

# My Journey Through Discourse

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## Abstract

This paper takes the reader on a journey through discourse, uncovering issues of body image and gender identity through the use of autoethnography and discourse analysis. The author explores how body image and identity are formed within discourse. Through the research the author comes to recognize that her body, and in extension, her identity is a site of construction, resistance, and reproduction of dominant social, economic and political discourses. As the author begins to interact with social theory, she realizes that her identity has been formulated in discourses of which she had no knowledge or understanding of. The author comes to understand that she was/is a subject of discourse, passively impacted by it, and a living representation of it. This realization prompts the author to explore how her negative body image is a result of her own interpellation of dominant ideology, and how her current health and fitness goals might be criticized by some feminist discourses.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, body image, postmodernism, feminist theory, identity

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Subject. Object. Ideology. Dominance. Feminist. Identity. Culture. Subversive sites. The body. Feminist Discourse: First wave, Second wave, Third wave. Theoretical Explanations. Interpretations. Questions. Discourse. Meta narratives. Resistance. The more I read, the more questions arise. Feminism, what is it and how do I define myself within the waves of discourse? What does being a feminist mean? How does it affect my identity, my body, and my world view? How do my identity and my body serve to resist or reinforce dominant ideology? Being aware that I hold a position of privilege and some of my choices support metanarratives while others resist them I can't help but ask: Would feminism accept me? I've always believed myself a feminist, but now I wonder..\*

Let me start with the body; or, more specifically, my body. My body is mine... well at least I thought it was. When I first started my journey into the realm of theory I took for granted that my body was my own; however, as I begin to read and learn more about social and political theory, I am surprised to find that my body is not just my own. I have come to recognize that my body, and, in extension, my identity is a site for construction, resistance, and reproduction of dominant social, economic and political discourses. I begin to understand that even before I was aware of theory/discourse I was/am a subject of it, passively impacted by it, and a living representation of it. This realization prompts me to explore how my negative body image is a result of my interpellation of dominant ideology and how my current health and fitness goals might be criticized by some feminist discourses. I decide to embark on a journey to understand the interactions between my body, my identity, and their relationship with feminist discourse.

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\*There are three very specific voices within this paper and each has been given its own font so that you can follow along with them. The first voice is my questioning voice and it is represented in italics. The second voice is my academic voice and it is represented in Times New Roman. The final voice is represented in handwritten font and represents my autobiographical voice – the voice of my own personal narrative. It is my intention that these voices take you with me on a journey through my own personal interactions with gender, body image, and discourse.

## Interactions with metanarratives and language: my postmodern understanding

The journey I embark on falls under the umbrella of postmodernism and is explored through discourse analysis and feminist critical theory. Many disciplines have come to view the world in a modernist sense, constantly searching for a universal truth or a metanarrative, that can explain how the world works. Postmodern theories attempt to deconstruct the notion of a universal truth by valuing the individual experiences and realities of all people. The role of language and how it shapes and creates the way we understand ourselves and the world around us is a core tenet of postmodernism. Discourse analysis is set up within a postmodernist framework; therefore, it also subscribes to postmodernist ideals that reject metanarratives and relies on the idea that language is fluid and can be interpreted in a variety of ways dependent upon the speaker/listener or the writer/reader. There are many other social theories that take on postmodernist views of the world and there are many facets of feminist theory that also align themselves with postmodernist ideologies. Since embarking on this journey, postmodernism, discourse analysis, and feminist theory have all become very central components of my own way of interpreting the social world around me.

For postmodernists, words not only create social reality; they are themselves the product of social conventions. The language we use to speak about the world has been founded and based upon social conventions. Words come into use and are consistently redefining their meanings, and therefore redefine our social world (Lemert, 1997). Jacques Derrida explores language as the way in which we interpret our physical and social worlds. To Derrida the world around us takes shape and becomes what it is through the use of language. This includes the social world and all the encounters we have within it. In essence it is through writing that we create meaning in our world and make it something different than it was before (Allen, 2006).

