

Postmodernism

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The term *postmodern* refers to a sensibility or mood that has permeated advanced capitalist societies in the West since World War II. Conceptually, postmodernism is associated with a group of intellectuals whose careers were shaped by the 1968 student revolts in France. Names familiar to educators include Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Many credit the American philosopher Richard Rorty with introducing postmodern ideas to the United States.

Some scholars and practitioners of education embrace postmodernism. Others try to hold back the postmodern tide. Both responses draw heavily on postmodern philosophy. This entry, therefore, focuses on the intellectual aspects of postmodernism, holding its economic, political, artistic, and literary dimensions in the background.

Defining postmodern thought is challenging. Postmodernism highlights the hybrid and fluid nature of ideas and spurns brief synopses and categorizations. In addition, a number of different intellectual streams feed postmodern thought, including the hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche. Post-structuralism is a primary influence. Postmodern thinkers take up these currents in different (and sometimes contradictory) ways, making it difficult to summarize them or treat key points of debate within a limited space.

Nevertheless, because postmodern thought is important for understanding diversity in education, it is helpful to identify and clarify its distinguishing characteristics. This entry centers on a few key points rather than on the full range of postmodern philosophy and analyzes general tendencies rather than specific programs. It concludes by briefly sketching how postmodern ideas are influencing educational purposes, practices, and research.

Postmodern Thought

Postmodern thinkers question values and beliefs associated with the modern era and the 18th-century European Enlightenment. Some believe these ideas are illegitimate and should be overthrown. Others believe these ideas, while problematic, may be retained but must be reconceived.

The nature of knowledge and the rational subject are two interrelated modern concepts that postmodernists challenge. From the viewpoint of modernity, true knowledge is the product of evidence and reasoned argument. In the case of science, sound empirical methodology aids rational thinking. All individuals regardless of cultural background can learn to exercise reason and recognize when claims are true. True knowledge is certain, universal, and objective. The evidence and conclusions of true knowledge are independent of interpretive frameworks that reflect particular places and epochs or that further the motivations and interests of particular individuals.

According to Jean-François Lyotard, modern knowledge is sustained by what he calls “metanarratives.” A metanarrative is a story people tell to legitimate their pursuits. The metanarrative that legitimates scientific knowledge maintains that science enables humankind to control nature and society and liberate itself from natural vagaries, political oppression, and economic want. Like all metanarratives, this one appeals to certain values, including progress, individual self-determination, and emancipation from natural and human-made bonds. Metanarratives presume that the values they espouse are self-evidently good and are

shared by all. As Lyotard puts it, metanarratives tell “grand” stories and engage in “totalizing” thinking. The tendency to assume that modern values and beliefs are universal distinguishes modernity from other epochs, Lyotard claims.

In Lyotard's view, “incredulity toward metanarratives” summarizes the postmodern attitude toward modernity in general and toward modern science in particular (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). Nuclear disaster, environmental erosion, and the systematic suffering and extermination of certain populations in the name of science have contributed to the postmodern suspicion that scientific knowledge is not as benevolent or as innocent as its metanarrative purports. Postmodern incredulity toward metanarratives also is fueled by ideas that question the modern tendency to assume that its values and beliefs are universal and unifying.

Postmodern concerns about modernity's tendency to universalize its assumptions trace back to a theory called *structuralism*. Structuralism devolves from the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, who held that language is a system of signs. Signs link signifiers (sound patterns) and signifieds (concepts). Links between signifiers and signifieds are arbitrary: There is nothing essential or necessary about the connection between concepts and sounds. The meaning of a sign is not inherent in the sign but instead arises because the sign differs from other signs in a system. Thus the meaning of a sign cannot be determined outside the context of relations in which its difference from other signs becomes apparent. For example, the sign “man” is meaningful because it differs from other signs, such as “woman” and “eunuch.” The meaning of “man” is intimately related to the signs with which it contrasts.

