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**FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY IN CULTURAL TIME:  
A POLITICISED SPACE WHERE WOMEN CAN FLOURISH**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the significance of agency for women, specifically for those who have been intersectionally disadvantaged. The research is positioned within a feminist poststructural framework, with a particular focus on language and how meanings construct individuals in ways that are socially and culturally specific. A QQI level three module, called *Intercultural Awareness*, was utilised for context where a politicised analysis was carried out on the level of understanding of the culturally constructed discourses that are shaping the subjectivities of the women within this group.

Using a critical qualitative approach to research, seven participants took part in semi-structured, one-to-one interviews along with a focus group. This small study has no claims to universal generalisations, instead the findings critique whether the women within this specific group consider themselves to having more choice and agency in recent years. What the research reveals is that freedom and choice are predominantly illusory. In this era of neoliberal understanding, the individual is constructed into a capitalist subject by their dependency to the market-defined model of the self. Hence, a significant site of political struggle that warrants consideration is the mind, where power and control are not only exercised in the market, but in a hidden and insidious way by controlling the means of consciousness. The poststructural framework does not claim to an understanding of the world in all its complexities, but what it does offer is an altered epistemological stance which disrupts the gender status quo to some extent and allows for an exploration into the possibility of a different kind of agency.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Science/ Department of Education and Skills
<b>ETB</b>	Education Training Board
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FE</b>	Further Education
<b>FET</b>	Further Education and Training
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>QQI</b>	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

# CHAPTER ONE – SETTING THE SCENE

*In this short life that only lasts an hour  
How much - how little - is within our power  
Emily Dickenson*

## **1.1 Finding my voice**

It has only been in recent years that I have developed the ability to critically challenge my worldview and the discourses that have shaped the perception of who I am. Throughout several years of academic study, I have immersed myself into theory that captivates me. Critical theorists, who critique issues of power, such as Freire, hooks, and Foucault, have pushed the boundaries of my thinking and significantly enlarged my epistemological lens. When I returned to education as a mature student in 2017, my main reason was to improve my employment status. What I did not expect was to be transformed.

I chose to research the topic of agency for several reasons. Firstly, on a professional level, I believe that this is the ultimate aim that adult educators strive towards in some shape or form, regardless of their philosophical positioning. I also chose this topic on a personal level. Only last year, I managed to get out of a highly controlled marriage. This thesis is embedded in my own personal journey through transformation and healing, where the concept of agency has been fundamental to my thinking, as I realise how much this has been lacking for a considerable part of my life. What I have discovered in recent years is that having freedom to understand the world better and an awareness of how I am not free in certain ways has provided me with a language, thus giving me a voice. This is what I have come to understand as agency.

## **1.2 Intercultural Awareness**

Last semester, I taught a QQI module called Intercultural Awareness and, within this module - through the voices of my students, the concept of agency was given its context. I also chose

this module because of the timely relevance that culture plays within the Irish adult classroom, as migration continues in an unprecedented manner with the integration of the global economy. This global politicisation of culture has generated complex issues with identity, and I intend to unpack some of these matters that are central to both cultural studies and poststructuralism, such as *signs* and *semiotics*, *discourses* and *representations*, *hegemony*, *meaning* and *struggle* (Gramsci, 1971; De Saussure, 1974). I believe there is a gap in the adult education literature concerning how we teach and learn from the dominant positionality within a culturally diverse classroom, and my aim is to draw attention to some of these issues.

I ask, what role does gender play in empowering or disempowering students specifically those who have been *intersectionally* disadvantaged? The concept of intersectionality was developed by bell hooks (1982), Kimberlé Crenshaw (2005) and Patricia Hill Collins (2020) in response to feminist work in which women were treated as a homogeneous category. With this in mind, we need to recognise how power and privilege are embedded in our practice and how dominant categories of gender, class, race, and sexuality remain influential. Teaching with this recognition requires a politicised interrogation, to understand how hidden power is exercised through the complexities of ascribed meanings that govern individual subjects.

### **1.3 A politicised space**

As part of my research and within this module I have created a feminist space where women can flourish. None of my participants would consider themselves feminists, yet I believe that without an interrogation into oppressive discourses, some of which are patriarchal, this would simply become another ‘Women’s Ways of Knowing’ (Belenky et al, 1986: 1). Within this learning space we explore our own positionalities, by connecting who we are with discursive practices that inform how we think, learn, teach, and ultimately construct knowledge. This helps see the connections between who we are and our positions within the structural systems

of privilege and oppression. This is how we have come to know the world and by having awareness of its many cultural constructs, we broaden perspectives and make wiser and more informed choices. For me, this not only assists in the production of agency - this is the purpose of adult education.

#### **1.4 Subjectivities**

The construction of subjectivities is important in my research as the subject is regarded as produced through and within social and cultural discourses. In a broad sense, subjectivity is a critical examination of how a person sees their role, and how that role contributes to identity and meaning. Arguably this is identity, sources of this refer to conscious and unconscious thought, our sense of self and our understanding of ourselves in relation to the world, based on our ideas, beliefs, and emotions (Weedon, 1997; Ryan, 1999). Enmeshed within this process are dimensions of power (Dahl, 1957; Barach and Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 2005; Foucault, 1980). I am particularly drawn to the third and fourth faces of ideological and normalising power, which Lukes (2005) and Foucault (1980) claim to be the most dangerous, due to their hidden and invisible nature. Foucault was mainly interested in the micro dynamics of power, and how in everyday contexts these are exercised in the construction of subjectivities. With this in mind, it is only by questioning and becoming aware of what is behind our subjectivities that we begin to realise that aspects of our identities can be subject to change, thus giving us some agency to make more informed choices in our lives. As early as 1949, De Beauvoir claimed that to achieve liberation women must recognise many of the social norms as constructions, only then will they have the freedom to escape their context and determine their own destiny.

#### **1.5 Becoming a feminist**

Feminist thinking has given me a framework to a more comprehensive understanding of the world and allowed me to reflexively question the discourses that have shaped me, from a new

perspective. Like most girls in 1980's Ireland, my upbringing was strongly influenced by patriarchal ideas that were predominantly inspired by Catholicism. I came from a loving home, with wonderful parents but within my home there were deeply held religious convictions. It was these religious ideologies that created a clear distinction between the appropriate roles for girls and boys within our family. At that time, the control from the church and state were dominant, where the characteristics for Irish girls were constructed on domestic terms. I now understand as an adult, how subtle and insidious these normalising ideologies are. We come into the world with socially embodied labels, that are assigned with statuses and responsibilities, even without our choosing. These gendered roles are assigned to us through cultural practices and are presented in ways that we accept as the most logical way to live.

Hence, is freedom an illusion? Lynch argues that:

as most group identities are already inhabited when a person 'arrives' to join them, the individual can choose how to manage these, but has little ability to choose (at least in the short term) to live outside them (Lynch, 2022: 106).

### **1.5.1 Research aims and questions**

It is because of its relevance to my lived experience that this topic resonates so much with me. The general aim of my research is to find out how much agency women have over their lives. Specifically, I seek to explore the following question: **How much awareness do women have of the culturally constructed discourses that are shaping their subjectivities, and on account of this, how much control do they have over their lives?**

### **1.6 Feminist poststructuralism**

I have chosen a feminist poststructural framework to examine the contingent identities of women, and to explore how individuals are made into gendered subjects. To do this effectively, I will investigate the meanings that are ascribed to language and the discourses that embody certain terms. Poststructuralist theory calls into question grand narratives of texts within

science, literature, philosophy, and everyday life (Davies, 2005). I am interested in revealing some of the assumptions that specific discourses contain about what it is considered to be 'normal'. It is with this intent that I query against many western philosophical norms, such as the *essentialist* nature of epistemology whose views are considered 'common-sense', 'natural' and 'true' (Ryan, 2004; Davies, 2005). It is through a poststructural analysis that dominant views are deconstructed to lay bare their underlying assumptions, such as, binary terms that are considered diametrically opposed. My analysis seeks to show how relations of ideological power are constructed and maintained by granting normality and naturalness to the dominant term within all hierarchical binaries.

### **1.7 Can a poststructuralist framework be implemented into a liberal humanist sector?**

According to Ryan (2004), adult education in general, is dominated by a liberal humanist model of the person. This model relies on a core, rational and unitary subject, and the notion of binary essential differences (Ryan, 1999). Experience, from this frame takes people's accounts as an expression of "the real person, rather than trying to examine how the account is generated by social understandings" (Ryan, 2004: 151). I recognise and argue that the liberal humanist framework and its framing of knowledge limit the possibilities within education by promoting versions of canonical understanding, rather than knowledge for political consciousness. Conversely, feminist poststructuralist educators recognise that learners do not come into the classroom as equals, or with different but 'equal' life experiences. Experience needs to be critiqued as an outcome of discourses, which are often conflicting and opposing (Ryan, 2004). Ryan (2004: 142) therefore claims that "this makes possible strategic alliances between feminist poststructuralism and other progressive social movements and is central to its value for adult education".

## **1.8 The structure of this thesis**

This section outlines the structure of the thesis, which contains six chapters. Throughout these chapters my research question is discussed, examined, and critiqued.

### **Chapter One – Introduction**

This chapter has set the scene for the research project, by providing a rationale for choosing this topic. It has also presented a structured outline of what will be contained in each chapter, including background to the research which encompasses a section on the accredited module, Intercultural Awareness, that I am currently teaching within the FET sector.

### **Chapter Two – My theoretical and conceptual framework**

This chapter will discuss my positioning within feminist poststructuralism and draws on existing theories to provide a critical discussion around meaning and language, subjectivities, and knowledges, and how all of these concepts relate to different forms of power. It also identifies and critiques some of the discursive practices that have been written into adult education policy in recent years.

### **Chapter Three – My approach to research**

In chapter three, I will outline my ontological and epistemological position. I have employed a qualitative technique using a critical and interrogative stance towards the meanings and experiences expressed in the data in order to understand the influences and effects of these representations.

### **Chapter Four – My research findings**

In this chapter I will introduce the data that was gathered during the interview process. The voices of the participants will be interwoven throughout a discussion that refers back to the literature in order to support the analysis of the findings.

### **Chapter Five – The discussion**

This chapter will analyse the findings which are informed by my understanding of what was uncovered throughout the research process. Within this analysis, I will endeavour to answer my thesis question.

### **Chapter Six - Conclusion**

This final chapter will present a summary of the main findings and address my contribution to the field of adult education. It will discuss my recommendations, limitations, and possibilities for future research.



## **CHAPTER TWO – MY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

As soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible (Foucault, 2000: 457).

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the concept of agency using a poststructuralist lens, which entails a comprehensive critical discussion around language, subjectivity, power relations and discourses. Using self-reflexivity on my own positionality, I will introduce my rationale behind using this theory as a feminist adult educator. Feminism is far from a unified body of thought, so I will examine the theoretical underpinnings of its different strands. The final section will examine the adult education sector to critique some of its discursive practices.

As an adult educator, I value the importance of assisting students in the production of agency. This concept is considered an underscoring belief of critical adult education, that change is possible (Freire, 1972; Giroux, 2013; Ryan, 2014; Connolly, 2018). While the topic of agency may seem straightforward, I need to clarify my understanding of what this term means to me and from which theoretical framework my assumptions are coming from. The first section will discuss my understanding of this term and how my epistemological stance has been altered in recent years. I now recognise agency as not only signifying freedom and empowerment within the classroom but requiring a connection to the constraints that people experience by their positions within the broader system.