The postmodernist rejection of metanarratives and its understanding that there is no fixed linguistic meaning is helpfully melded together in the writings of Jean-Francois Lyotard. Lyotard introduces the idea of: "language games" in which one set of rules is constantly being overturned by another (Simmons, 2011). In the theory of "language games" Lyotard distinguishes two types of knowledge: narrative and scientific. For Lyotard there is the belief that "narrative knowledge, which does not equal scientific knowledge, corresponds to the taken-for-granted knowledge structures everyday individuals in a society employ" (Denzin, 1995: 400). Lyotard's argument is as follows: scientific language, which is how modern societies categorize "true" knowledge is "agnostically structured" and that it is exclusive in nature. Furthermore, Lyotard notes that although narrative knowledge has been deemed inferior by the scientific community it, "carries its own authority " (Denzin, 1995: 400).

As I consider postmodernism's ideas of "truth" and language I am struck with the thought: if language is the foundation of all knowledge and it is fluid, malleable, and can be interpreted in many ways, then the idea of "truth" becomes fluid, malleable, and open to interpretation. I am inclined to align myself with the great postmodernist theorists. Lyotard, giving validity to narratives as a form of knowledge, opens a new way of seeing and of understanding the social world. Postmodernism opens previously unexplored paths of appreciations. One significant new appreciation is the importance of narrative; narrative has validity. My lived experience—my story—is valuable when it comes to analysis and research. The world of "alternative" forms of re/presenting research opens up as I realize that the established form of scientific writing is not the only way to write research. I will discuss this appreciation of new methodology/ies shortly. Let me first discuss my new appreciation of postmodernism, discourse analysis, body image and gender identity.

## Interactions with research methods: my understanding of discourse analysis

This appreciation of postmodern theory's rejection of metanarratives and its insight into the role of language/narrative to shape human knowledge makes it possible to discuss the interaction between body image, gender identity, and discourse analysis. I recognize that in order to comprehend how my own gender identity and body image has been formed I need to understand what discourse is and how it impacts me as an individual. Discourse can be defined as "language use that focuses around common assumptions, and in a poststructural Foucauldian sense as the ability of certain groups to have power to define how such language use is controlled and shaped" (Seibold, 2006: 21). Pamela Hardin explains that discourse refers to language systems that have been socially constructed (Hardin, 2002). Recognizing postmodernism's focus on language and how it works to shape human knowledge, I begin to appreciate the importance of discourse analysis as a viable approach to analyzing and understanding how we humans understand ourselves and construct our social worlds.

According to discourse analysis, the ways in which we use language is an important indicator of how we interact with the social

world. Jan Renkema posits that language performs, “not only the ideational function of representing the world and the textual function of relating discourse and context, but also the interpersonal function of enacting social identities and relations” (Renkema, 2004: 283). I begin to realize that discourse analysis sets out to analyze the production of knowledge, and as it does this it helps to create a realistic picture of how discourse affects and shapes our social worlds. I am increasingly intrigued about how my own identity has been formulated through discourse.

I continue my journey reading and reflecting on theories of discourse analysis. I read Pamela Hardin who notes that most researchers treat language as if it provides an accurate interpretation of experience and that each of us read the experience in the same form (Hardin, 2002). According to Hardin, “language produced by research participants is treated as if it (a) provides a transparent window into internal experience or understandings and (b) originates with the participant” (Hardin, 2002: 538). In other words, according to Hardin, most research ignores the connection between the social constructions surrounding language that participants of research use. In my mind connections start to formulate, tying together postmodern theory’s deconstruction of notions of a universal ‘truth’ with that of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis realizes, as does postmodernism, that language is formed through ideologies and language is, in itself, discursive. It recognizes that experience plays a role in how we relay our stories, choose our language, and interact with our social worlds. Language also plays a role in how our stories are received and interpreted by others. As Jan Renkema states, “discourse is no discourse at all without a sender and a receiver” (Renkema, 2004: 3).

### My interactions with methodology: autoethnography legitimized

The more I consider discourse analysis the more I think of it as an effective approach for analyzing autoethnographic pieces of writing in order to explore my own body and gender identity. Denzin proposes that, “any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of-and between-the observer and observed” (Denzin, 1995: 31). I want to place my own lived experience of body image and gender identity formulation as a subject for a practical application of discourse analysis. To do this, I write autoethnographic pieces about my body, my gender, and my social experiences and interactions that surround the topic. It is my hope that through critical discourse analysis I can come to an understanding of the role that discourse plays in shaping my/these identities.

