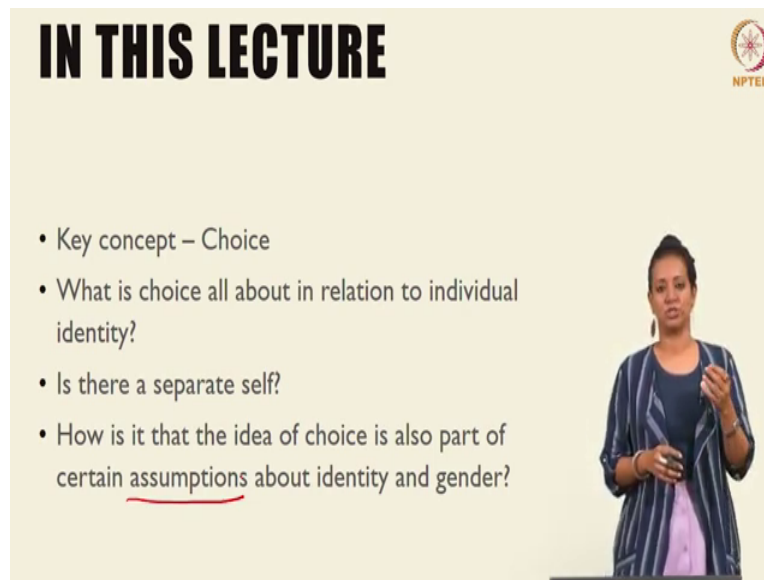


Feminism Concepts and Theories
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Key Concepts – Choice


Feminism: Concepts and theories; we are now marching forth into lecture eight. Welcome back, to week three. As you may recall in the last week, we covered two important concepts, equality and difference. We will continue in the same mode and you will get used to the ways in which we are thinking about concepts in a gendered fashion. Equality and difference form the cornerstone of a lot of the work we are going to do henceforth and therefore, start thinking about all of these concepts together.


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IN THIS LECTURE

- Key concept – Choice
- What is choice all about in relation to individual identity?
- Is there a separate self?
- How is it that the idea of choice is also part of certain assumptions about identity and gender?





I am going to lead you through various ways to think about a concept called, choice. You have already been introduced to the question of this concept with the video we looked at last week. Empower: My choice; we spoke a little bit perhaps about liberal feminism and individuals.

So, today's lecture is going to build on those very concepts and complicate the idea of choice. Now of course, as ever, our goal is not to take choice and critique it to the point where we can not use it anymore, but to be able to widen the capacity of the concept, to explain life as we know it and to be able to be used for the goals of the feminist movement and feminist theory.

So, in relation to choice, we ask a couple of questions in order to achieve our goal. One, what is choice all about in relation to individual identity? Now, this is as I mentioned something that is very, very common to our understanding of everyday life. So, how do we understand it in relation to our own identities?

In other words, are individuals all about making choices, and how do we understand such a capacity in a gendered fashion? Two, this is very important, choice is predicated upon individuals very often and therefore we ask is there a separate self? Is there a noncontinuous separate individual self that can then make choices, which we are then going on to interrogate. It is an open question, we will come back to it. Lastly, very specifically for the purpose of this course we ask, how is it that the idea of choice is also part of certain assumptions about identity and gender? Now, as you may be used to this by now, the word assumptions is very important to our understanding about choice. We are trying to critically break it down to see how is it, that certain natural sounding ideas about choice have to be deconstructed vis-à-vis choice. So, this in totality is how we are going to approach, the question of choice.

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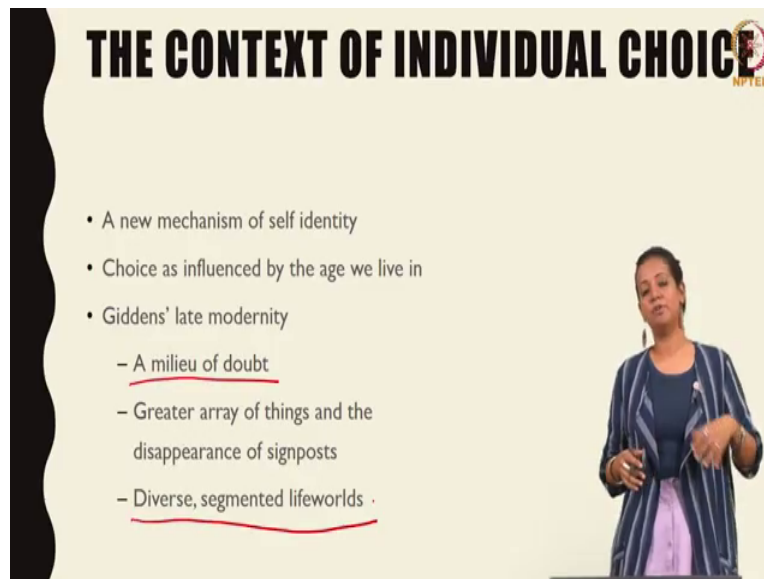
Let us start very much with this commonsensical understanding. In current day, capitalist, what is called late modern society, choice is the one thing that everybody is expected to make. You make choices every day, you wake up, you decide what kind of toothpaste you are going to use, what