### **2.2 Shifting paradigms**

Adult education is informed by beliefs that have developed along philosophical lines of inquiry. These are structured into distinct philosophies of education along categories of liberal, behaviourist, progressive, humanist, and radical approaches. According to Davies (1991: 42), “within the humanist discourses that predominate in the social sciences, agency is synonymous

with being a person”. Davies also states that “modern history is thus the story of celebrated individuals and of their impact on the world” (1991: 42). Embedded within this view is an understanding that we are all responsible for ourselves as free individuals, who are in control of our own lives. When I first began teaching in 2006, these were the assumptions, values, and pedagogical approaches that I would have brought to the classroom, genuinely believing in their ability to empower students.

### **2.2.1 Critical pedagogy**

Over the years, I began to recognise their limiting effects due to the lack of attention to the structural causes of inequality. As stated by McLaren (2009: 61), the radical approach of using a critical pedagogy recognises that we are “unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege”. Freire (1972) believes that to be knowledgeable is to critically engage with the circumstances of your life. He maintains that narratives of liberation are attached to people’s stories. Through discussion and questioning, students learn in the process of reading the aspects of the world with which they are linked. Freire’s term ‘conscientisation’ means to develop the ability to think critically about issues of power (Freire, 2017: 77-78). For this reason, I embraced the Freirean pedagogy wholeheartedly. Implicit within this theory is a vision of social justice and emancipation, which has been hugely influential within critical movements that have emerged since the 1960s and 1970s.

In spite of the many positives, by his own admission, Freire (1972) acknowledges his androcentric bias which fails to address women’s experiences and therefore struggles to challenge oppression in all its complexities. As stated by Weiler (1988), Freire has claims to universal truths and his assumptions of a collective experience of oppression do not adequately address the specific realities and complexities of students’ lives. Freire does recognise the need to critically interrogate the common-sense norms within our lives, but he inadequately sees just how difficult a process it will be to make any significant changes. In other words, to become

agentic is possible, but it is not as straightforward as one is led to believe. As stated by Ryan (1999), making changes in one's life is not a simple move from constraint to liberation. Hollway (1991: 33) argues that "change has to do with the transgression of boundaries which are carefully and tenaciously drawn around identity". Thus requiring an interrogation into the social and cultural conditions that have discursively shaped the subject. Belsey (1980) argues that to discuss what makes subjects act in a certain way, presupposes a whole theoretical discourse around language and the relationship between meaning and people, and their place in the world. These concerns about meaning, subjectivity and history are characteristic of practices in the social sciences which have emerged since the 1970s, under approaches such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and feminism (Ryan, 1997: 36). The next section will set the scene with its relevant philosophical backdrop.

### **2.3 Postmodernism and poststructuralism**

The postmodernist school of thought is a broad movement, based on a range of disciplines which has determined a lot of current thinking about how identities are accepted, constructed, and conceived in the modern world (Baxter, 2016). It challenges the view that there is an objective world that can be definitively known (Lyotard, 1984). In other words, the way postmodernism conceptualises the world contrasts with the scientific advances that have been considered reality for the last two hundred years. Rather, postmodernists recognise that:

knowledge is socially constructed, not discovered; contextual, not foundational; singular, localised, and perspectival rather than totalising or universal; and egalitarian rather than hierarchical (Baxter, 2016: 35).

The poststructural framework offers some similarities and is based on the foundations of much postmodernist thinking (Baxter, 2016). It is considered a subset of applied linguistics, offering a rich diversity of theoretical and analytical approaches to conceptualise the relationship between language and identity. Poststructuralism does not have one fixed definition but has

been applied to a range of theoretical positions developed by theorists such as Foucault (1980), Althusser (1984), Kristeva (1984), Derrida (1987) and Lacan (2006). Each of these thinkers has worked independently within similar timeframes, resulting in a range of multiple and contrasting perspectives. While these forms may vary, they share certain fundamental assumptions regarding language, meaning and identity. My discussion will focus primarily on the Foucauldian theoretical framework, which explores the relationship between historically specific discourses and the influences of power relations behind the construction of identities through language.

### **2.3.1 Language**

Once language is understood in terms of ways of giving meaning to the world, it becomes an important site of political struggle. Like all epistemological positions, poststructuralism makes certain assumptions about language, subjectivity, knowledge and truth (Weedon, 1997). Language has become a central focus of poststructuralist analysis, crucial for combining social meaning, power, and individual consciousness. Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), in his writing held that neither social reality nor the 'natural' world have fixed intrinsic meanings which reflect language. He sees language as a system of *semiotics and signs*. Semiotics are used as a way of understanding culture as if it were language, through the study of signs or words (de Saussure, 1974). de Saussure claims that each sign is made up of a sound or image (*signifier*) and its concept of meaning (*signified*). Their relationship is arbitrary, indicating that there are no fixed universal concepts and no natural connection between these signs (Weedon, 1997). de Saussure (1974) considers that while meaning is subjective and relational, the language that one develops and understands is the result of an already existing social contract to which all language users are subject. Thus, de Saussure sees that the meaning of language is fixed to an extent, and that subjects are instilled into the pre-existing 'structuralist' language system that in part forms their identities (Baxter, 2016: 36). This theory is therefore problematic, as it does

not account for the plurality of meaning or how meanings change over time (Weedon, 1997). Poststructuralist theory questions the site of social and cultural meanings in fixed signs and speaks of signifiers in which the signified is never fixed, but instead, is constantly *deferred*.

### **2.3.2 Jacques Derrida**

Building on de Saussure's theory is Derrida's (1987) concept of '*differance*', which has helped explain the fluidity of language (Baxter, 2016). '*Differance*' is Derrida's term that signifies words are subject to a continual deferral. Any account of meaning can only be fixed temporarily as it depends upon its discursive context (Weedon, 1997). Derrida (1987) places an emphasis upon the way any text becomes the medium for struggle among different power interests to fix meaning permanently (Baxter, 2016).

### **2.3.3 Derrida and hierarchal binaries**

Gender is one of the first social categories learned through childhood socialisation. The distinctions between genders are oftentimes categorised in a deterministic way that fit into fixed biological groupings. Derrida (1987) evaluates western philosophical assumptions that are considered factual, which presuppose an essence that is 'unique', 'fixed' and 'rational' within humanist discourses. The term *logocentrism* is used by Derrida to describe the origins of a word in western metaphysics. For Derrida (1987), logocentrism is constituted by the binary oppositions which are central to western discourse and structure thought more generally. Through the process of deconstruction, Derrida examines binaries such as man/woman and instead of framing them as if they were 'real', deconstruction involves examining the way meanings are based on oppositions which are constructed. By doing this he is not saying that the latter is superior to the former, but rather, he is showing that the two terms are so distinctly intertwined that it no longer makes sense to think of them as an opposition (Weedon, 1997).

Binary thinking is never neutral, as due to its hierarchal nature, there is always one term that is privileged over the other and because of this it carries distinct forms of power.

## **2.4 Dimensions of power**

Conceptions of power, according to Gaventa (1980), are nuanced and operate on different dimensions. *In Power and Powerlessness*, Gaventa (1980) asks why some people appear to consent to their own oppression. In order to answer this question, power needs to be considered in its multiple forms and not as it is traditionally represented as coercion and influence. Traditional forms are conceptualised by Dahl (1957) as the first face of power. This means having the ability to influence a decision – also referred to as the pluralist view. This one-dimensional face exists when A influences B's behaviour so that B pursues a different option against their original interests. Gaventa (1980) claims that A has power over B to the extent that they can get B to do something that they would not otherwise do. This account of power, for Gaventa, is insufficient in a number of ways as it still does not explain why some groups rise up and resist against inequality and others do not. It is also limited to individuals and behaviours and does not adequately expose the different ways in which dominant groups build up and maintain their domination.

The second form of power, Gaventa (1980) refers to as non-decisional. This form differs from the first as it is not solely intended to influence decisions but to prevent them from arising in the first place, by controlling the parameters of an agenda or discussion. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) refer to this as the second face, also known as institutional power. Gaventa (1980: 9) states that “power is exercised not just upon participants within the decision-making process but also towards the exclusion of certain participants and issues altogether”.

Bachrach and Baratz (1962) critique issues such as, who determines what gets decided and who controls the agenda? If we apply this to adult education, we could ask, who gets to decide what

knowledge is of value and what learning is being discounted? This is what Gaventa (1980: 14) refers to as the ‘mobilization of bias’, which is the power to set the agenda. Yet, this face alone is also inadequate as it does not explain sufficiently how conceptions of grievances form. Traditionally, people can internalise the status quo so that they never raise a grievance or an issue by not even recognising that there is a problem in the first place.

Lukes (2005) identifies that by conceptualising power in three dimensions we see further and deeper into the phenomenon. This third face is ideological and cultural. Gaventa (1980) illustrates this as follows: A and B have different interests. Rather than forcing B or excluding them from political participation, A tries to influence B’s perception of interests through ideology and through culture so that B changes their mind and prefers the original option. In this third dimension, B is socialised so that they internalise the opinions and preferences from the dominant group.

Not only might A exercise power over B by prevailing in the resolution of key issues or by preventing B from effectively raising those issues but also through affecting B’s conception of the issues altogether (Gaventa, 1980: 12).

Lukes (2005) claims that the effects of three-dimensional power can shape our conceptions of the world, though, he also argues that this is not to the extent that we are no longer in control of our own thoughts and lives or that we lack the ability to become agentic. This is where Lukes claims that Foucault may have taken the concept of power too far, by adding a fourth dimension.

#### **2.4.1 Michel Foucault**

Foucault (1975) is drawn to the way in which power operates through the construction of specific knowledges. He is particularly interested in looking at *how* power is exercised rather than by whom and why. Foucault (1975) recognises that the most influential in society have access to the greatest power through control of culture and institutions, thus setting up

normalised ways of thinking and behaving, which he terms claims to truth. Some of these truth claims are considered to be more legitimate than others. Foucault maintains that the explanation of meaning involves conflict and that the power to control meaning in a particular field resides in claims to knowledge.

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 (Foucault, 1975: 27).

Foucault (1980) insists that there is no truth without power. It is in and through power that what is known, what is said, what is taken for granted and what is regarded as the truth are constituted. Foucault (1975: 30) refers to these claims as “will to truth”, which become a “will to power” and these fields of knowledge, he argues would ultimately organise themselves into a “regime of truth”. These claims to knowledge, he identifies in his conceptualisation of the term *discourse* and discursive formations. Foucault considers that it is not ‘knowledge is power’, rather knowledge is formed out of power and this ‘power knowledge’ nexus is exercised using discourses. Knowledge, therefore, can never be neutral as it represents a privileged way of seeing and understanding the world. Because of this, Foucault stresses that the power within discourses should not be underestimated, as they are responsible for reality and not just a reflection of it. As stated by Hunt and Wickham (1994: 8-9), discourses “structure the possibility of what gets included and excluded and of what gets done or remains undone”. They appeal to ‘truth’ for authority and legitimation, and it is within their discursive fields that they compete, overlap, and influence one another. For example, knowledges in fields such as psychology ‘function in truth’ and these are referred to as *veridical* discourses by Foucault. According to Ryan these

are organised around norms of truth and falsehood, maintaining the ability and status to divide the normal from the abnormal. They are embedded in and organise specific discursive practices. Discourses articulate and convey formal and informal knowledge



and ideologies and are thus contained or expressed in organisations and institutions as well as in words (Ryan, 2004: 144).

*Vernacular* discourses are the conception of the ways that power and the norm-producing effects of the veridical discourses are associated in the production of everyday knowledge. Foucault (1975) argues that this normalising power constructs our view of the world and of ourselves, by shaping our beliefs, our desires, and our decisions while at the same time giving us the idea that these are our own. As a result, the habits that we develop form the normative mechanisms that produce a stable pattern of being which creates an illusion of a permanent core or essence (Oksala, 2011). Power influences language and determines what is accepted and dismissed within cultural discourses. Hence, the concept of ‘truth’ must be understood in terms of how it is made, for whom, and within what timeframe was it considered ‘true’. The next section will discuss how discourses define or position people in particular ways and how these are constantly changing.