In order to fully grasp the methodology, it is important to come to an understanding of what autoethnography is, and how it can be utilized as a research tool. Many authors have addressed the significance of narratives and autoethnography as a means of exploring social issues where author and reader engage in a generative interaction. (Sparkes, 2002). L. Richardson discusses autoethnography, also known as stories of the self, and defines it as personalized and revealing texts where the authors explore their lived experiences. In these stories the author holds back from interpreting and engages the reader, asking them to interpret the narrative stories, through their own lens of the lived experience. (Richardson, 2000). Further, Ellis and Bochner define autoethnography as, “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural... Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto)” (Ellis and Bochner, 2011: para 1). In keeping with the postmodern ideal of multiple truths, autoethnography provides an alternative way of knowing and writing about the social world (Sparkes, 2002), allowing readers to interact with the research, and thereby leaving the reader to formulate their own conclusions surrounding the topic, rather than being instructed by the author.

Autoethnography challenges conventional ways of researching. It allows the reader to be active within the text and create multiple meanings, in that they go beyond reading the text by bringing to the reading their own experiences. L. Richardson points out, “language does not ‘reflect’ social reality, but produces meaning, creates social reality” (Richardson, 2000: 928). It is in this regard that narrative stories are useful in not only interpreting the social world, but also in co-constructing the social world. Deborah Tannen explains that, “what is required to effect change is an understanding of the patterns of human behaviour as they exist today, an appreciation of the complexity of these patterns, and a humane respect for other human beings – other researchers as well as the subjects of research (Tannen, 2015). It is the possibilities that lay within the narratives that give autoethnographic writing its power to affect personal and social change.

The use of autoethnography not only allows author and reader to co-create meanings of a text, it also brings the author closer to the content being researched. According to Richardson, writing is a way of 'knowing' and through writing we are able to come to discover new aspects of our topic. For Richardson writing is a way of discovering and analyzing the social world. In this way of analyzing the social world form and content are inseparable (Richardson, 2000). It is my hope that through autoethnographical writing I will be able to connect to, and interpret, my experiences of body image and gender identity formation in a meaningful way. Writing my own lived experience will not only increase my understanding of my own ideas of body image and gender identity formation, but also bring understanding of the world around me. My hope is that it will also be a source of personal insight to body image and gender identity formation for my readers, and will generate for them new ways of being in and viewing the social world. "To write individual experience is, at the same time, to write social experience" (Mykhalovskiy, 1996: 141). It is in this context that using discourse analysis, which offers a considered theorization of the relationship between social practices and discourse structures, and a wide range of tools and strategies for detailed analyses of contextualized uses of language in texts and talk (Lazar, 2007), is a perfect fit for shedding light on my own narratives of body image and gender identity.

## Interactions with identity and discourse: my discovery of interpellation

My journey continues. If I am to apply discourse analysis to my autoethnography, I must first appreciate how my body becomes the subject of discourse. I read Althusser and Butler. They discuss the interpellation of individuals as subjects. The concept of interpellation refers to the idea that as soon as an individual responds to society they become a subject of the social world. Interpellation means that even though an individual may not be conscious of the fact that they are a product of a given ideology, the reactions of that individual are set in some pre-formulated ideology. The individuals' body and identity becomes automatically interpellated by the metanarrative of society, and although the subject may be unconscious of the hegemonic ideology, it begins to affect the formation of the individual's identity. From these theorists I begin to understand that individuals are interpellated as subjects of dominant discourse by simply interacting in the social world (Althusser, 1971 & Butler, 1997). According to Althusser, this interpellation is based on an external ideology that seeks to reinforce an external relationship between base and superstructure (this, in the last instance, being the capitalist system) (Althusser, 1971). Butler theorizes that this interpellation results in the individual's embodiment of ideology. In other words the subject performs a role within society because the individual believes that role to be a part of *the self* (Butler, 1997).