clothes you are going to wear, what you are going to eat. If you have the capacity to make a choice, even within limited constraints. So, often the question of choice is always positional. What you see around you, the pictures on the screen, are very much about the idea that modernity is inundated with choices. There is too much to choose from.

Now, a certain commonsensical idea like this, hides the understanding that it is primarily about one kind of population that such a statement is made. So, we are talking about the idea of choice as going hand in hand, with a question of consumption. In such an understanding, the consumer is a primary citizen and those who cannot be consumers automatically become exempt from what Renata Salecl calls, the tyranny of choice, and the tyranny of choice is expected to be something that all of us labour under; rich and poor alike. Because, even the poor are told in many ways that because they did not choose the right things, is why they are poor.

I will not deconstruct the problems with that statement, but this is just to say that the word choice, its connotations, its consequences surround us in the present moment. Therefore, what are the ways in which feminist theory deals with choice?

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THE CONTEXT OF INDIVIDUAL CHOICE

- A new mechanism of self identity
- Choice as influenced by the age we live in
- Giddens' late modernity
 - A milieu of doubt
 - Greater array of things and the disappearance of signposts
 - Diverse, segmented lifeworlds

The slide features a presenter on the right side, a woman wearing a blue and white striped cardigan over a purple top. The slide has a light beige background with a black wavy border on the left side. The title is in large, bold, black letters at the top. The bullet points are in a smaller black font, with some text underlined in red.

Let us start then, with the context of individual choice before we even move on to feminist theory. Choice is considered in the current moment, as the lead up to many other moments before it, starting with the late 70s, perhaps to be a new mechanism of self-identity. In many ways, it is influenced by the age we live in, which primarily is produced as a capitalist utopia.

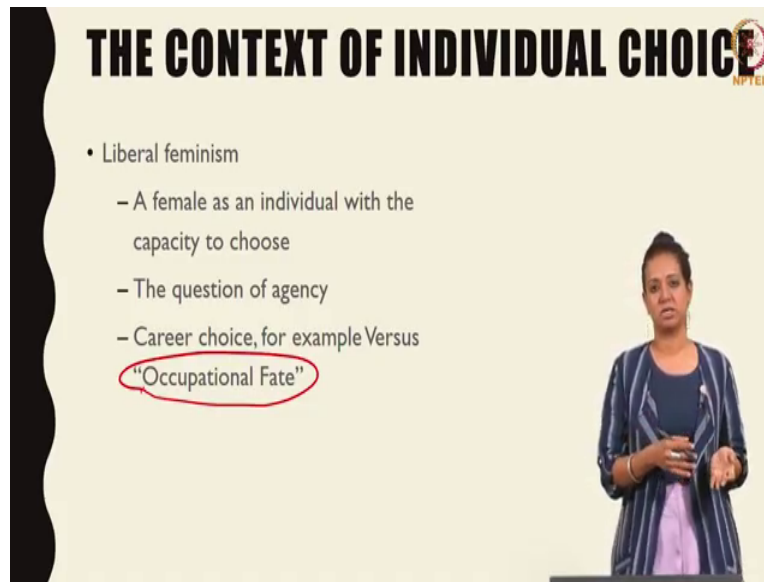
And therefore, in a capitalist utopia and I use it very, very sort of in closed quotes. In such a utopia, choice is your only action available. It is the only way in which you exert your identity in the world, is a commonsensical understanding.