#### **2.4.2 – Historical subjectivities**

Subjectivity is linked to Foucault’s (1978) historical perspective of genealogy, which offers the conceptual tools to understand how we are shaped by historical forces. This investigative perspective offers an intrinsic critique of the present, by uncovering the correlation between subjectivity, power, and knowledge. Subjectivity replaces the aforementioned liberal humanist concept of role with that of *position*. It is within discourse that positions are produced, which subjects actively take up (Ryan, 2004). This concept of subject positions emerged from various connected attempts to depart from essentialist thinking, and to help people make sense of who they are, by locating themselves within culturally circulating discourses (Guilfoyle, 2016). This rejection of the view of essential subjectivity and a recognition of it as multiple and fluid, opens its political meaning as subject to change, as it is constantly reconstituted through discourse each time we think or speak (Weedon, 1997). According to Ryan (2004: 141), “the political

nature of this knowledge is often overlooked, and the subject is seen in terms of a pre-given human nature, as natural, normal, common sense, asocial, or beyond the social". Ryan continues by claiming that:

The politics of a multiple subject, [...] is a direct challenge to liberal humanism, which is the legitimating ideology of late modern capitalism, and which portrays itself as common sense, free of ideology (Ryan, 2004: 141).

For this reason, it is important to critique social norms. As already argued, these norms have developed in the interests of those with social power, and they work to maintain these sites of power by naturalising them into common-sense. These ideologies are *interpellated* on us, so much so, that we believe they are our own (Althusser, 1984). As stated by Althusser (1971), when subjectivity appears obvious to the individual, this is an effect of ideology.

Like all obviousness, including those that make a word 'name or thing' or 'have a meaning' [...] the 'obviousness' that you and I are subjects – and that that does not cause any problems – is an ideological effect, (Althusser, 1971: 161).

Althusser (1984) argues that ideology is a dynamic process constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice. It is evident in the ways that people think, act, and understand themselves and their relationship to society, which offer us a particular identity which seems natural. This concept has already been discussed in the above section on Lukes' (2005) third face of ideological power. For Gramsci (1971) also, the cultural power of civil society is just as important as coercive power, which he refers to as hegemony. Hegemony is reproduced in cultural life through the media, universities and religious institutions to manufacture consent and legitimacy. This is known as hegemonic discourses, which refers back to the section on Foucault. Its accomplishment is through social institutions, which allow those in power to influence the ideologies of the rest of society. A hegemonic discourse is one that enables the values of the dominant to be perceived by the population as a universal natural order of things, where there is no alternative.

### **2.4.3 Disciplinary and biopower**

Foucault's (1975) interest in disciplinary power was originally used in his study of prisons, which he applies to the education system and society at large. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975) insists that schools serve the same social functions as prisons and mental institutions, which he argues is to define, classify, control, and regulate people. He claims that over time, this regulation leads to the individual becoming complicit in their own regulation and that of others. This is where our behaviour and appearance is under the gaze of others within cultural practices that are accepted by family, friends, and the wider society. This regulation of populations implies power over bodies, which Foucault (1978) describes as biopower, which is internalised and referred to as disciplinary power.

...the governed are, variously, members of a flock to be nurtured or culled, juridical subjects whose conduct is to be limited by laws, individuals to be disciplined, or, indeed, people to be freed (Rose et al, 2006: 85).

### **2.4.4 Investments**

What needs to be questioned at this point is why some people take up subject positions in one discourse rather than another. Guilfoyle (2016) claims that we should be cautious not to consider the self as only a fluid, changeable product of discourse. Yet, to return to the vision of an essential self is also not sufficient. Several theorists such as Henriques (1984) and Hollway (2006) have integrated psychoanalytic concepts with discursive understandings in order to deal with the limitations of discourse determinism. In simplistic terms, this describes an individual whose historical experiences lead them to develop an unconscious "investment" in particular positions (Henriques et al., 1984: 205). These investments enable resistance against discursive recruitments into alternative positions. As stated by Guilfoyle (2016: 125):

On this account, there is indeed something (an unconscious and its socialised-historical rather than essential, a priori investments) lying beneath and motivating the positions we occupy; and furthermore, the specific contents of these investments are seen to assure a level of identity-constancy over time.

#### **2.4.5 Resistance to power**

As stated by Foucault (1980: 142); “to say that one can never be ‘outside’ power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what”. Rather, power always implies the possibility of resistance. Just as dominant ideologies can reinforce and legitimate social injustices, so can the ideological institutions of education and media be sites of resistance (Gramsci, 1971; Giroux, 2014). Lynch (2022) similarly claims that the dominance of ideological control in maintaining the exclusion of certain groups from accessing educational and cultural symbolic systems can be challenged. When we highlight and name how power functions in its hidden forms, we disrupt its control. Foucault (1977: 208) considers that this is how we “sap power” and “take power”. Foucault’s (1980: 142) conceptions of power always consider the political struggle, as he argues that “there are no relations of power without resistances”. Resistance, therefore, is so central to power relations that it constitutes a good starting power for its analysis.

#### **2.4.6 A critique of Foucault**

It must be stated that reading Foucault’s work has been challenging at times. His analysis on power seems somewhat incomplete as it fails to provide any definitive claims nor answers to who is responsible for some forms of knowledge being favoured over others. Having a deeper understanding of Foucault now I realise that this is his very argument. He refuses to provide any universal normative criteria for distinguishing or naming power in any form. However, by identifying power in its many complexities, Foucault recognises that its social and political use is the product of human goals and desires, which is continually shifting and changing. As a result, Foucault (2003) is not convinced that subjects can have agency and claims this to be a myth. While I would agree that becoming agentic is difficult, it is not impossible. From my perspective, having awareness and being able to name invisible power, this has given me

greater freedom even if it is only in a small way. Through this process, my sense of self has shifted and thus discourses have been disrupted.

#### **2.4.7 Androcentric theories**

Up until this point, it is worth noting that most of the theorists mentioned this far have been male. This too is a mark of the conditions under which prestigious and powerful bodies of knowledge were produced at that time. My rationale behind using these theorists is that they have provided an excellent theoretical framework by addressing social power and how social relations might be transformed. Many feminist poststructuralists use these theorists' work, as according to Weedon:

if Foucault's theory of discourse and power can produce in feminist hands an analysis of patriarchal power relations which enables the development of active strategies for change, then it is of little importance whether his own historical analysis fall short of this (Weedon, 1997: 13).

#### **2.5 My positionality as a feminist**

When women become feminists, the crucial thing that has occurred is not that they have learned any new facts about the world but that they come to view those facts from a different position, from their own position as subjects (Alcott, 1988: 434).

As mentioned in the introduction, identifying as a feminist has been a huge part of my positionality, and thus the lens which informs this research. As an adult educator, I endeavour to become more reflexive about my positionality and the unconscious rules that influence how I see myself and relate to the world around me. This position ultimately influences how I construct knowledge and what I consider relevant to teach my students. As a feminist adult educator who attempts to deal with systems of power and privilege within my classes, I look to the existing literature that addresses critical and feminist pedagogies. Feminism is far from a unified body of thought and the following paragraphs will highlight the three main strands and the theoretical underpinnings that inform each of them. Within each tradition, feminist

scholars occupy a range of theoretical positions, such as liberal, radical and poststructural to name a few, and these are the examples that are discussed in the next section. Some feminists examine women's *empowerment* primarily at the psychological level and some *emancipate* by addressing the structural factors of privilege and oppression. Inglis (1997) highlights an important distinction between these terms by stating that, empowerment involves individuals developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analysing, resisting, and challenging these structures.

### **2.5.2 Psychological model of feminist pedagogy**

Poststructuralists consider that there has been a division between psychology and sociology, by treating the subject and the social as separate and different. According to Ryan (1997), psychology plays a significant part in legitimating and reproducing dominant assumptions about the individual. From this theoretical framework stems *liberal feminism*, whose unit of analysis is the *generic* woman (Tisdell, 1998). Liberal feminism began in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and continues to be influential today.

Within adult education literature, there remains a strong connection with the psychological model (Ryan, 1997). One of the most influential books on feminist pedagogy has been *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al. 1986), which was ground-breaking for its time. This book focused specifically on how to create environments where women can come to voice and see themselves as constructors of knowledge. According to Ryan (1999) though, Belenky et al have produced knowledge about women which proposes a universal, unitary female subject, existing in a dualistic and therefore hierarchical relation to a unitary male subject. While this may have empowered some women, it is crucial to understand that any pedagogy suggesting that women's learning is based on essential differences from men will inevitably become problematic. What this assumes, according to Ryan (1999: 18), is that "certain kinds of

knowledge are indigenous to women and to men” and the result is that it “isolates women in an academic context which is already highly stratified”.

The failure of this psychological approach to address structures means that the many ways in which powerful interest groups consider gender, racial and ethnic themes are less visible. Jarvis (1987: 11) also argues that “learning is not just a psychological process that happens in isolation from the world in which the learner lives but [...] is intimately related to that world and affected by it”. Within this model though, power is conceptualised as an unequal resource and the goal of feminists is to redistribute these resources equally for both women and men (Tisdell, 1998). The result of this outcome is that certain individuals experience empowerment while others do not. This is the difference between equality and equity. Equity requires acknowledging that no individual is ‘generic’, thus it requires that supports are given based on each person’s circumstances.

### **2.5.3 Structural models of feminist pedagogy**

According to Ryan (1999), since the 1970s socialist feminisms became concerned with psychological perspectives as a result of consciousness raising groups and their recognition that the personal is political. Also, through a radical perspective, there developed a growing awareness that change is not solely a matter of economic resources and equal opportunity. However, Ryan (1999: 23) argues that as long as the reliance on gender distinctions remain, the “personal will be reduced to the psychological and the individual, losing in the process a vision of the politicised personal and the personal nature of the political”.

Paulo Freire (1971) wrote extensively about the politicisation of adult education and the importance of using a critical pedagogy. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, what Freire failed to recognise was oppression in all its complexities (Weiler, 1991). Feminist pedagogy is just as concerned with questions of power, equity and authority in the classroom, but views these issues through a gendered lens. One of the most influential writers to incorporate a feminist

analysis to the Freirean pedagogy is bell hooks, a prolific contributor within critical education. hooks (1994: 52), claims to have “taken threads of Paulo’s work” and woven it into a way of working that acknowledges the gendered nature of oppression, where women are often denied the right to define their own realities (Fitzsimons, 2017). hooks (2004: 17) provides discursive understandings of intersectional modes of oppression through her formation of the term “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”. hooks (2004) states that these terms provide a language about the interconnected systems of domination that define reality and also draw upon a political world which we can all structure ourselves in relation to.

This model recognises the effects that structures have on the learning environment, as well as the politics of knowledge production in what gets passed as official knowledge in the curriculum and who determines it. The structural perspective sees the human subject as socially constructed but static, whereas feminist poststructuralism sees subjects as simultaneously occupying a range of positions in discourses. In *Educating Feminists*, Middleton (1993: 11) discusses a method that engages students in a politics of location by problematising their multiple and contradictory identities, which she refers to as a “life history approach to feminist pedagogy”. Aligning herself with postmodernists, Middleton (1993: 47) draws attention to women’s “multiple and simultaneous positionings in complex, changing, and often contradictory patterns of power relations-between races or cultures [...]”.