Understanding the idea of interpellation I begin to view myself as a subject, and ponder the ways in which dominant discourse interacts with my identity and my body. This pondering brings the realization that I have embodied discourse, and this realization raises questions. *I begin to question my identity and how I see my physical body. What beliefs about my feminine-self have I developed on my own? Which have been imprinted on me based on my interpellation of discourse?* These questions arise as general concerns about my identity formation, but they soon become more specific. *Are the ideas I have about my own physical body based on my own thoughts and experiences or have they also been shaped and molded by dominant discourses presented in media about the feminine body and figure?*

## My interactions with discourse: my body has become interpellated

*Ever since I was a young girl I have struggled with issues of body image. Many years of my life were spent having a completely negative self-image and struggling to find a solution. I saw myself as too big in some places and too small in others, too curvy here and much too flat there. I spent time comparing myself to other women and seeing them as more beautiful than myself. I looked at my friends, my family, celebrities, and strangers. I tried diets – some very expensive, personal trainers – again often expensive, joined different gyms, bought all sorts of fitness equipment, took supplements. I did everything I could think of aside from the drastic option of plastic surgery to force my body into submission. At times I was successful and at times less so, but the common thread throughout was that I had a picture of what I "should" look like and I felt badly that I didn't conform to this image. If I had known that I was an unconscious subject of ideology all those years ago, I wonder if my attitude towards my body would be/ have been different? Would I question/have questioned where the idea, "that my body 'should' look a certain way" comes/came from?*

## My interactions with feminism: can I call myself feminist?

As I continue my interaction with feminism I stumble across an article by Claire Snyder, and it helps me realize where this idealized

image might have come from. In the essay, “*What is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay*”, Snyder discusses how the discourse of third wave feminism is concerned with, “cultural production and critique” (Snyder, 2008:178). The article discusses how imperative it is to think critically about the images and ideas the mass media is sending as, “it’s a public gauge of attitudes about everything” (Snyder, 2008: 178). Snyder quotes the editors of *Bitch* magazine stating, “the world of pop culture is... the marketplace of ideas” (Snyder, 2008: 178). Popular culture is the vehicle for dissemination of hegemonic ideology. The movies I/we watch, the music I/we listen to, the magazines I/we read, the websites I/we search, the social media I/we participate in, my/our political rhetoric, the slang I/we use, is a means of convincing me/us—the public at large—that the social world should be viewed in specific ways and that people should take on certain roles in order to interact successfully within the confines of the dominant culture. If I had known that I was a subject of ideology, I would have understood that part of why I thought I needed to look a certain way was because I was unconsciously interacting with ideology via popular culture. Now that I have been exposed to the idea of myself as a subject of discourse and I understand that I am constantly navigating through a pathway of metanarratives I have a better understanding of my body image issues.

## Interactions with my body image: through the eyes of a feminist

*Recently I’ve become increasingly interested in living a balanced and healthy lifestyle that is focused more on feeling rather than looking a certain way. My goal, as I see it, is to be physically, mentally, and emotionally balanced. I exercise at least twice a day, I eat healthy unprocessed foods, I meditate. I do these things because of the way they make me feel not because I anticipate that I will change the way I look. If you were to visit my home, you would see a workout room that is decorated with photos: images of myself at different body weights, cutouts of women that I admire and consider to be fit, images of women and men who inspire me. Also, on display are motivational quotes that trigger specific emotional responses that drive me to strive for the healthy lifestyle I desire.*

*As part of my goal to be physically, mentally and emotionally balanced, I belong to a fitness club in Abu Dhabi. Going to the club is a daily routine, and my experience at the club follows a routine as well. I enter the establishment and I am greeted by a number of receptionists, all of them Russian women. While I complete the cardio section of my workout, men and women who are mainly Western, accompany me. During my training session I can see that all the cleaners at this particular fitness establishment are males of Indian or Bangladeshi descent. When I’ve finished my workout, I walk past the nail salon where an army of Filipino women, dressed in white, are providing various services to club members. As I walk to the locker room I pass by the club café and take note that all of the workers are also Filipino. I know that these men and women are working long hours for low wages. It is very doubtful that any of them can afford the time, or money, to think about being physically, mentally and emotionally healthy in the manner that I do.*

Just as there is no room for metanarratives in postmodernism, there are no metanarratives in 3rd wave feminist theory. There are a number of ways my apartment, my reading material, my gym membership, even my goals can be analyzed through a feminist discursive lens; a common perception would not be shared. Indeed, the lens seems to be fractured, highlighting and focusing on very different points of analysis and concepts, giving varied and sometimes competing ideas of my personal lived experience, depending on which part of the fractured lens is being used.