According to Anthony Giddens, this is a problem of late modernity and late modernity, coming as it does after World War II, in an age of increasing uncertainty, breakdown—and such a breakdown is of concepts, ideas, signposts, certainties, what have you—breakdown of structures, breakdown of identities, breakdown of nation states. In such an age, choice is what is produced as, a hallmark of identity. It is a product of what Giddens calls, a milieu of doubt. Nothing is sure anymore, and such unsurety then makes us work through anxiety. To produce the only actions that we are able to produce, by choice. There is a greater array of things, but we do not know how to choose anything between those things and, we all inhabit extremely diverse, extremely segmented life worlds.

What does that mean? It means that, older understandings of community, kin, have broken down to the detriment of our understanding of self and the world, and, in the context of such a breakdown, what happens is that choice becomes a certain kind of rebellion as if we are still exerting our right to be, by choosing how to live.

Now, one of the things that Giddens also says in such a milieu as do other theorists of late modernity, is that this is a very sort of fragmented way to live. It alienates us, it does not allow us any kind of security, which means that choice only allays doubt for about a minute and then we have to make other choices, to be able to allay the anxieties that arise after that. Think about that for just a second, before we move on to the question of what do we do with choice and feminist theory.

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THE CONTEXT OF INDIVIDUAL CHOICE

- Liberal feminism
 - A female as an individual with the capacity to choose
 - The question of agency
 - Career choice, for example Versus "Occupational Fate"

Now, such a context of individual choice, may sound familiar to you from the assumptions of liberal feminism. Because here too is the understanding that, feminism can achieve its goals as long as it gives women the right to choose. Therefore, a female is an individual, with the capacity to choose and that is where we locate the possibility of liberation.

The question of agency becomes very important here and this kind of binary you will encounter again and again in relation to social theory or feminist theory, this question of structure versus agency. Very simply explained; structure versus agency, is a representation of 2 possible vantage points of understanding of individuals lives.

Are our lives governed by structure, do we have rules that we have no choice but to follow, family, kin, state, nation, world so on and so forth. Or, do we have agency, do we have the capacity to act unfettered, by any kind of structure. Which is encapsulated in the term, structure versus agency.

Now, as may be already obvious to you: structure versus agency is not really realistic in that sense. It is not either structure or agency, it could be one or the other, which is that either people have agency or people are slaves to structures. Instead, the truth always lies somewhere in between, and such an in between is often an encapsulation of life as we know it.

In liberal feminism, the question of agency is paramount. The question of whether a woman is able to act in any situation and has the opportunities and the freedom to act, is the side on which liberal feminism weighs.

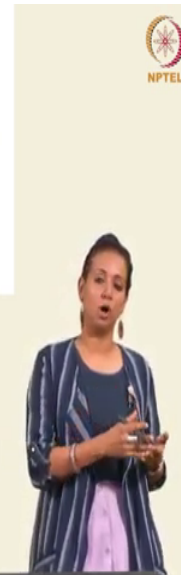
Such a notion, however is subject to a very easy critique because as we well know individuals make choices, but often under tremendous constraints depending on their position in society, and this can be illustrated for example by questions such as career choice and in career choice often the question is well, you know, if women want freedom, why do not they work, why do not they just take up a job?

Which simple question elides the understanding that women are subject to multiple constraints, within which they have to make this decision of whether to have a career or not. Which is why, for example, and I brought this up before, women who work are always asked the question, how do you take care of home, and the term working woman. So, instead if we think about it as occupational fate, that might be able to capture the structure versus agency paradox much better than liberal feminism.

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In couching the issue of occupational behaviour within a choice framework, there is an inherent assumption that all people have to do is choose a particular job or career from a whole array of different options. To operate from this assumption simplifies the issue and implies some kind of deficiency on the part of those who appear to restrict their selection to specific fields . . . educational and occupational choice is a complex process that is significantly influenced by environmental variables. Consequently, the current terminology and framework of choice . . . is inappropriate. (1998: 145)

- Anderson, P.(1998) 'Choice: can we choose it?', in J.Radford (ed.), Gender and Choice in Education and Occupation. London: Routledge, pp.141-61.