#### **2.5.4 Feminist poststructuralist theory of resistance**

Building on from, and critiquing, structural theories are feminist poststructuralist discourses which argue for the significance of positionalities. Feminist poststructuralism recognises other structural systems of privilege and oppression, and the limitations of viewing patriarchy as a unitary social structure. As Walkerdine (1989: 205) alleges, from this perspective, patriarchy is not “a monolithic force which imposes socialisation on girls ... it produces positions for subjects to enter”. Our positioning is considered key to the construction of the self. According



to Tisdell (1998: 146), the primary unit of analysis should be conceived as the “*connections between* the individual and the intersecting systems of privilege and oppression that affect how participants construct knowledge, discuss their own experiences and interact in the classroom”. With this in mind, it is crucial to recognise that education plays a significant part in the broader social and cultural process, which forms the production of subjectivity, agency and identification (Giroux, 2014). Education is always contending with the important questions, not only on the production of knowledge, but how knowledge functions in terms of what it normalises and legitimises. The next section will endeavour to connect the relevance of what has already been discussed in this chapter, with the discursive practices within the adult education sector.

## **2.6 Discursive practices within adult education**

The education system is ... the produce of conflict between the dominant and the dominated ... It is an arena of conflict over the production of knowledge, ideology and employment, a place where social movements try to meet their needs and business attempts to produce hegemony (Carnoy and Levin, 1985).

Critical adult educators, such as Giroux (2013), hooks (2010) and Freire (1972) among others, claim that education in its final analysis is all about the production of agency. Agency, not only signifying freedom and empowerment within the classroom but requiring a connection to the constraints that people experience by their positions within the broader system. Giroux (2013) argues that to focus on pedagogical methods and skills is to ignore the fundamental concepts about education, which are power, ideology, culture, and authority. This is what Bartolomé (2003) refers to as the *methods fetish*. These are a set of pedagogical methods which have been tried and tested for the teaching of particular subjects, regardless of the specific needs of the learners. Biesta (2010) claims that there has been a major discursive shift and also identifies that the emphasis on learning is all about the *how* of education, in the form of pedagogical techniques, progression routes and models of assessment and what is being forgotten is why

we educate and what we hope to achieve. Thus, diminishing our understanding for the purpose of education and our comprehension of how it relates to broader social and cultural issues (Finnegan, 2016). This has significantly limited the exploration of what sort of new knowledge and practices might emerge in and through education.

From my own experiences within adult education this shift has been most apparent since the economic crash in 2008, where an increased emphasis on performativity and outcomes of education are evident. As stated by Grummell (2014: 135), this commercial and economic drift towards employability is combined with the performativity and accreditation processes which “narrows the opportunities for knowledge and learning in further education”. Grummell (2014: 135) continues to state that “this filtering effect compromises the social justice and transformative possibilities of further education” which are core to its original ethos. What needs to be made clear, is that I do recognise the essential need to reduce unemployment and to equip learners to compete in the job market but what is of equal importance is an analysis of the factors that make some groups more vulnerable to struggle than others.

### **2.6.1 The behaviourist approach to adult education**

With this in mind, it needs to be understood that education can never be neutral. It always carries a political agenda, as previously discussed - the dominant having access to power through control of institutions and culture, with their versions of truth seeming the most convincing. To support this discourse, the mode of teaching that is predominantly used is known as the *behaviourist* style – also referred to as the *banking system* (Freire, 1972). In this approach students are taught without necessarily having deep understanding, thus inhibiting critical thinking. Due to its unquestioning approach, it permits conformity by producing a submissive society. According to Watson, (1919) if organised society ordered that individuals should act in a specific way, the behaviourist could arrange the stimulus which would bring

about such action. I would like to add with certainty that this is no reflection on the wonderful staff within the FE sector where I have worked for the past seventeen years. Within this centre, there is huge commitment to meeting the needs of the learners, however, there is also increasing pressure from policy and funding to cover course content from modules that are generally preset and without learner consultation. What needs to be recognised is that this form of teaching is not utilised by accident. Fitzsimons (2017: 107) argues that as *neoliberalism* takes over education as a tool to fit a market need, a likely impact is a rising shift towards behaviourism. At this stage I consider it important to contextualise these expansions within the neoliberal circumstances from which they have emerged. Harvey states that:

Neo-liberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (Harvey, 2005: 2).

Finnegan (2008: 58) maintains that this “is a set of strategies and ideas that are shaping our public spheres”, which has been advanced through an EU-led policy approach that interprets all education as largely instrumentalist (Fitzsimons, 2017). These *ideas* are affecting how policy describes what adult education does and is supposed to do. This shift is certainly an ideological one, where hegemony legitimises certain values and beliefs through discourses of ‘common-sense’ that shape the purpose and formation within education. To put this into context, I will discuss the concept of lifelong learning that has been altered in meaning to suit the neoliberal economic agenda.

### **2.6.2 The lifelong learning discourse**

Lifelong learning was a term originally employed by UNESCO, with an all-embracing approach to education (Ryan, 2014). It was this approach that gave the Irish Government’s White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000) the context for adult education’s recognition and

development for the future (Fleming, 2001). In recent years the use of this concept to encompass all forms of learning has diminished (Ryan, 2014). Adult education is now firmly orientated to employability based on the proposition that enhancing human capital will create jobs and strengthen social inclusion (Finnegan, 2016). This shift was driven by the OECD and EU's use of the term in ways that focus on the learner taking courses to acquire skills to fill gaps in the labour market.

### **2.6.3 A neoliberal outcome - human capital**

Human capital principles have been systematically promoted by the OECD, the World Bank and national governments, in order to become deeply integrated into the lexicon of global education (Mundy et al., 2016). Thrupp and Tomlinson (2005), claim that social justice for the common good has been replaced with discourses of social justice considered through the market state in the form of human capital. These perceptions around matters pertaining to social justice are now linked to the importance of human capital, and together they have been combined in the FET Strategies' vision statement, which is linked to the notion of the knowledge society (Fairclough, 2010). What is important to understand is that the growth of human capital that has been responsible for a two-tier knowledge society, with those who are high-knowledge skilled and those who are low knowledge skilled, and this has resulted in exacerbating inequality (Brine, 2006). Learners that are considered to be of higher knowledge are viewed as the future, in terms of offering an educated workforce that will drive the European economy. This tier system ensures that wider societal inequality is set to continue.

#### **2.6.4 Equality of opportunity discourse**

The focus on equality of opportunity has increasingly been joined by the aim of ‘interculturalism’, using adult education as a means for social and cultural inclusion (Department of Education and Science, 2000: 13).

The solution to the equality dilemma is the promotion of equality of opportunity, which Rawls presents as the most comprehensive framework for a liberal politics (Lynch, 2022: 107). Rawls (1971: 73) refers to this concept as ‘fair equal opportunity’. He maintains that people should not be advantaged or hampered by their social background and that their prospects in life should depend on their own effort and abilities. What Rawls and other liberal egalitarians accept implicitly is to create the conditions to empower individuals. The principle of equality of opportunity is encoded in EU treaties, and advanced within member states by a variety of legally binding directives, thus adding to its legitimacy as a mechanism for distributing social goods, including education (Lynch, 2022).

Within this framework, self-responsibility is key. Mau (2015) argues that this entrepreneurial, self-interested manifestation continues the discourse of individualism which is not only an integral component of liberal humanism but also of neoliberal capitalism. As far back as 1980, when neoliberalism first emerged, Hargreaves (1980: 187-8) identifies the onset of a “cult of individualism” where education was slowly diverting from its social and civic role to a “promotion of the educated individual”. Since that time this approach to education has been steadily increasing and resulting in, what Giroux (2020) claims to be a “politics of depoliticisation” within adult education.

This depoliticisation has developed as a result of some of the teaching methodologies used within the adult education classroom. As already discussed in the section above, behaviourism plays a significant role. This method deems observing the external sources of behaviour rather than to consider approaching the thoughts and motivations of individuals. Yet learning in any context needs to consider how it alters the brain and how we perceive and construct knowledge

based on our meaning-making (Knowland et al., 2014). Jean Piaget's (1971) theory of cognitive development recognises that we organise our thoughts based on *schemas*. These schemas are sets of knowledge, which we use to store new information into in categories based on what we already know and their interpretations (Curzon, 2003). For example, as we encounter new information, we try to categorise this into our existing schema, in order to make sense of it. We do this because as individuals, we are hardwired to categorise with what we already know. This practice simplifies the complexities in our world and assists us to recall information quickly and effectively. This automatic thinking is the human brain's default setting, which is when we make quick judgements that lack critical awareness. Piaget (1971) refers to this process as *assimilation*. Assimilation also applies to our categorisation of people, which we refer to as stereotyping.

### **2.6.5 The significance of being critical**

I would consider that a mindful awareness of stereotyping is particularly relevant when teaching in a culturally diverse classroom, as most classrooms are nowadays. As educators, we need to be conscious of our own biases, otherwise there is a tendency to reflect the one value system which comes from the culturally dominant. We also need to bear in mind the struggles that some students have in making meaning of new information, since it may not fit neatly into their existing schemas. What happens in this case is that our brain creates another category to fit the new information, and this is what is known as *accommodation* (Piaget, 1971). When individuals experience inconsistencies within their personal beliefs, they tend to reduce this conflict either by changing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, or by justifying and rationalising their own conviction and prior knowledge. This is where Bélanger (2011: 26) recognises learning as a reflexive act, and that "significant learning takes place through such

deconstruction and reconstruction of one's representation and through such mobilisation of new knowledge.”

As an adult educator I try to spend time unpacking some of the assumptions and values that my students bring to the classroom, which can oftentimes go unquestioned. Certain modules will allow for this space more than others. What I recognise is that through these peer group discussions students can challenge one another and can question their values in a way that they may never have done before. Within this critical space, we step away from automatic thinking, and thus move the boundaries to see the world from a different perspective. It is my understanding that when we build the capabilities to make critically informed decisions and have awareness of our constraints, we increase our capacity for agency.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has endeavoured to provide a comprehensive discussion around the poststructuralist perspective and my positioning within this theoretical framework. I have argued that for subjects to become agentic, there has to be a critical awareness of different forms of power, and how they constrain certain subjects. I have also discussed the adult education system, which has shifted from a liberal to neoliberal perspective in recent decades. Within this standpoint, which is highly individualised, at best students are helped to be empowered within a flawed system. This affects, not only subjects becoming agentic, but more significantly their understanding and awareness of this lack of agency.

## **CHAPTER THREE – MY APPROACH TO RESEARCH**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The main elements of research stem from three overlapping categories – philosophical, praxis and ethical. This chapter will consider the many decisions made and my rationale for using a feminist poststructuralist framework, which corresponds with my research question - outlined in chapter one. The values within this process are connected to my ethical considerations, which are intertwined into all phases of the study. Above all, this chapter seeks to show the connections between the theoretical framework set out in chapter two and the methodologies that I will present within this chapter.

### **3.2 Philosophical assumptions**

According to Leavy (2017), social research is an endeavour to investigate a specific problem that needs a solution, which is located in a particular philosophical position or paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1994: 107) define paradigms “as basic belief systems grounded on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions”. According to Braun and Clarke, (2013: 27), “ontological positions specify the relationship between the world and our human interpretations and practices”. It determines whether or not we believe that reality exists separately from human understandings. My paradigmatic positioning is a *critical realist*. This paradigm maintains that “a pre-social reality exists but we can only ever partially know it” (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 26). It combines a realist ontology, with a relativist epistemology. What this means for me, is that I assume the existence of an objective world that can be known but recognise that knowledge is subjective and discursively bound. Epistemology is what counts as legitimate ‘knowledge’, and my epistemological worldview therefore determines what I consider to be true knowledge. This reflects my perspective, which is that knowledges are a site of political struggle, that are always connected to specific social, cultural, ideological



and political contexts. Reality is thus understood as created through power structures in a given society, which shape knowledge through linguistic discursive processes.