Within linguistic systems, relationships between signs exhibit an internal dynamic or “deep structure.” The deep structure of any given system conforms to laws that apply to all linguistic systems. De Saussure believed these laws could be objectified and mapped. He maintained as well that relations between different linguistic systems conform to laws that could be objectified and coded.

Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied de Saussure's linguistic theory to analyze kinship relations. Other social theorists adopted structuralist principles to study a range of human institutions and practices. Structuralist theorists frame practices and institutions as signs: cultural “units” that link concepts (“signifieds”) to various “signifiers,” such as linguistic expressions, material objects, and human behaviors. The links that constitute cultural signs are arbitrary products of social convention. To understand the meaning of a sign, one must determine how the sign relates to and differs from other signs in its system. Social meanings are contextual; they arise as a consequence of relational differences between signs. Just as de Saussure attempted to map laws governing linguistic systems, structuralist theorists attempt to map the laws of social systems. Structuralist theorists believe that these laws can be abstracted from particular contexts and objectively coded.

From a structuralist perspective, the meaning of an individual's life experience and identity cannot be understood apart from the social system in which the individual is embedded. The opportunities, choices, and roles that individuals perceive and experience are shaped by the structural dynamics of particular systems. These systemic dynamics conform to their own principles, operating apart from human desire or volition. Structuralism, in short, “decenters” the individual.

Structuralism continues to influence social theory. Analyses of how social systems shape individual identities and choices are especially influential. Nevertheless, a number of structuralist premises came under attack in the 1960s. Insofar as these challenges aim to correct perceived inconsistencies within structuralism, they are called *post-structuralist*. Because these challenges draw on ideas that extend beyond structuralist theory, many analysts locate them under the more general umbrella of postmodernism.

Two such challenges are relevant to diversity in education. First, postmodernists challenge the goal of structuralist social theorists to discover the objective laws that govern all social systems. This goal, postmodernists point out, contradicts structuralism's own insight that social meaning is contextual, a function of differential relations within particular systems. Insofar as the principles governing social systems are meaningful, they cannot be abstracted from the particular contexts in which they are embedded.

Laws that purport to explain these principles also reflect the dynamics of the very systems they aim to examine objectively. Postmodernists suggest, in short, that social laws, which claim to be objective and general, are meaningless.

The second postmodern challenge concerns social signs. This challenge has two aspects. First, structuralism stresses the idea that signs connect signifiers and signifieds. Over time, signs come to be regarded as cohesive units whose value lies in the fact that they unify disparate elements (signifiers and signifieds). The separate elements out of which signs are constituted receive less attention. Of course, elements in a sign potentially could be linked with other elements to produce different signs. But emphasizing signs as integral units masks their inherent plurality and the contingent arbitrary nature of their construction. Structuralists forget that signs are arbitrary constructions, postmodernists fear. They worry that structuralists regard signs as necessary normal entities that cannot and should not change.

The second aspect of this challenge pertains to the value of signifiers and signifieds and the quality of their relation. From a structuralist perspective, both signifiers and signifieds are necessary for the construction of signs. The two elements are interdependent; if one or the other changes, the sign as a whole changes. Signifiers and signifieds thus have equal value. Relations between different signs in a system are equal and interdependent as well.

Postmodernists maintain that the value of signifiers and signifieds is not necessarily equal. To the contrary, one element in the unit often is favored over the other. The favored element seems to be crucial. But the devalued element also is necessary and important for the sign. Without both elements, the sign would not exist. Insofar as the constitutive role of the depreciated element is unrecognized, social signs belie a hierarchy of privilege and devaluation. In such cases, the unity of signs, in short, depends on inherent unequal relations. A similar phenomenon characterizes differential relations between certain signs. Whereas structuralists hold that the meaning of “man” depends on its contrast with “woman,” they do not think that this contrast suggests a difference in value. Postmodernists, on the other hand, maintain that the meaning of “man” does not arise simply as a consequence of the fact that it contrasts with “woman.” The value of “man” rather suppresses, excludes, or marginalizes the value of “woman.” Since the meaning of “man” depends on its contrast with “woman,” the meaning of the dominant sign depends on the sign it represses.