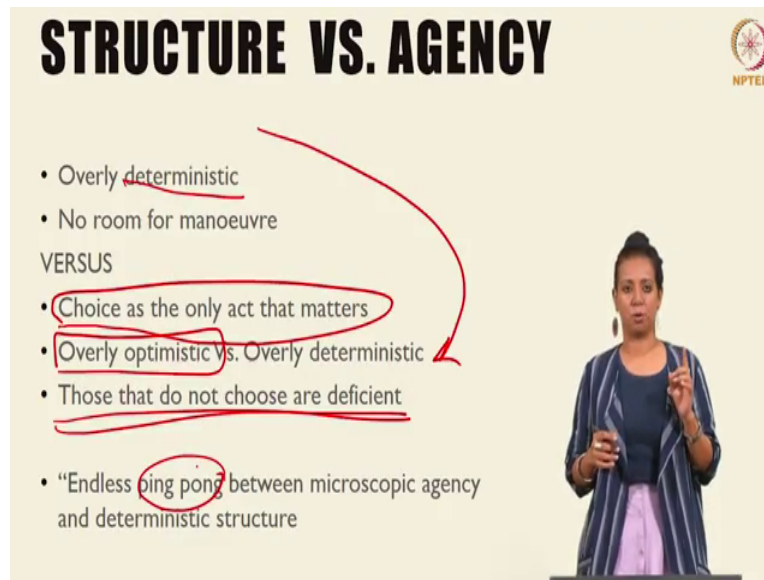
Anderson for example, speaks about work on career choices and the psychology of career choices, in an article called “Choice, can we choose it?”. Let me read out a little bit from the article to be able to understand, how is it that we locate it within the structure-agency debate. “In couching the issue of occupational behaviour within a choice framework, there is an inherent assumption that all people have to do is choose a particular job or career from a whole array of different options. To operate from this assumption simplifies the issue and implies some kind of deficiency on the part of those who appear to restrict their selection to specific fields.

Educational and occupational choice is a complex process that is significantly influenced by environmental variables. Consequently, the current terminology and framework of choice, is inappropriate.” Pause there for a second, to try and understand what this means.

It means that, if we locate people’s choices only within a choice framework, then we tend to overdetermine the agency part of that framework that I referred to earlier. Therefore, people ask questions. Why is it that women always choose careers in this country for example in banks and schools? Because they want a 9 to 5 schedule. But why is it that they want a 9 to 5 schedule, do we then generalize to say that, women actually just do not want to work. I do not know why such a hullabaloo is made about women and careers, when clearly, they cannot work long hours like men. Well, consider a number of environmental variables, primary among them being, the realm called home.

A 9 to 5 allows women to be able to juggle, life-work balance and I say this euphemistically, what I mean to say is that it allows them to continue doing the labor at home as much as work and thereby you see, an overwhelming number of women seeking that kind of stability in time, so that they can plan for the work also pending at home.

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STRUCTURE VS. AGENCY

- Overly deterministic
- No room for manoeuvre

VERSUS

- Choice as the only act that matters
- Overly optimistic vs. Overly deterministic
- Those that do not choose are deficient

• "Endless ping pong between microscopic agency and deterministic structure"

The slide features a presenter on the right side, a woman in a blue and white striped cardigan over a purple top. The text on the slide is annotated with red circles and lines, highlighting key terms and phrases. A red arrow points from the 'Overly deterministic' bullet point to the 'Choice as the only act that matters' bullet point.

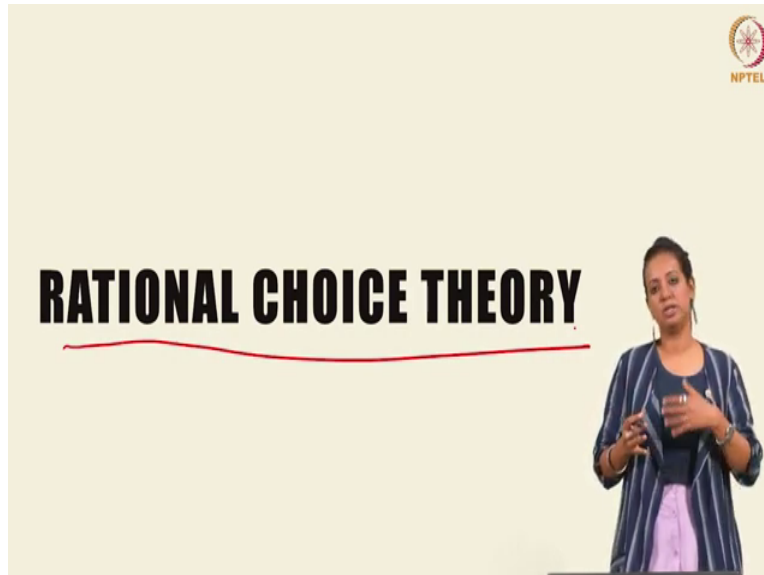
In the structure versus agency debate, however, it would be a mistake to say that everything is about structure. In all of these examples, to say that actually people have very little agency, means that there is very little hope. A structural kind of argument is overly deterministic, it says there is only structure, there is no point fighting it and there is no room for manoeuvre. And why is this a problem? Think about the ways in which we all live. Of course, commonsensically we are all aware of constraint and structure, we are intelligent beings. But within that structure, do we not act, do we not have joy, do we not have hope, do we not find ways to do more than is expected of us, in which case how can there not be agency? However, the agency part of the debate constructs choice as the only act that matters.