### **3.2.1 My ontological and epistemological worldview**

The values that I assign to this position are a recognition of the intersectional inequalities that are socially and culturally produced, which continue to replicate themselves through assumptions and values that are accepted as normal, natural and true. My reasons for holding these beliefs are personal and stem from a lived experience from which I have learned valuable lessons pertaining to power and inequality.

As reflected in chapter two, my own epistemological stance has been transformed. Within my research, I employ elements alongside feminist poststructuralism and critical realism, such as constructivism. This paradigm looks at the way people construct knowledge and meanings within certain contexts (Braun and Clarke, 2013). What I understand of the world is constructed and produced through multiple discourses and systems of meaning that I reside within, because of this awareness I do not take data at face value.

### **3.2.2 Critical qualitative research**

Critical qualitative research focuses on language as it is used in the world, and how it gives shape to certain social realities and their impacts (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This approach takes a productive view, whereby its core premise is that language creates rather than reflects reality (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Critical research records the complexities of real life, places it in an organised framework and interprets it in some way. This concept is illustrated by Kincheloe and McLaren who claim:

[..] that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2011: 304).

Kincheloe and McLaren, as critical theorists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, recognise power in its multiple dimensions and these they refer to as ‘axes of domination’ (2011: 308). I have found Kincheloe’s (2008) insights particularly useful as they draw on poststructuralist considerations to identify the politics of knowledge.

Unless we understand the ways that power not only validates but rank orders the knowledges produced by individuals with differing amounts of academic and cultural capital, an epistemological hegemony legitimising a political economic hegemony will only grow more acute (Kincheloe, 2008: 12).

My research focused on women and sought to find out the level of awareness of the culturally constructed discourses that have shaped their subjectivities, and on account of this, how much control they have over their ways of being in the world. This topic is not new and similar studies have been researched before. I have read and been influenced by Anne B. Ryan’s (1997) PhD, entitled *Feminist Subjectivities: Sources for a politicised practice of women’s personal development education*. I believe that my research takes a slightly different slant, as I focus on changes within culture and link my participants’ positionalities within an education system that promotes a discourse of equality of opportunities. I have also endeavoured to put this research into practice within a module that is being taught in the FE sector, by teaching through the lens of race, gender, and class and I believe that students studying this module can benefit from this politicisation.

### **3.3 Praxis: How I will carry out my research?**

The second element involves praxis, which refers to the process of research. This incorporates the design, theory, methods and methodology (Leavy, 2017: 14). Methods and methodology are distinct from each other (Braun and Clarke, 2013). According to Walsh and Ryan, (2015: 117), “methodology refers to a ‘perspective’ or broad theoretically informed approach to research, which stems from the researcher’s epistemological stance or philosophical/political position”. Drawing on the literature my orientation was predominantly deductive, however,

due to the multiplicities and complexities of meanings within language I was conscious that new themes could also arise.

### **3.3.1 Methods**

For my methods, I chose to carry out one-to-one interviews with seven participants. After this I conducted a focus group discussion with three of my existing students.

#### **Interviews**

I chose one-to-one interviews, as I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding into how my participants have been shaped through their individual cultural experiences. As stated by Trethewey, (1999: 429), the value of interviews lies in its ability to “capture participants’ articulations of their discursively constituted realities”. Trethewey continues by stating that interviewing should be seen as an opportunity to explore the forms of a particular discourse, in all its normalising effects.

On an interviewing continuum, my technique lay between “unstructured and semi-structured, which can also be classed as informal interviewing” (DeWalt et al., 2002: 121). However, since themes arose from the literature review, semi-structured interviews were an ideal way to allow for these themes to be explored while still giving leeway for the interviewee in how to reply without sacrificing the focus of the interview (Barbour, 2008).

Prior to the interviews I spent time critically reflecting on my research questions and how they were framed. For me, coming to acknowledge the politics that is inherent within this process of, not only asking questions but *how* they were asked, was important. This has required an awareness of the power that I carry to decide what constitutes knowledge and what knowledge I will represent. Letherby (2003: 4) acknowledges that “the researchers’ choice of methods, of research topic and of study group population are always political acts”. I was conscious that by asking my specific questions, I was making a distinction. Because of this, I use what Hollway (1991: 32) calls a “production-of differences approach”, which she claims is “explanatory

rather than descriptive, relational rather than comparative, emancipatory rather than normative and dynamic rather than static”. My participants were asked to talk about their upbringing and whether they felt that women have greater opportunities nowadays. The full list of questions are available in Appendix 1.

#### **A focus group**

My rationale behind choosing to carry out a focus group discussion was because I believe that my students can benefit from hearing from different perspectives within the group. According to Chambliss (2016: 220), a focus group “involves unstructured group interviews in which the focus leader actively encourages discussion among participants on the topics of interest”. The focus group consisted of four females including me and was based around a broad discussion on representations and meanings of femininity within social media and popular culture. We then talked about whether the participants felt that there were more opportunities and choices for women in recent years.

Throughout the whole research process, I endeavoured to focus on meaning, to go beyond the *semantic* content of data to the *latent* level of analysis to identify underlying assumptions and ideologies that informed the content of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This process was intentional, as I recognised that when my participants gave “their accounts, they were conducting their own analyses” by selecting and drawing on multiple assumptions and values (Walsh and Ryan, 2015: 183). My role as the researcher was to endeavour to reveal these discourses.

#### **3.3.3 Sampling**

According to Braun and Clarke (2013), one of the concepts that can drive the question of how much data is needed for a qualitative study, is the notion of *saturation*. Saturation refers to the point when additional data fails to generate new information. This was not a concern for me, as providing a *complete* and *truthful* picture does not sit comfortably within a structure that

accepts its multiplicity, fluidity, and complexities. The sample chosen for the research was *purposeful interviewing*, for the most part. Purposeful sampling takes place when the researcher decides who the individuals to be included in the study are (Schutt, 2008). I deliberately asked students who had taken part in the module Intercultural Awareness, as it was within this module where a politicised space had been piloted for the first time.

My group within this module consisted initially of ten students. For various reasons, such as family commitments or being relocated, they became a group of five. The inclusion criteria solely requested that each of the participants were female and were either part of this module or connected in some way to the adult education centre. Seven participants in total; five students and two teachers, agreed to participate in the research in January 2023. The two teachers, who work in the adult education centre, had heard of the research topic, and were interested in taking part. The first part of the research process was to gather the biographical information on each participant, where the use of pseudonyms was used to protect their confidentiality (*see table below*).

Figure 3.1 - Anonymised Students' Profiles

Student Profiles					
ID Names	Country of Origin	Religion	Age	Marital and Family Status	Years in Ireland
Zara	Gaza, Palestine	Muslim	20's	Single, no children	Less than one year
Samia	Laghouat, Algeria	Muslim	30's	Married, no children	Five years
Abebi	Kware, Nigeria (Yoruba – tribe)	Muslim	40's	Separated, three children	Less than one year
Kateryna	Kyiv, Ukraine	Orthodox Christian	30's	Married, three children	Less than one year
Daryna	Kyiv, Ukraine	Orthodox Christian	30's	Married, one child	Less than one year

Figure 3.2 - Anonymised Teachers' Profiles

Teacher's Profiles				
ID Names	Country of Origin	Religion	Age	Marital and Family Status
Michelle	Ireland	Catholic	50's	Divorced, no children
Nicole	Ireland	Protestant	50's	Single, no children

Fig 3.3 -Anonymised Focus Group Participants

Focus Group Participants				
Samia	Laghouat, Algeria	Muslim	30's	Married, no children
Kateryna	Kyiv, Ukraine	Orthodox Christian	30's	Married, three children
Daryna	Kyiv, Ukraine	Orthodox Christian	30's	Married, one child

### 3.4 Reflexive thematic analysis

For my findings, I chose a manual open coding of the transcripts, and through a predominantly deductive method my themes were formed. Braun and Clarke (2006) claim that this process involves the identification of themes and subthemes which capture important information relevant to the research question, based on prevalence and quality. What was crucial during this process was for me to reflexively acknowledge any of the emerging information that came from my worldview.

Creswell (2013: 183) describes this process as “coming to know the self within the process of research itself” and learning to *own* our perspective. It has been essential for me to reflect on the conscious and unconscious positions that I occupy within the group and how these impact on the learning environment. One of the steps that I put in place was to keep a journal. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), keeping a research journal is vital in the development of good qualitative research. I wanted to make sure that my own experiences and biases have

not influenced the process and that my perspective has not been imposed on any of the participants. It has equally been important that I have not misinterpreted the meaning of any of the data that has been given to me. For this reason, my participants were given a copy of the transcript, which they could alter if needed.

### **3.5 My ethical considerations**

My values as an individual are connected to my ethics as a researcher, which underscores every aspect of the research process (Leavy, 2017: 21). Ethics cover our relationship with participants and the wider world in which we conduct research (Braun and Clarke, 2013). It is concerned with the principles of moral behaviour. Right from the beginning, as we select a topic to study, ethical considerations come into play. The topic selection is informed by our values, our understanding of which problems require research, and the potential impact of the research. Every aspect of dealing with the ‘who’ of our study, the people involved, is an ethical decision (Leavy, 2017: 24). The focus throughout this process has been on the ability to protect participants and the integrity of inquiry. Therefore, ethical decisions are not described in terms of what is beneficial to me as a researcher; they are concerned with what is just.

#### **3.5.1 Participant confidentiality**

Each participant took part in a one-to-one interview and the focus group afterwards. Confidentiality was specifically important within the focus group. A discussion was carried out prior to the interview where it was agreed that what was disclosed within the group would remain private and not discussed outside. It must also be mentioned that the members of this group felt comfortable talking about personal issues, as they knew each other quite well at this point.

Each participant was informed as to the nature of the study and signed a consent form (see Appendix 3). Time was spent confirming that participants understood this form, as English is

not their first language. The participants were also given a copy of the interview questions several days prior to the interviews to ensure that they understood and were happy with what was expected of them through the research process. All interviews took place within the adult education centre where participants are currently attending their courses. My rationale for using this space is that it is familiar to them, where they could talk without fear of being overheard. All interviews were recorded using the Otter App and transcribed. A firm commitment to protect confidentiality for each participant was adhered to by keeping their names anonymised. The interviews lasted between thirty to sixty minutes. Participants were informed that if at any time during the interview they wanted to stop, they could terminate the interview immediately and the information would be destroyed. All participants were made aware of the university protocol for the completed thesis and all members were informed that a copy of the thesis can be sent to them on request. Recordings and transcripts are kept on a password-protected file and will be destroyed upon completion of the research process.

### **3.6 Limitations of methods**

I consider that one drawback from my research was that I did not have the opportunity to interview more participants. This was mainly due to the timing in which the interviews were held, as students were between modules. I believe that a larger number, especially for the focus group, could have added extra discussion and depth to this study.



### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has looked at the philosophical, praxis and ethical considerations of the research process, where making one decision influences other judgements. For me to select a methodology, it had to correspond with my ontological and epistemological worldview and be appropriate for the topic under study. Similarly, my commitment to valuing a dialogue between equals was founded on my ethical considerations to protect all participants involved in the research. Most importantly, within this research, are the voices of each participant who through their distinct perspective have added depth and richness to this study by providing a unique insight into their reality.