In sum, postmodernists worry that the quest for universal laws renders social theory meaningless. They also caution that the unifying function of signs can mask their inherent plurality and contingency. Possibilities for social change consequently can be lost. Finally, postmodernists worry that even when differences are recognized, they will be regarded as neutral. When this happens, unequal hierarchical relations are suppressed or ignored.

Postmodern thinkers seek to disrupt the tendency to treat particularized beliefs and values as if they were universal. They question why unity is prioritized over difference and aim to show how recognizing differences can unmask exclusionary marginalizing relations. Jacques Derrida, for example, deconstructs the surface unity of signs to expose hierarchizing oppositions within them. He reveals how signs, which supposedly are inessential for understanding texts, illuminate deep insights into the meaning of character and plot. Michel Foucault also aims to interrupt the unity of the “apparently given.” He traces how social practices and institutions divide the true from the false as a function of power dynamics operating within social systems.

Postmodern Education

From a postmodern perspective, education is necessary and valuable. But it is not an intrinsically benign endeavor. Despite good intentions, education can be exclusionary and repressive. Exhortations to unite behind policies and goals are especially worrisome, because calls for consensus can disguise and perpetuate privilege and marginalization. Postmodern educators track how this dynamic arises, and they propose

strategies for interrupting it. This work goes on in a number of arenas. Curriculum studies and educational research are two areas that are generating much conversation.

In the field of curriculum studies, postmodern practitioners and theorists challenge so-called mainstream knowledge. They trace how canonical courses and texts have become dominant and how social dynamics serve interests that legitimate their canonical status. Postmodern educators work to diversify curricula. This is done not merely to offer students and teachers more choices. More profoundly, postmodern educators want teachers and students to understand how mainstream knowledge shapes notions of “difference” and how judgments about what counts as knowledge have political implications that should be openly examined.

Postmodern sensibilities also influence education research. Three postmodern influences are notable. The first concerns strategies, goals, and evaluative criteria of qualitative inquiry. Postmodern qualitative researchers question how research narratives may privilege the positions and interests of researchers over those of the people they study. They examine how cultures may not be cohesive but instead may be sites of conflict, and they employ strategies such as multisite ethnography to illuminate how individual identities are forged across a range of contexts. While objectivity has long been a contentious issue in qualitative research, postmodern researchers worry that so-called objectivity masks the perpetuation of power. They contend that research may advocate on behalf of participants. Advocacy is regarded as an ethical responsibility, not as a source of bias.

The second way postmodernism influences education research is evident in current debates about the desirability of establishing common evaluative standards and forging a unity of purpose among researchers. Postmodernists worry that emphasizing consensus coerces assimilation and ultimately erases differences in perspective. When this happens, mainstream researchers foreclose opportunities to learn from those whose views of science differ from theirs. Mainstream researchers may espouse open-mindedness, postmodernists conclude. The actions of these researchers, however, are rigid and closed.

Third, postmodernists worry that mainstream researchers, in the name of advancing rigorous inquiry, discount the views of postmodern researchers. When this happens, postmodern researchers are not taken seriously. Postmodern researchers believe that their views are being discounted systematically as part of a political struggle. Mainstream researchers hold that political struggle is anathema to the creation of knowledge, and they typically deny that exclusion is a political act. Denying this possibility, however, makes it impossible to critically examine how politics may be involved in the creation of knowledge. For this reason, postmodernists believe that mainstream researchers shut down the kind of rigorous inquiry they claim to advance.

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See also

- [Critical Pedagogy](#)
- [Critical Theory and Multicultural Education](#)
- [Deficit Thinking Paradigm](#)
- [Diversity, Exceptionality, and Knowledge Construction](#)
- [Knowledge, Types of](#)
- [Objectivity and Diversity](#)
- [Positionality and Knowledge Construction](#)

Further Readings

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