In other words, if you are oppressed, is because you did not choose the right thing, if you are unsuccessful, it is because you did not choose the right thing, if you are miserable, it is because you chose badly. So, the fallout from constructing an agency kind of debate, is that you put excessive emphasis on people's ability or inability to choose, as if that is something that the individual decides without constraint.

It is overly optimistic as opposed to structure, which is overly deterministic and very importantly, it condemns those that do not choose, those that refuse to choose or make choices that do not necessarily lead to the things that are good and fair in society, are considered deficient. Their structural constraints are not taken into account.

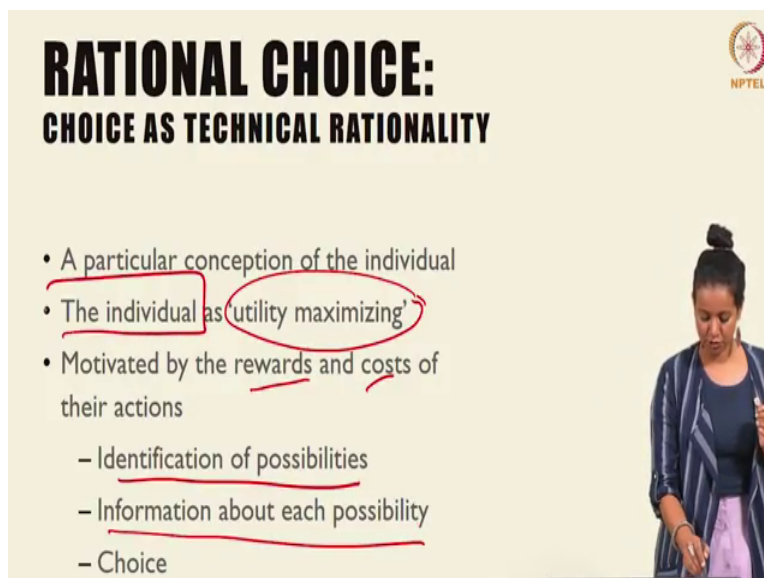
Therefore, there is an endless ping pong between microscopic agency, small agency in everyday life versus deterministic structure, at the macro level. We are never quite sure, where to locate our debate and our argument. Hold on to that problem for just a second.

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Let us start with, the first model in choice, that I will explicate today which is, rational choice theory. Now, rational choice theory of course comes from economics and in many ways consider rational choice theory as the explication, of the agency part of the choice debate. So, let us then expand upon this and take it to a wider conception and see what happens.

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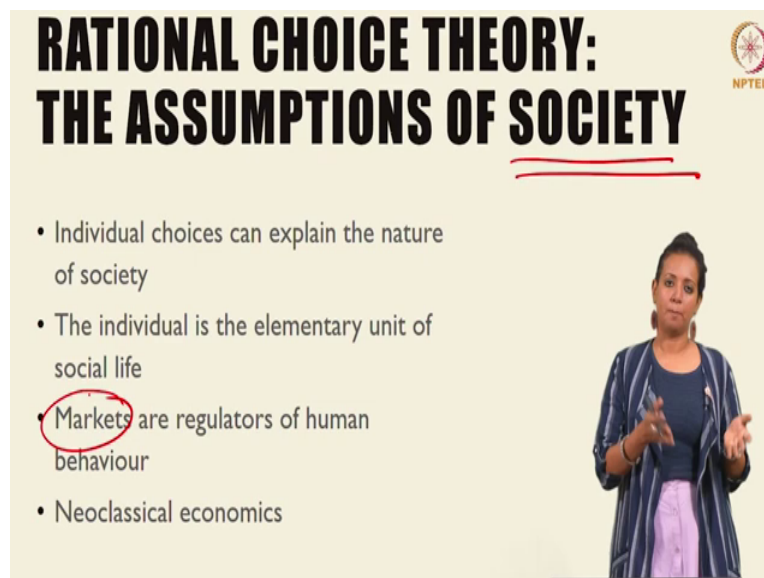
In rational choice theory, we consider choice as a result of technical rationality. Rationality in action and as seen through a range of actions. Rational choice of course, takes into account a very particular conception of the individual as free, as thinking, as sentient and very importantly the individual is always utility maximizing, seeks to get the best possible result from choices.