## CHAPTER FOUR – MY RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 4.1 Introduction

My research focuses on the significance of agency for women, specifically those who have been intersectionally disadvantaged. I am interested in understanding not only how culturally constructed discourses of gender define women's subjectivities, but also how my participants perceive the personal, social, and political meaning of being female.

A brief outline of this chapter entails an introduction to the four main themes that emerged from the data - *religion, family, education* and *work*. As mentioned in chapter three, my research adopts a largely deductive approach to analysis, where themes also emerged. Due to similarities and distinctions, I have decided to group all participants' findings together for both the interviews and focus group conversations. One of the opening questions asked to the participants was to talk about their upbringing. For most of the women, religion played a significant role in creating distinctions between genders which influenced their positions within the family. For some, this experience was negative and for others religion was spoken about in a positive light. In some cases, religious beliefs shaped the participants' opportunities for education and work, although this finding was not universal. In the next section of this chapter, I will present the themes through the voices of my participants and in the analysis chapter, these themes will be structured around a discussion on *distinctions* and *changes* (see figure 4.1 below).

Figure 4.1 Themes and Discourses

## Students' and Teachers' Themes

<b>'Distinctions between Genders' and 'Everything is Changing'</b>			
<b>Religion</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Work</b>
The role of mother – as natural carer Essentialist thinking		Feminised roles The neoliberal subject Equality of opportunities	

### 4.2 Religion and family life

Religion can serve several functions within society. It can give meaning and purpose to life, which provides stability and well-being, but it can also operate as an agent of social control. It is from these perspectives that the participants spoke about this theme. Religion, and the discourses attached to it, were identified as a substantial influence in how participants constructed their self-identities. When asked what it means to be a female within her culture, Abebi, a black Muslim woman responded that the differences between genders are huge, and nothing has changed in recent years.

In Nigeria, they are treating boys/man up more than the woman, even now. They treat man very well more than woman (*Abebi*).

Abebi went on to tell me about her marriage, and the expectations within the Muslim religion for a woman to stay in a marriage, no matter what. Despite the lack of support from family and friends, Abebi managed to leave her husband.

[...] I find it so difficult throughout the marriage until I get out [...] three years ago. In my culture, they don't want woman – daughters to leave the marriage. Either do or die, no matter what you are going through. Even in my family [...] They want you to remain there (*Abebi*).

Zara, from Palestine and also Muslim, spoke in a similar manner about the impact of gender differences. For a young girl in her early twenties, she displayed a lot of awareness of some of

the oppression that is attached to religion and has been resistant to it, especially now that she is living in Ireland.

It's hard for us, the religion, because there's a big difference between women and men (*Zara – Palestine*).

This participant spoke about not having the same opportunities as her brother. She uses words such as '*not allowed*' '*shouldn't*' when talking about women in relation to playing football, driving, and working in shops and restaurants.

My brother played in a football team but there was [sic] no female football teams allowed for girls (*Zara*).

Not many women drive, and they would get weird looks from both men and women that she shouldn't be driving (*Zara*).

When I came here, I saw girls and women working in restaurants and shops but in my country, I have never seen a woman or girl working in shops or restaurants. It is not considered good (*Zara*).

I then mentioned that she now works in a restaurant here in Ireland, and she responded, "Yeah, I'm one of them now" (*Zara*).

When asked about the differences that Zara could see here in Ireland, her reply was as follows.

The differences here – everything – I think that's all about religion. First of all, you have to wear a hijab. I didn't used to wear a hijab in Palestine, so it was very weird for them. Whenever I go out with my friends, my family or whoever they would look at me with very strange and weird looks. And every single woman or man would always ask 'why you not wear a hijab?' It's not your business, it's mine. I can decide if I want to wear it or not. But they would say, 'but you have to', and I said, I know I have to but I don't want to wear it now maybe in the future but not now. Another thing is that in my religion we are not able to be in relationship. Like we have to be married, me and my boyfriend. But here no, you can live with your boyfriend or partner without getting married (*Zara*).

These women have only lived in Ireland for a short time, so they are unfamiliar with the ideological strongholds of Catholicism of the past, where both church and state controlled Irish people. Michelle, one of the teachers in the adult education centre commented on what it was like for her growing up as a female in rural Ireland in the 1970s.

Your role was very clear – to raise children and keep the house tidy. You were made to believe this is why you are here on this planet. I hold the church and state responsible, and we know why. It was the state and the church who ruled Ireland and it was all about control and definitely, it was about suppressing women. I remember the men going to the left when you walk into the church, they all sat to the left and the women went up the middle in the centre and to the right-hand side. So, the minute you stepped into the church you were separated into two categories and looking back on that, it's bizarre. And then if you look at the church it was full of men. Women held the – they were subordinate really. They were the people who cleaned the church (*Michelle*).

Michelle spoke about her position in the family, which was influenced by religious discourse.

I always say, unfortunately I was the eldest girl, there was an awful lot of pressure about particular roles that I had to hold as the eldest daughter and the eldest girl in the house. I had one brother older than me, eleven months older than me and he had no pressure applied to him around looking after children and having to do housework. When the boys got older, the boys in our house had no duties at all in the family in terms of domestic duties. But the girls, particularly myself as the oldest, I was like a second mother to my siblings, and it was really hard. I remember as a young child, even then, knowing that this was wrong, feeling really worn out by it all. I had no agency – I was old when I was young, tired and old as a child. And having a responsibility, that kind of was too much for a child. It meant that I had immense pressure as a child where I should have been out playing, I was doing household chores and minding children (*Michelle*).

When Michelle's marriage ended, she spoke about what it was like being labelled 'separated' and 'barren'.

There's a stigma leaving a marriage - I've been there and talk about feeling like a misfit for years. First of all, for having no children and then for being separated and no children. And then it's probably as bad for different reasons if you're separated with children. She's got baggage. It took years for that to leave me. Again, it's all part of our conditioning. That you made your bed, lie in it. And if it doesn't go right, you're a failure. Damaged goods, barren – barren! Imagine, is any word more derogatory than barren for a woman? (*Michelle*)

Samia, a Muslim woman from Algeria, spoke about her experiences through a different perspective. She considers that to be a woman you must be beautiful, elegant and should be looked after by your husband.

God created two things – man and woman – this is the secret of the life. The man is not like woman. The woman created to be a woman – like princess – not to work hard, not to do everything. The woman, she created to be class, rest, drink, go to the shopping (*Samia - Algeria*).

Samia went on to state:

To be feminine you have to be class, calm, speak slowly, with polite words and don't wear anything [short, tight]. You have to do like high level to learn and work for high level (*Samia*).

Samia does feel that it is important to have rules to follow and for this reason she does not agree with some of the behaviour from Irish people, as she states.

Ireland is not like our country, because in our country we have rules. But here no. You can do what you like. You can go out, you can wear clothes as you like, you can go with boyfriend, in our country no! But here I see everything is normal. When they do tattoo, when they go at night to the pub and when they wear short clothes and when they do relationships with boys like girls of 13, 14 – she has boyfriend and the boy also. They do cigarettes. Also in our country, we have people who do this. I am not saying that our country is very very good, no no no, but maybe under the table. Not for everybody to see (*Samia*).

When asked about cultural changes over the generations, Samia responded that:

Almost all the boys, they have a little bit up to [sic] the girls. In all the families, not just our family. The boys are the boys! But I think in these last years with the Internet the girls put themselves in the right place. Big changes. Now girls – she can travel alone, she can go to the work, she can marry. Before they married 13, 14, 16, very young but now they take time. They say I have to speak with men, I have to understand his ideas, I have to speak lots of time and after I decide if I might or no. The changing is in all the world, not just Ireland. I tell you, in my country, before I can't wear like this and go outside. I have to put something long and now no. [...]. They are open of everything, it's not like before. Before the girl must stay at home, must cook, clean and do everything and now she can go to work, she can study. (*Samia*).

I asked Samia if men accept this and she said that “no, not all men, not all the family accept this.” The discussion within the focus group was similar in nature, although it evolved into a discussion about the effects of social media on girls, Kateryna insists that “it's a very big influence”. Daryna maintains that “it is difficult to be feminine”. Social media puts more pressure than ever on females “to be perfect”. Daryna spoke about her concern for teenage girls who are heavily influenced by celebrities, stating that, “they see them in Tik Tok, and they start to be them. They don't have their own opinions. They don't think about what they want to do, what they want to be”. Samia spoke about the fact that we do not need to follow everything

that we see. We have choices and it is the responsibility of the mother to guide our daughters and to help them to critically think about their choices.

The social media, they give us something positive and they give us something negative and we have to choose and use our minds to choose the right things. (*Samia, Algeria*)

The influential experience of power within representations is significant, and how gender is portrayed has profound effects. Samia spoke about her expectations around violent films. She spoke about how she would consider it acceptable to see the male as aggressive, but this is not suitable behaviour for a woman. She stated, “when I see the men like with gun, I accept this but when I see a woman do this. It’s not right”.

Finally, from Nicole’s perspective her experiences of being a woman were profoundly different. She spoke about her mother who was determined to give her a better life than she had.

From a very early age, my mother didn’t want me going out doing the farm work. I wanted to be out, you know, just mucking in on the work but my mother – she'd buy me a book every week, quite a thick book and I'd be reading books, and I'd be studying and doing my homework and the boys would be doing the work. But interestingly enough, my mother was out in the thick of it. It was like she was the transitional generation, and she was doing all the farm work, but she was determined that I would have a better start and that I would have better opportunities (*Nicole*).

### **4.3 Education**

Education was another significant theme that emerged, however, its meaning was predominantly expressed through market-driven means to improve employment opportunities.

When asked whether women’s situations had improved and there was more equality, most participants referred to economic discourses. Some participants felt that women’s situations have improved, both regarding education and employment and felt that women have more choice nowadays. Despite this, all of the women could identify that they are still recognised as the providers for the primary caring role. Daryna spoke about the responsibility that this position holds, although for her, she considers that this is something to be proud of, rather than burdened by.

A woman is very strong. It's to be a mother, not housekeeper but the soul – the heart of the family. Our women [Ukrainian women] are the soul of our families - children and men. They know that they need to have work, good work, education. A lot of our women, very intelligent and it's very important for our women to have children, to parent, to be able to take care of family – about children and men (*Daryna*).

As mentioned earlier, religion can affect certain women from accessing a high level of education. The findings on this theme have been mixed, with some participants still having opportunities, while others not, a situation that has been changing over generations. Kateryna could see that her mother's generation lacked opportunities as women were expected to stay at home to rear children, but despite this, Kateryna's parents both encouraged her to attend university where she studied law for five years.

I think it's not a good choice for her [participant's mother] to stay at home with us all the time [...] She gives everything for us and she doesn't live. For me I don't spend so much time at home. I worked after university for 5 years then I got pregnant and after that I worked maybe two years. It was very hard to work and to take care about my children because I have three children of different ages (*Kateryna*).

Zara spoke about her aspirations to study dentistry in a few years' time, this is despite education not being considered important for women.

Education in my country is a very important thing for males, but for females they don't care that much. There are women who are well educated but it is not considered that important because it is expected at the end, she will get married and stay at home (*Zara*).

Abebi attended a mixed school where she could see that women and men were not treated equally, instead women were treated poorly in comparison to the boys.

[...] They always allow girls to go through a lot of stress more than boys. I don't know why they really put much pressure on we girls then. (*Abebi*).

Michelle stated that despite her position as a 'second mother' in the family home, her education was still valued as a female.

School was very important in our family. I'm very grateful for that, and that came more from my father than my mother. My mother couldn't wait for us to be older to get out and get a job, where my father was all about education (*Michelle*).



Nicole also came from a home where education for women was valued, yet this was assumed that an educated women would follow the feminised positions.