Nina Power and Claire Snyder, both of whom claim to be 3rd wave feminists, would have a very different analysis of what they see in my apartment. Nina Power, author of *The One Dimensional Woman* would see the blatant consumerism that has been caused by my feelings of liberation to strive for a specific type of body. Power stipulates that the so-called emancipation of women has turned into an economic, capitalist venture, stating that “the personal is no longer just political it’s economical through and through” (Power, 2009: 26). Power posits that there is a, “remarkable similarity between ‘liberating’ feminism and ‘liberating’ capitalism, and the way in which the desire for emancipation starts to look like something wholly interchangeable with the desire simply to buy more things” (Power, 2009: 27).

Claire Snyder has a very different view of 3rd wave feminism. Snyder’s view lacks an economic analysis, as she describes 3rd wave feminism as being empowering and sex positive, and discusses ‘girlie culture’. The proponents of this specific line of feminism claim that the desires of women are not “booby traps set by patriarchy” (Snyder, 2008: 179). The argument created is that feminists subscribing to the notions of ‘girlie culture’ feel as if they are reclaiming “tabooed symbols of female enculturation” (Snyder, 2008:



179). For Snyder even though 'girlie culture' is tied to specific consumerist elements — such as purchasing make-up, fitness magazines, etc. — Snyder doesn't see this consumerism as problematic, but rather sees it as a reclamation of what it means to be 'liberated'. Power, on the other hand, would argue that the bottom line seems to be that as feminism begins to become a more mainstream ideology there comes with it a rise in consumerism which seems to be embedded in feminist notions of being 'liberated' women.

When viewing my apartment through Power's lens, one could come to one of two conclusions. Firstly, when viewing the images on the walls, one could assume that I have never been exposed to feminist theory. It could be argued that I am a passive subject of patriarchal and dominant discourses about what is feminine and how female bodies should be represented. Secondly, when glancing at the spattering of magazines — which include a variety from *Shape*, *Fitness*, *Women's Health* to *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* — one might assume that if I have been exposed to feminist theory that I subscribe to a 3rd wave 'girlie culture' stream. As Power states, "feminism offers you the latest deals in lifestyle improvement, from the bedroom to the boardroom, from guilt-free fucking to the innocent hop-skip all the way to the shopping mall — I don't diet so it's ok! I'm not deluded? I can buy what I like" Feminism is the perfect accompaniment to femme-capital" (Power, 2009: 29). Power's feminist lens would see my living room as the perfect example of feminism supporting and reinforcing capitalist ideals, or it may not believe that I have engaged with feminist discourse at all.

On the other hand some 3rd wave feminists would not only be concerned about my level of consumerism, but they would be further concerned by my apparent interpellation of gender. Dworkin and Wachs, authors of *Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness*, would agree with Power in the sense that liberation often merges with capitalism. In their book Dworkin and Wachs examine the notions of male and female depictions in fitness magazines. They discuss how men and women are gendered within these magazines and how dominant cultural narratives are re/presented as normalized and natural versions of how individuals should portray themselves. Dworkin and Wachs propose that, "what is being sold or promoted within the health and fitness industry is not necessarily a healthy body, but a body that looks and enacts gendered 'health' through sufficiently gendered signifiers" (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009: 174). This fits in with Nina Power's belief that 'liberating feminism' and 'liberating capitalism' are synonymous. Dworkin and Wachs argue that the re/presentation of idealized bodies, for both men and women, send a message about how each gender is failing to achieve these gendered ideals. Since the magazines convince both men and women that they are failing at fitting into the socially accepted gendered bodies, they are offered a variety of remedies that can easily be bought (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009). It is interesting to analyze how gender narratives in the magazines strewn around my living room and the images and quotations on my walls might have impacted and shaped my seemingly conformist and capitalist identity.