We will talk a little bit about what that best possible result means, but in just a second. The individual is motivated by the rewards and costs of these actions and therefore in the process of such motivation, identifies possibilities, has information about each possibility and makes an informed choice accordingly.

As you can tell, this is quite an ideal circumstance, I mean what is wrong in this picture. You have a set of things that people are making available to you, the world is making available to you, you have pros and cons with each, you evaluate and say which is the best possible life I will get from choosing a, b or c, c gives you the best life and you are sort of like now c.

And in the process, all of these things are given to all individuals is the understanding, you will get information, you will get capacity to access any choice that you want, the world is your oyster. Now, this is the individual of rational choice theory.

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**RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY:
THE ASSUMPTIONS OF SOCIETY**

- Individual choices can explain the nature of society
- The individual is the elementary unit of social life
- Markets are regulators of human behaviour
- Neoclassical economics

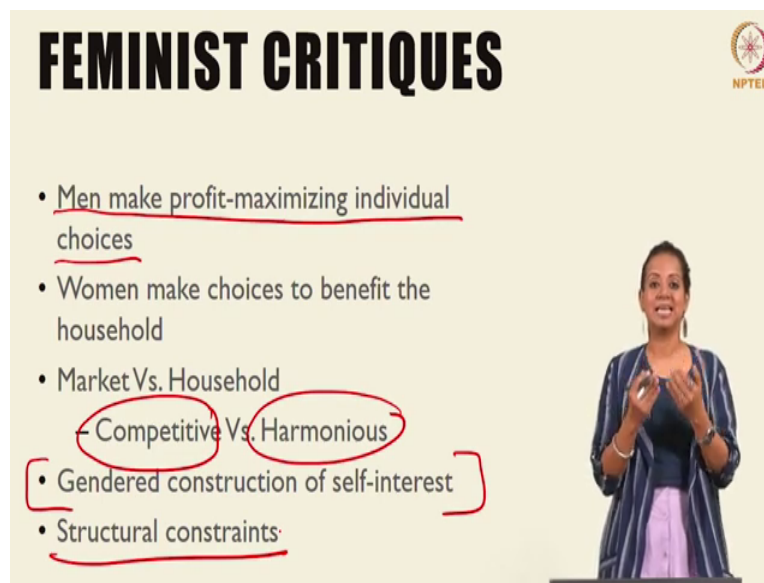
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The assumptions, that undergird such rational choice theory are also about society. In society, the actions of individuals explain the nature of society, they all add up to something. Therefore, complex phenomena in society can be understood, through the actions of individuals.

The individual is the elementary unit, of social life. There is only a set of individuals and these are the units through which society functions. And, very importantly since we are speaking about neoclassical economics, markets, are regulators of human behaviour. Pause for just a second, and examine what that means.

What do I mean when I say markets are regulators of human behaviour. It is not that market is the only institution, but the imagination of a market where demand and supply are the forces that equalize society, is how we imagine everything, including individual behaviour. Which is that certain people make certain sets of choices and if the supply of something runs out, then people will automatically make other choices and society will balance itself out. This is a very sort of, invisible hand idea of society itself, upon which we base rational choice theory.

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FEMINIST CRITIQUES

- Men make profit-maximizing individual choices
- Women make choices to benefit the household
- Market Vs. Household
 - Competitive Vs. Harmonious
- Gendered construction of self-interest
- Structural constraints

The slide features a presenter on the right side, a woman with dark hair, wearing a blue jacket over a purple top, gesturing with her hands. The NPTEL logo is in the top right corner. Red annotations underline 'Men make profit-maximizing individual choices', 'Structural constraints', and circle 'Competitive Vs. Harmonious'.

Now, as you can imagine there are multiple feminist critiques of this form of theory. Primary among them being that every time, such a rational choice theory encounters woman who behave differently, they attribute to women thinking in the service of the household as a primary unit rather than self as a primary unit. Whereas, men always make profit maximizing individual choices. Men think about themselves, women think about the home, and this is how you explain the different kind of choices that men and women make.

