masculinity that dominates our intelligible reality. Their analysis showed that the world, as we know it, is socially constructed through gender hierarchies that valorise, normalize and legitimize a masculine orientation of language (Tickner, 2004). Therefore, any definition is relative: there cannot be a single or a universal truth (Steans 1998: 25). Consequently, post-structural feminists understand “deconstruction as a way to explore, unravel and reject” whatever assumed understanding and relationship, since they argue that

assuming that there is a universal truth silences or makes invisible other possibilities that probably do not fit into prevailing discursive practices (Whitworth, 2008; 106). Moreover, the post-structural concept of the interplay between power, knowledge, discourses, and reality becomes very important for the understanding of gender relations. The dominance of masculinity has hence defined and constructed what we now call our ‘reality’. Post-structural feminism tries to deconstruct this discourse, and also to create a new narrative in which women produce another type of knowledge that challenges and may overcome the male-biased one. Thus, the research is focused on the possibility of moving beyond what is already known and understood (Davis and Gannon, 2005; 313).

2.2. Concept of gender: language, knowledge, discourses

Gender is the core concept around which feminist theorizing has developed. Unlike the concept of sex, which is biological, gender is a social concept. This social categorization reflects the imposition of a particular view of what is the “right social order”, and it usually attaches different characteristics to the two genders. Masculinity is often associated with strength and militarism, and femininity with vulnerability and peace. For post-structural feminists, the concept of gender must be understood as a relevant empirical category and an analytical tool to understand relationships of power at a global level.

We can define gender in multiple ways. But to be brief, we can say that gender is “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences” and a “primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott, 1986). The meaning of these relationships or the way that they are “signified” is through the hierarchical structure of norms and social practices that are imprinted upon the respective genders. In other words, gender is an ensemble of symbolic meanings that produce different social ‘echelons’ based on perceived connections with masculine and feminine characteristics. Pregnant women will usually buy pink articles for a baby girl, and blue articles for a baby boy. But if they still do not know the sex, they will try to buy a “neutral” colour, such as white or yellow.

On another hand, it is important to emphasize that making a gender analysis and creating gender perspectives is not just about adding the concept of “women” in to

discussions of security. It is about generating different ways of understanding, conceptualizing, and explaining social phenomena (Shepherd, 2009:216).

2.3. How post-structural feminism and the concept of gender challenge international security: normalization of violence

The gendered language and the normalization of some issues are two sides of the same coin. Violence may be seen as a process that is, in part, legitimized and normalized within society because of its intrinsic relationship with the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Post-structural feminist scholars and the critical thinking they engage in, are convinced that there is no reality, no framework and no world that should be taken for granted. Nonetheless, they also believe that language is key when seeking to explain the social world. Our language is what creates our reality. As Derrida argued, the structure of thought in the Western tradition is based on dichotomies: I am this because I am not that.

The rhetoric and the speeches made by the Bush Administration following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the ensuing War on Terror, were also a great example of the dichotomies: 'free world/tyrannies'. In Trump's speeches there is always a 'we' versus 'them', a dichotomy between the white majority and the growing ethnic and religious minorities within the United States.

Thus, one of the most important contributions of post-structural feminism in security studies is the analysis of how gendered linguistic manifestations of meaning, particularly the different dichotomies (strong/weak; rational/emotional; public/private) serve to increase men's power by marginalizing females and to constitute global politics (Sjoberg 2009: 3).

In other terms, security (as a field of power/knowledge) is structured by a system of gendered hierarchical dichotomies that derive from masculine thought. The concepts of order, domestic and protector are related to concepts of masculinity; but anarchy and protected are associated to femininity (Tickner, 1992: 17). Consequently, women are perceived as chaotic, in need of protection, and in need for men to establish order. In this sense, the concept of security is constructed and understood as a rational use of power, essential to

control and "domesticate" the primitive state of nature of the human being, in this case, women. The state is also constructed on the dual gendered dichotomies of inside/outside and public/private. Women are confined to the inside and private dimension, where violence and abuse are invisible, making us think about the real capacity of the state to protect, which often maintains the subordination of the 'weaker sex' (Boyd, 1997; Hoffman, 2001).