## Feminism: Interactions with my own privilege

Dworkin and Wachs also add class, race, and privilege to the analysis of my goals, my apartment, my reading material, and activities at/membership in my fitness club. Dworkin and Wachs argue that the idea of bodywork creates a sense of liberation for women even though the activities associated with it have negative social effects. Dworkin and Wachs write, "individualized bodywork certainly has its attendant effects on social structures" (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009: 64)." They argue that health and fitness magazines attach signifiers of morality and public citizenship to bodily ideals. The readers of these magazines then are led to believe that using methods to ensure they are healthy and fit leads them to be part of an exclusive moral group. Dworkin and Wachs argue that the signifiers of morality and citizenship work to, "re-inforce various classed, racialized, sexualized, and gendered relations of power" (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009: 173).

The concept of power and privilege, when it comes to fitness magazines and an individual's desire to become 'fit' is quite stimulating. Dworkin and Wachs mention Foucault's, "distinction between the docile bodies of the poor and disenfranchised subject to panoptic scrutiny and the confessional body of the privileged" (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009: 173). They use this notion to conclude that caring about the body implies a certain amount of privilege. Since an individual has time and money to focus on herself it is safe to assume that this individual has a certain amount of privilege.

As Dworkin and Wachs put it, "everyone has to contend with privilege and oppression, they manifest in different ways depending on one's intersecting social location" (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009: 140). Because the space in my apartment is taken up by "stuff" that

showcases my current goal of living a healthy lifestyle and my desire to belong to and ability to pay for a membership at the fitness club, some feminists, such as Dworkin and Wachs would say that I am assuming a privileged role in society. From this analysis it would also seem that I am re-enforcing classed, racialized, sexualized and gendered ideologies.

*But how can I remove myself from a position of privilege? Is it possible to have goals of a 'healthy' lifestyle without re-enforcing metanarratives of: gender, race, privilege, class, hierarchy...?*

## Interactions with feminist discourse: through my eyes

As I sit and think about how feminist discourse would interpret my struggle with a negative body image, and of how they might interpret my ideologies based on a quick glance at my apartment I almost feel ashamed. A look at my apartment categorizes me as someone who exhibits a privileged place in the social world. One could assume that I am completely unaware of dominant ideology. What makes me more ashamed is the fact that I am aware. I am conscious of this and yet I still conform in many ways to metanarratives. Of course, there are moments where I resist dominant ideology and I am constantly and actively interacting with discourse, but I still find myself wondering: *Am I truly feminist if I allow myself to operate within metanarratives? Am I really a hindrance to social progress if my body is not a constant site of resistance to dominant ideas? Is it possible to truly form one's identity without being affected by dominant ideology and metanarratives?* Even after a lengthy dialogue with feminism and an examination of how I perceive my body and my identity within discourse, questions still rain down upon me. I am unable to decide if feminism would accept me under its umbrella.

## Interactions with conclusions: through my postmodernist eyes

The process of examining my own body and gender identity through a conscious use of discourse has brought not only clarity, but more questions as well. I find myself understanding how discourse has shaped who I am and how I interact with the world. I recognize how my actions within the social world might be interpreted by others around me and I become more conscious of how I see others. Discourse analysis and autoethnography have pointed me in a direction that causes me to be reflective of my own narrative and my own construction of a body and gender identity. I find myself wrapped-up in discourse with the need to untangle myself from its knots. I claim that I am feminist, but to claim that I am one thing is to put myself in a discursive box. Can I claim to **be** something if metanarratives don't really exist? As I consider my autoethnographic writing, and I begin to dive deeper into discourse analysis, I become more aware than ever, of how deeply intertwined my identity formation is with dominant discourse and my ability to express myself in understandable terms is impossible based on the interpretability/fluidity of language — interpretation between myself and discourse, myself and others, myself and me becomes a key question in how I understand myself within the social world and how it interacts with me.

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