In many ways this is a double bind, because on the one hand you are saying, well, it is because women are thinking about the household that they are not making the kind of choices that allows

them to maximize profit. But at the same time, you are also saying that well women are only capable of thinking of the household. So, of course, they will never achieve the kind of profit maximization that men do. So, there is both a critique and a structural constraint embedded, in the same set of assumptions. Markets are constructed as competitive and that is why men compete with one another in making choices.

Whereas, the household is constructed as harmonious and therefore, women make choices to be able to preserve that peace, rather than to be able to “win”. In this, are also embedded, gendered constructions of self-interest, the moment we go back to this question of the self that makes choices, between a set of rationally ordered information replete possibilities. Immediately we know that men will choose differently, women will choose differently and I do not say this as a matter of fact, I am saying this to be able to explain how rational choice theory imagines men and women.

In other words, a woman making the kind of choices that a man makes is considered to be, not woman like and not having the same kind of affinity for household, as men do. Such a theory then becomes inadequate to explain both things, both society and the ways in which gender operates. It does not take into account, any kind of structural constraints in the ways in which gender, men, women operate in a highly gendered society.

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The slide features the title "NEW FORMULATIONS" in bold black text at the top left. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a star and the text "NPTEL" below it. The main content is a bulleted list:

- Purposeful choice
- How do people construct their desires?
- Avoiding the dichotomy of rational/irrational

Handwritten red annotations include:

- A red oval around "Purposeful choice".
- A red oval around "desires?".
- A red arrow pointing from "desires?" to the word "Men" written in red.
- A red arrow pointing from the underlined text "dichotomy of rational/irrational" to the phrase "Women/other" written in red.

A woman in a blue and white patterned top is standing on the right side of the slide, appearing to be the presenter.

People have sought to try and change such an understanding of choice, and instead put forth the possibility of what they call, purposeful choice, which is not rational choice. Where rationality is the quality of individuals that is either present or absent, but that people act with purpose that is in keeping with the nature of their desires.

Such a reworking of rational choice theory attempts to grapple with this question of desire, which can be constructed differently depending on the kind of structures within which such desires arise. And therefore, trying to avoid the dichotomy, of rational men versus irrational women, slash others.

And this is an important thing to remember, which is that we are not throwing rational choice theory out of the window, we are instead asking what are the assumptions of rational choice theory, and how might we be able to mend them.

From here, let us then think about the other formulation within which we can understand the agency part of the debate, without falling back into the structure agency problem. And one of the ways in which people have suggested something like that might happen, is through the notion of something called the poststructuralist choosing subject.

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The Poststructuralist 'Choosing' Subject

Post-structuralist conceptions of the subject have appealed to many because they seem to offer a way through an apparent tension in notions of 'social construction': how do we speak about people as constructions of the social order on the one hand, and as constructing agents or actors on the other, without erring on either side? Those 'social constructionist' accounts of schooling and socialisation which accentuated the determining effects of the social structure and ideology had been unattractive not only due to their inherent pessimism, but also for the ways in which they seemed to obliterate the 'real' thinking person who can choose to resist, change, and 'make a difference'. On the other hand, accounts which emphasised 'agency' and change were too often voluntarist, in danger of assuming an individual able to act and think independently of the social structure and its ideologies.

(Jones, 1997: 262)

Jones. 1997.

NPTEL

Here, let me take you through a little paragraph on the post structuralist choosing subject, and then see what you make of it. Poststructuralist conceptions of the subject have appealed to many, because they seem to offer a way through an apparent tension in notions of social construction.

Now, social construction is a popular phrase because in many ways, thinking about society also entails that we think about concepts as constructed. Constructed is not the same as saying true or false. It merely means, that they are constructed and they can be understood as constructions or objects in the mind.

How do we speak about people as constructions of the social order on the one hand, and as constructing agents or actors on the other, without erring on either side? Tough social constructionist accounts of schooling and socialization which accentuated the determining effects of the social structure and ideology had been unattractive not only due to their inherent pessimism, but also for the ways in which they seem to obliterate the real thinking person who can choose to resist, change, and make a difference.

On the other hand, accounts which emphasised agency and change were too often voluntarist, in danger of assuming an individual able to act and think independently of the social structure and its ideologies. In this is encapsulated the problem of erring one way or the other. Therefore, we turn to the poststructuralist choosing subject which seems to have both sets of words in it, actually three sets of words, structuralism, choice or choosing and subject which seems to be about individuals formed within the constraints of society.