[...] we were strongly encouraged to study and to progress, so I didn't notice any gender inequality in school. In fact, the girls were top of the class and the girls were progressing faster than the boys. I did my leaving cert in 1979, and in our school you could be a nurse or you could be a teacher. We didn't know that we could do medicine. We didn't know that we could do law. We didn't know that we could be something more. Then I went to ██████ College, I was 17 and I didn't notice any gender inequality then either, because women were as valued as men in the institution. But I noticed when I joined the world of work, that women didn't climb the ladder the way men did (*Nicole*).

#### **4.4 Work**

The theme of work was substantial, and any mention of equality always referred back to opportunities for women within work. Some of the participants believed that nowadays women have the same choices and opportunities as men, however, it was also recognised that they must work harder because of the expectations around their traditional role in the home of mother and wife. The gender division of labour was a considerable issue discussed. While several participants recognised that men help out more than the previous generations, what will be discussed in the next chapter are the reasons why both men and women still assume that this is considered women's work.

This discussion around division of labour was quite mixed. When we spoke about the roles within the family, Samia stated that her husband does "everything". Kateryna claims that "some men doesn't help at home at all but some men do something". Kateryna went on to say, "sometimes we want that men help us". The participants spoke about how mothers are more patient than fathers. I asked how did they feel this was so? Samia said that "it's genetic". Kateryna claims that this is "an example from family" and because "she spend many time with her children".

What asked whether men and women should have different jobs. Samia responded with "yes of course! The man is not like woman, because the man he has his jobs and the woman has her

jobs.” When asked about opportunities for women nowadays, Kateryna’s response was as follows:

Sometimes women want to work in IT, she must have this chance to work in this area. I think that in this society women should be more independent. We should have a choice – what do you want and if you want work in construction, you must do it (*Kateryna*).

Daryna stated that several of her female friends work in male dominated roles, however, she also recognises how unequal this situation is.

Nowadays once a woman want to have such work like a man she need to work more hard because she has another work from home and she have no so lot of time for this work but if she wants she need to work more and maybe in the perfect world it will be something other (*Daryna*).

#### **4.4.1 Equality of opportunities – is this realistic?**

I asked the teachers whether they felt that treating all students the same was working within adult education and why.

I think there’s more opportunities and so we can achieve more as women. But the roles – if you’re looking at the private sphere – I think women have had to take on extra. It’s not balanced at all. [...] So, equality? I don’t think so (*Michelle*).

Michelle recognised that most male students do not have the burden of childcare.

When a male [student] comes in to me, it would never dawn on me that they even have a life outside of what they’re doing. What I’m really thinking of is that you don’t have to worry about your children because your wife or partner worries about them (*Michelle*).

Michelle could identify that women remain to be considered as the primary carers, but what was also evident was the deeply embedded essentialist thinking where she considers that women are naturally more emotional.

It’s on a societal level, where it’s still deemed that women are the carers and the nurturers at home, and they automatically carry the heavy load because we’re more emotional (*Michelle*).

Nicole’s response to whether there were equal opportunities for women and men was as follows:

I work in the [...] program and it's a very holistic program. I've been in this program for [...] years, and from the beginning we were concerned not just about people learning but about the entire person and about them growing in confidence and self-worth as well as in learning. I found that we kind of embraced them as people and especially the women because we would have had a lot of women who were quite downtrodden and quite broken. So my role was to empower them to be the person that they were born to be, not just determined by what a man said about them. [...] we'd get them into the history of the country and we'd get them excited about learning and excited about new doors that were opening that they'd never experienced before. It was to give them a new vision that there is much more to life than being abused or being badly treated. Our goal was to give people back what was taken from them [...] (*Nicole*).

#### **4.5 Summary of themes**

This chapter focused on the voices of the participants who spoke about their experiences of being female. The themes that emerged were *religion, family, education, and work*. What was interwoven within these themes were *differences and changes*. What I am interested in now, is how and why these differences and changes exist and who benefits. Dominant discourses prevail at certain times and in particular areas of life, and by using an historical analysis I endeavour to disrupt some of the ways of understanding that are taken as unchanging and unquestioned truth. These are the issues that will be critically analysed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FIVE – THE DISCUSSION**

Those who would codify the meanings of words fight a losing battle, for words, like the ideas and things they are meant to signify, have a history (Scott, 1986: 1053).

### **5.1 Introduction**

I believe that the most significant way to establish credible knowledge is through critical analysis, in which we look at language and discourse and how they shape our way of thinking in cultural time - a time marked by a particular way of understanding the world. In this chapter, I use a Foucauldian genealogy to uncover distinctions and changes in a deeper theoretical sense, through hidden discursive practices.

In the last few years my understanding of gender has shifted, from biological determinism to a heightened awareness of its social construction. In this analysis chapter, my discussion will be centred around two important readings of the data in terms of ‘difference’ and ‘change’ in the construction of women, which are significant, not solely within localised culture but globally. This has prompted me to learn more about what I would have considered, in the past, to be a normalising subjectivity and deemed ahistorical. Not only do I now recognise the constitution of the subject as historical, but that it is saturated and steeped in meaning from the social world. It is because of this perspective that I take a critical look to evaluate the ideological and hidden meanings that are variable between different forms of discourse. The next section will discuss the historically constituted female subject which varies, not only by era, but by a host of intersectional factors such as class, race, education, and religion.

### **5.2 Religion and family – gender differences**

The topic of religion is too significant a theme to dismiss. I am however conscious of my participants who have trusted me with issues that they hold dear, and their religious beliefs being one of those. I am not questioning the validity of a God, but my referral to religion is to

query the socially constructed discourses that are historically produced and the different forms of power attached. I am also trying to refrain from universalising the term as I am conscious that I am referring to multiple religions with many distinctions, which are experienced differently from the various participants. Accordingly, I am not solely focusing on what religion means to my participants, but what they think and do when they talk about religion. What I am interested in is how religion influences behaviour and how women's positions are shaped and constrained within them over cultural time.

One unanimous response from the participants was the clear expectations and differences between genders while growing up within their families of origin, and these were most obvious from those who held a strong religious tradition. Almost all participants spoke about the distinctions as though they were natural and normal. The word differences was mentioned repeatedly throughout the interviews. Participants used it when talking about differences in culture, religion, gendered positions within the family, gendered work, and educational opportunities and within their experiences of living in Ireland. Since I recognise differences between genders as produced, I will discuss these distinctions using Hollway's (1991) production-of differences approach, as already stated in chapter three. The next section will discuss concepts within religion, which are considered 'natural' and 'normal'. These discourses of normality or naturalness have the capacity to mask the power of what appears to be benign.

### **5.2.1 Gender categories – binary and essentialist thinking**

One of the many dangers of religion is that it leads individuals to think in terms of binary opposites. Binaries, as mentioned in chapter two, are often false dichotomies which are socially produced to give the illusion of opposites (Derrida, 1987). For example, some contrasting themes relevant to religion are - good and evil, heaven and hell, and male and female. If we take the example of gender, we see that religion makes strong distinctions between genders, which are categorised in a deterministic manner that fit into fixed biological groupings. We see

this when we look at the gender roles that are considered ‘natural’. When my participants spoke about their upbringing in their families of origin, a common theme was regarding the division of labour between genders. A shared consensus was that women still see themselves as the primary carers, although this was not universally considered in a negative light. Another issue discussed was the domestic support from partners regarding chores and childcare. Several participants claimed that men do not help enough, while others expressed gratitude to their partners for helping them. What I was most interested in was the use of the word ‘*help*’ and its meaning. What this means to me is just how deeply embedded essentialist thinking is, even among women. To reiterate again, gender essentialism and religion give a false illusion of a worldview that is considered to be natural, normal, and true. How it has come to pass, the next section will address, by examining the historical construction of religious discourse. This will be carried out by deconstructing concepts which are seen as stages in a unified structure of human development within what is considered to be the *natural* history of western culture.

### **5.2.2 The history of religious consciousness**

The systemic ideology of western culture produces predictable responses in certain figures, ideas and actions. Lease (1994) states that this predictability is key, as it means that the process of development can be guided in advance and by definition. In other words, western culture produces *types* by which the course of history can be interpreted, controlled and predetermined by the past, present and future. Thus, establishing a universal model of meaning for all.

Within much critical scholarship, religion has been identified as the “historical product of discursive processes” (Asad, 1993: 29). Lynch (2017: 285) insists that religion is a social construct, which “invents that which it claims to describe”. Lease (1994) argues that religion is ultimately and always a political manifestation and a theory of religion must always be a political theory. In chapter two, I refer to the discursive conceptions of ideological power as increasingly exercised through the use of language and its meaning. As per Thompson

(1990: 8), the critical conception of ideology is defined as ‘meaning in the service of power’. This meaning creation comes from cultural systems such as religion. Lease (1994) insists that religion is a key intersection for the distribution of power and control over the texts of diffusion, and thus over consciousness.

Gramsci (1971) wrote extensively about the link between religion and hegemony, which is ideology at its peak. Hegemony is the point where all alternative constructions are suppressed in favour of one dominating view. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999: 26) maintain that when ‘proper’ ways of thinking and doing give a one-sided account that ignore other practices, discourse is said to function ideologically. These ideologies become part of our consciousness, which we tend not to question. As stated by Gramsci (1971: 145), hegemonic discourses are the consensus surrounding a particular ideology that has become normalised in society, even by those who become marginalised from it. We become the authors of our own subjugation and our behaviour we learn to regulate according to these discourses (Foucault, 1975). This regulation encompasses every aspect of our being such as our beliefs, actions, appearances and so forth. The power of hegemony is so strong that it leads individuals to believe that there is no alternative (Gramsci, 1971). In a similar manner, Lease (1994) describes the function of religion as totalitarian. He claims that any ideology that provides the only explanation of the nature of reality, and the only framework within which relationships can be pursued is an “absolute set of self-evident bases which cannot allow any other to intrude upon it” (Lease, 1994: 468). By its very nature, religions define reality.

### **5.2.3 Religion and its different forms of power**

What is evident from the findings is that some religious discourses are so deeply embedded that they are accepted as a given. For example, Zara spoke about women not being allowed to play football, or work in a shop or restaurant. Abebi, a black Muslim, spoke about having to

stay in a marriage no matter what. These are blatant practices of ‘power over’ women, which are observable forms of Dahl’s (1957) first face of power.

As already stated, religion also contains ideological power which is more insidious because of its invisible form. In the findings, Zara spoke about Muslim men and women who would approach her to tell her that she should be wearing a hijab. Lukes (2005) claims that we can act in such a way even if it is not in our real interests and that we might not even know what our own authentic interests actually are. This power is in the form of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ that we accept as a given. It is internalised in our bodies, where we discipline ourselves to conform to social norms (Foucault, 1975). We are usually unconscious of these effects of power because we take so much of what is around us for granted. Although this was not the case for Zara and Abebi, who were resistant against several of the religious traditions. The reason for this is possibly because religion carries both visible and invisible forms of power, so it is easier to question.

But what happens when situations change, and visible forms of distinctions between gender become less obvious. In recent years, women appear to have more opportunities than ever before specifically in terms of education and work. Some may argue that these changes are the direct result of feminists, specifically liberal feminists, who have fought for freedom and equality for women for many years and have achieved success on a number of areas such as voting, education, equal pay, reproductive rights and protection against violence and sexual abuse. As mentioned in chapter two, this empowerment for women has been for the right to compete within a system of institutionalised inequality. In the next section I will address changes towards the myth of equality, which I argue is the accomplishment of neoliberalism, not feminism.