Understanding gender as a social construct that creates power relations allows us to see that socio-cultural norms and traditions are extremely gendered, to the extent that they also are involved in the production or reproduction of violence. The relevance of discourse is essential, since everything can be constituted through language. Violence is, therefore, deeply involved in the construction of gender relations, and in the "hegemonic masculinity" (Shepherd, 2006). Since discourses are composed of a linguistic system in which concepts have been 'infused' by masculinity, violence is therefore a process and performance of that masculinity.

Post-structural feminism and the concept of gender show that women are victims of what Galtung (1969) referred to as "structural violence" and "cultural violence". The violence comes from a social structure of a social institution that prevents individuals from meeting their basic needs. It also comes from the culture, from within the society and the society's beliefs are used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. He argues that "violence happens in areas and ways that people do not recognize".

Women during the Korean War suffered from being unable to meet their basic needs. They also were used as sexual instruments to satisfy American soldiers. The fact that these women were "encouraged" to be prostitutes was not seen as something wrong. They "sacrificed" themselves to maintain U.S. troops who, in turn, were there to provide security and keep Koreans safe (Young, 2003). Thus, it highlights the problem of sexualised violence as a way to legitimize politically motivated actions.

Sexual violence is used as a weapon of war, as a way to humiliate the enemy, but also as a soldier's proof of masculinity and success. History shows us that, unfortunately, there are many examples of sexual violence during wartime, including in Bosnia, Sierra

Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Liberia, Rwanda, Uganda, Cambodia and Vietnam.

In her article 'Gender, Violence and Global Politics: Contemporary Debates in Feminist Security Studies' (2009), Shepherd argues that "through material acts of violence, discourses of gender are given physical form" such as when prisoners in the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib were tortured and physically abused. They were forced to perform sexual acts on each other, and "behave like women", in order to undermine their masculinity. This reinforced the gendered power relations that insist in the superiority of masculinity over femininity, and heterosexuality over homosexuality.

Sexual violence in war has often been normalized by different security discourses, which have not given importance to the matter, presenting these practices as incidental, exceptional, or inevitable (Brownmiller, 1977; Hansen, 2000; Seifert, 1996). In times of war, women are a type of "casualties". The language of women's rights and freedoms used to legitimize a great number of forms of institutionalized and organized violence. Following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration started including the sentence "protecting Afghan women" in almost all its speeches (Shepherd, 2006), in order to legitimize the invasion of Afghanistan.

As Young (2003, 2009) argued, the post- 9/11 U.S. security agenda has been characterized by the "logic of masculinist protection", in which the state is the protector, and the citizens (feminized) are in need of that protection. Interestingly, eight years after the beginning of the War on Terror, the same argument was made by the Obama Administration to justify the importance and the urgency of a U.S. intervention in Libya and, shortly after, in Syria.

3. Conclusion

All feminist scholars have contributed to the field of security studies, with analyses and reassessments of the traditional concepts, by exploring the roles that women and gender play in relation to different security issues, and by focusing attention on other areas and subjects in the field that were not previously considered (including human security, the presence of women in conflicts, and sexual violence as a weapon of war). Thus, the concept of gender is conceptually, empirically and normatively relevant to the study of international security; it is a power relationship, in which connections to masculinities and femininities position people, states, militaries, and also organizations (Sjoberg 2012).

Words have power. Power to hurt, to please, to disappoint, to confuse, to irritate, to amaze, to respect, etc. Words matter, but the knowledge they produce, matters more. Post-structuralism scholars argue that knowledge does not simply exist, it is created. Discourses are constitutive of reality, and this reality is constantly being produced and constructed by those who share knowledge in a specific period of time. The concept of gender is essential in security studies, since it allows us to distinguish male-biased knowledge from gender-neutral knowledge, but mainly because it is an indispensable element that proves there is a link between discourse and the normalization of violence within the society.

We live in a world that has been constructed through discourse that values masculine attributes and denigrates the feminine ones; a world in which women have to act like a man if they want to be respected. In reverse, men are limited in terms of their range of emotional expression in the name of masculinity, in a world that is constantly perpetuating differences and hierarchies... in the name of security.

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