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POSTSTRUCTURAL ACCOUNTS

- A critique of both rationality and humanism
- The consciousness and deliberateness of rationality may be subverted by both conscious and unconscious desire
- An individual is not always "rational, justified, continuous and coherent"

Discourse

What are poststructural accounts? Poststructural accounts are critiques of both rationality and humanism and suggest that the consciousness and deliberateness of rationality may be subverted,

by both conscious and unconscious desire and an individual is not always rational, justified, continuous, coherent.

Think then of the kind of individual, that is assumed by poststructural theory: the individual has desire, the individual has the need to act as an agent. However, the nature of desire is both conscious and unconscious. In unconscious desire we may locate, the working of what is called discourse.

Or the idea that structures in society act upon us, to create in us desires that seemed to come from within us but are actually the result of socialization; an individual's choices or what are called rational choices, can be subverted by such desires. Sometimes, you act in ways that you do not want to act in, mainly because you are coveting these actions. Sometimes, you act in ways that you know, you should not act in, but you just feel like it. The poststructural choosing subject is one such subject.

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The slide features the title "POSTSTRUCTURALIST CHOOSING SUBJECT" in large, bold, black letters at the top left. To the right of the title is the NPTEL logo. Below the title, there are three bullet points. The first bullet point is "Desire is constituted through discourses through which one is subject of and subject to." The second bullet point is "Not all subject positions are equally available," with a red vertical line to its left and a red arrow pointing from it to the third bullet point. The third bullet point is "Individuals have differential access to particular discursive positions:". On the right side of the slide, there is a photograph of a woman in a blue and white striped cardigan speaking. The background of the slide is a light beige color.

POSTSTRUCTURALIST CHOOSING SUBJECT

- Desire is constituted through discourses through which one is subject of and subject to.
- Not all subject positions are equally available
- Individuals have differential access to particular discursive positions:


For the poststructuralist choosing subject, desire is constituted through discourses, through which one is subject of and subject to. One is the subject of discourses, discourses act upon us, which means that they act through us, and we react to them and modify ourselves, in relation to things we hear and see and feel in society.

We are also subject to such discourses, we are bound to be limited by these discourses. Very, very important: not all subject positions are equally available. Which means, individuals do not have

the right to endlessly be whoever they want to be, there are limits to these that change from person to person depending on your location and life, depending on race, caste, class, gender.

These are very real constraints, which means we all operate within a tight repertoire of possibilities and to follow up, individuals have differential access to particular discursive positions. There is very, very clear differentiation between the axis of one person as opposed to the other, and in many ways such kinds of differential access are what we call inequality in society.

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POSTSTRUCTURALIST CHOOSING SUBJECT 

Men have greater access to discourses of autonomy.

The illusion of choice

- Choice, Consequence, Agency
- Simultaneous act of free will and submitting to the existing order

(Handwritten red annotations: a circle around 'illusion', arrows pointing from 'illusion of choice' to 'Choice, Consequence, Agency' and 'Simultaneous act of free will and submitting to the existing order', and underlines under the two bullet points.)



In such a society, and now we come to the punch line, one of the ways in which gender operates is that, men have greater access to discourses of autonomy. Men have lesser constraint in the ways in which they are allowed to be rational choosing subjects. And of course, here I say men as a general category, but this also differs by race, caste and class. So, you already know that there are inequalities shot through even the category of men and you come one rung down the ladder; between men and women, there are greater differences. As enshrined in the understanding of rational men versus irrational women who are not making the right choices. In such a scenario, feminist theory says that, choice is an illusion. Choice, consequence, agency are considered to be related but when choice itself is precarious, the consequences are already given and agency is limited.

Therefore, choice is the simultaneous act of free will, even as one submits to the existing order. What does that mean? It means that sometimes we are doomed to make the same choices, which otherwise appear as free choice.

It feels like people are choosing particular things when they could have chosen something else, but given that they have constrained subject positions, they will make the same choices again and again, and again. Such, are the ways in which structure and agency, battle one another.

And therefore, as we end this session on the question of choice, remember that choice itself, is not a problem, the idea that only those who choose have the right to a good life, is a problem. And this is the kind of critique that feminist theory subjects choice to. In the next session, we will take up another concept. Until then.