### **5.3 Education and work – changes to a liberal society**

According to Althusser (1971) the new dominant Ideological State Apparatus, is the educational apparatus, which has replaced in its functions the previously dominant - Church. This section will examine how it is that the privileging of certain patterns can change rapidly, not only within different or separate cultural reserves, but also within the same culture. This was another prominent theme within my research where almost all participants spoke about changes, both within their own culture, but more significantly, when they moved to Ireland. Samia from Algeria talked about huge changes in her country in recent years, with women having more freedom now than ever. She stated that before women had to stay at home, to cook, clean, and do everything and now they can work and study. Now women can make their own decisions in terms of how they look and dress, whether they choose to travel, study, work or marry. This consensus was unanimous amongst all participants except for one, Abebi, who stated that nothing has changed between genders in Nigeria, even in recent years.

These changes need to be considered in terms of a power that is gaining importance, which has its roots in traditional liberalism. Liberalism, as originally understood, is the historic advocate of individual freedom (Collini, 1983). As already stated, this type of freedom does not question how opportunities and choices can be hindered for certain groups of people, by implicit forms of power. Foucault et al (1991) claim that the liberal subject is not free, nor a natural being with predictable forms of conduct, as one is led to believe. It is considered that we are historically constructed subjects that enable an art of government to be developed according to the new principles of economics (Oksala, 2011). According to Lynch (2022), within the neoliberal framework, the individual is constructed into a capitalist subject by their adherence to the market-defined model of the self. This neoliberal subject, created by the market, is controlled by it and is 'governable' from the inside out (Lynch, 2022: 121). The next section will discuss neoliberal capitalism and how it appeals to certain values that legitimate the establishment of a new era.

### **5.3.1 Liberal to neoliberal investments**

The neoliberal framework is a significant *episteme* of our age (Oksala, 2011). Foucault (1970) refers to an episteme as a set of unconscious rules that govern all discourses in a certain society and time period and determine what does and what does not get taken seriously. According to Amable (2011), in order for neoliberal capitalism to function, its constraints have to be internalised by individuals, who must then adhere to values that reinforce the social structures upon which it is built. Many of these values and norms are found within the strands of economic liberalism, however, neoliberalism possesses some original characteristics. It is based on the concept that the ideal world order should be ‘free’ and ‘fair’ competition between individuals. As mentioned in chapter two, within adult education, power assigns value and is implicated in what constitutes the curriculum and what students will have the opportunity to learn. Accordingly, adult education principles have been increasingly colonised by the neoliberal economic and political logic. Grummell (2007) maintains that the growth of discourses of individualism, consumerism and market competitiveness in adult education policies encourage a belief in the individuals’ own responsibility to improve their employability and life chances. Amable (2011) claims that this has a dual economic and moral intention; it enhances the global efficiency of the economic system by allowing the best individuals to contribute the most to prosperity and rewarding individuals in concordance with their merits. According to Ryan (2004), this neoliberal-based approach to education sits comfortably with the individualist approach of meritocracy, which is a defining characteristic of the Irish educational system and a reason for its unequal outcomes.

### **5.3.2 Adult education and the discourse of individualism**

Grummell (2007) argues that these effects on adult education are that critical reflexive analysis on how economic and political power operate is neglected in favour of individual reflection. According to Connolly (2018), the concept of critical thinking that is commonplace within

adult education for both students and educators, is with an emphasis on logic and argument rather than addressing social change. In this individualised form of reflection there is no recognition that knowledge is produced within historical conditions. Giroux (2020) recognises this danger and argues that to disconnect individuals from their ability to conceptualise the social has been one of the most powerful ideologies for domination and is, unquestionably, an educational issue. He claims that within today's culture, people do not have the same avenues to which they can translate their own personal problems and private suffering into collective issues and this has resulted in a retreat in identity. These discourses reinforce the concept that we alone become responsible for the problems we confront when we can no longer conceive how larger forces control or constrain our choices (Giroux, 2014). Within my own experience, I have witnessed students from marginalised societies blame themselves for lack of achievement, but what they do not see is that it was the system that failed them.

Freire (1972) also acknowledges the importance of critical reflection, as the basis to action which leads to praxis. He believes that praxis is essential to shift our epistemological position. This process begins with a critical inquiry into the social, cultural, and political meaning of individuals' experiences (Freire, 1972). This reflexive process helps educators to 'better understand what they know and do' by placing an 'emphasis on learning through questioning and investigating' (Loughran 2002: 34).

### **5.3.3 My reflexive position**

I believe that as long as essentialist ways of understanding remain, certain groups of women only have the illusion of agency. Again, it must be remembered that women are not generic and that their experiences differ significantly depending on multiple factors. These distinctions are not recognised enough within a discourse of individualism. A discourse which has been responsible for accepting an altered meaning of principles such as equality of opportunities, lifelong learning and human capital into adult education policies, and thus providing a

convincing illusion of agency. Whereas I consider that agency only begins when we can ask critical questions in order to recognise who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge, practices, and values. Through this critical awareness we become mindful of the forces that are shaping our consciousness and ruling our lives.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

In this discussion chapter, I have endeavoured to connect the theory from chapter two to my findings in chapter four where I present a critical analysis of differences and changes within female subjectivities using an historical genealogy through the themes that emerged. It is hoped that through this process I have answered my research question.

## **CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Answering my research question**

My research endeavoured to examine the level of understanding that my female students have over the culturally constructed discourses that are shaping their subjectivities, thus determining how much agency these women have over their lives. The findings and analysis have shown that in almost all cases the participants accept the normalising discourses of the ‘essentialist model of the person’, and what I have discovered is just how profound an impact this is having on reproducing the gender status quo. I would like to reiterate that, up until recent years, this too was my way of thinking. Several participants did discuss their resistance towards certain religious traditions, but this alone is not enough to challenge any changes. Fundamental change needs to involve a shift in perspective in how we think, and how we view ourselves as subjects that are historically produced. Through this position, we have a deeper understanding that the way events happen is not inevitable, but rather, can be contested and open to new possibilities.

### **6.2 Reflections and new learning through the research process**

This journey through research has been one of the most significant opportunities for growth thus far in my life. In the introduction, I stated that I am not the same person that I was when I first began my studies six years ago. I see the world differently now and I am grateful for that. I would consider myself fortunate that while conducting research for a master’s degree, I also had the unique opportunity to bring healing into my life.

This research has been as much about my learning journey as it has been for my students. As educators, we can sometimes believe that our job is a one-way process – to empower individuals, however my experience of teaching has been different. I have learned the value of critiquing my own life history and how I have come to see the world in the way that I do. I believe that from this positioning I am in a better place to be able to teach.

My students have taught me so much through this experience. I have learned the value of not making quick judgements or generalisations, such as - that the religious experience is oppressive for all women. What I have learned on a deep level is that no two people are the same and because of this we should not fit individuals into categories. This is something that all adult educators need to be more conscious of, especially in the culturally diverse classroom - where the tendency is to group and categorise people based on their cultural origins. This level of automatic thinking neglects the complexities and multiplicities of meanings within subjectivities, which vary from culture to culture and language to language, that differ between discourses within a particular language and are subject to historical change.

### **6.3 Overall limitations**

This research topic is extensively rich and broad, however, due to the time constraints and the word count I have been limited in what I could present. I have also found that due to work and family commitments, it has been difficult to incorporate the necessary amount of time needed for a project such as this. Upon reflection of the research process, I could have benefitted from using *photo elicitation* by asking students for visual representations of their historical culture. This could have opened a deeper discussion based on hidden histories of certain struggles, and these insights could have allowed for the construction of more meaningful knowledge of cultural representations. I have also critiqued some of the wording around the questions that I asked during the interviews, as I recognise that when I asked what it means to be female, I am still unwittingly making a distinction. What I really want to focus on is *why* everyone is so interested in differences and what function does this serve?

#### **6.4 Contribution to knowledge/ Suggestions for future research**

This thesis is intended as a theoretical tool - not to attack religious or educational systems but to serve as a means of engaging in a critical process of uncovering aspects that can change in order to find new directions forward. Its aim is to give adult educators a deeper awareness to examine the assumptions that underpin their practices. It encourages practitioners to question the explanatory power of liberal humanist and neoliberal assumptions that remain prevalent within adult education and late modern Irish society at large. What needs to be asked is - how is this shift possible and is there a place within adult education to support this change?

As reiterated by Ryan (1999), in the drive to subvert the gender status quo a focus on feminist poststructuralist insights are crucial in order to challenge the liberal humanist model which dominates most approaches within adult education. Although, with this in mind, the greatest danger is that personal change will not be accompanied by political change. Yet, if political change is not accompanied by personal politicisation, it will also be of limited effect and the outcome is that the gender status quo will be reproduced and deepened over time.

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## APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### Questions for Students

1. What do words such as girl/woman mean within your culture?
2. Can you give examples of this from your own family life?
3. What changes do you see from generation to generation?
4. Do you think that there is more gender equality now? Why?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been mentioned?

### Questions for Teachers

1. Can you tell me about your upbringing?
2. What were the expectations of you growing up?
3. What changes do you see from generation to generation?
4. Do you think there is more equality now for genders? Why?
5. Within adult education, equality of opportunities is promoted. How is this implemented? Is it realistic?

## APPENDIX 2 – INFORMATION SHEET



### Information Sheet

**Purpose of the Study.** My name is Maria-Ana Kelly, and I am a master's student in the Department of Adult and Community Education in Maynooth University. As part of the requirements for the master's degree, I am undertaking a research study` under the supervision of Angela McGinn.

The study will focus on creating a space where women can learn from each other's experiences. This will involve discussing what being a woman represents within each participant's culture. We will discuss the meaning of terms, such as gender neutrality, social inclusion and equality to see whether women feel that the gap is decreasing in terms of gender inequality.

**What will the study involve?** The study will involve us arranging a convenient time to carry out our group discussion. This may lead to smaller one to one interviews with certain students.

**Who has approved this study?** This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked because you are a female adult learner within the Further Education centre where I am conducting my research.

**Do you have to take part?** No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, we hope that you will agree to take part and give us some of your time to participate in a group discussion and possibly a one-to-one interview with a researcher. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the research findings are analysed in May 2023. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships with me or the centre.

**What information will be collected?** A transcript will be written up based on the group meeting and one-to-one interviews.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No names will



be identified at any time. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by me.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

*'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'*

**What will happen to the information which you give?** All recordings and transcriptions will be securely held on the universities encrypted on one drive and consent forms stored in a locked filing cabinet.

**What will happen to the results?** The research will be written up and presented as a thesis. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part** I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

**What if there is a problem?** At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. You may contact my supervisor, Angela McGinn, [Angela.McGinn@mu.ie](mailto:Angela.McGinn@mu.ie), if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact me: Maria-Ana Kelly, 086 2545089 or [mariaana.kelly.2018@mumail.ie](mailto:mariaana.kelly.2018@mumail.ie).

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

**Thank you for taking the time to read this**

## APPENDIX 3 – CONSENT FORM

### Consent Form

I..... agree to participate in Maria-Ana's research study titled –

Female subjectivity and agency in cultural time: A politicised space where women can flourish

#### Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally and in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for meeting and interview with Maria-Ana to be recorded

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data up to May 2023

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request.

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

*[Select as appropriate]*

I agree to publication of extracts from my interview

I do not agree to publication of extracts from my interview

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects

I agree for my data, once anonymised, to be retained indefinitely in the IQDA archive

Signed.....

Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals

.....

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*I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.*

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitals .....

*If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact Michael Murray ([michael.j.murray@mu.ie](mailto:michael.j.murray@mu.ie)) or Angela McGinn ([angela.mcginn@mu.ie](mailto:angela.mcginn@mu.ie)) Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.*

***Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for yourself***