Seeing as how I talked about writing this piece a few days ago, thought you might want to see how it turned out. I don't have full bibliographical citations here--I might include a list later today or tonight. But if you want any of the citations in particular, email me at ratli008@umn.edu.

Research that is classified as “feminist” usually meets one or both of the following broad criteria: It takes gender or a specific group of women as its object of analysis, and it is designed in the service of an emancipatory political agenda. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist standpoint theory, the theory that the feminist standpoint has epistemological privilege because the perspective of the oppressed provides a more accurate view of reality than that of the ruling class, who only sees the world in ways that legitimate their power, was considered a favorable approach to feminist research. In the 1990s, however, the influence of poststructuralist and postmodern theory, which is marked by the rejection of universality, truth, totalizing top-down structures of power, and essentialism in favor of the view that society, identities, and ideologies are discursively constructed and that power is multiplicitous and malleable, became evident in feminist research. The following essay is an attempt to review systematically the problematics in feminist standpoint theory and its knowledge claims that the postmodernist and poststructuralist critique brought to the fore.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory takes women's everyday/everynight experience, to use Dorothy Smith's term, as its ground for knowledge claims. As such, a woman's experience is imbued with authority, and her interpretation of the experience is believed to be true and accurate. Smith argues that “taking women's standpoint and beginning in experience gives access to a knowledge of what is tacit, known in the doing, and often not yet discursively appropriated (and often seen as uninteresting, unimportant, and routine).” With the assumption that women's experience is authoritative and true comes the corollary that there is a concrete reality separate from abstract discourse (in feminist standpoint theory, the abstract/concrete dichotomy sometimes carries a gendered connotation). This reality can be known if one studies it using women's experience as the measure of it. Feminist standpoint theory has three explicitly political goals, the first of which is to prove that women are oppressed. I use the term “prove” because the aim here is indeed a truth claim, which carries with it the assumption that there is such a thing as truth (Hekman, “Truth and Method,” p. 342). The second goal is to expose the system that oppresses women, its mechanisms, and the way it reproduces itself. The third goal is to liberate women—to improve women's everyday/everynight lives. Harding claims that “[feminist standpoint theorists] have wanted to identify ways that male supremacy and the production of knowledge have constituted each other in the past and to explore what heretofore unrecognized powers might be found in women's lives.
that could lead to knowledge that is more useful for enabling women to improve the conditions of our lives." Poststructuralist feminists brought the assumptions held by standpoint theorists into question by employing what is often called “the linguistic turn.”(1)

The Postmodernist and Poststructuralist Critique of Feminist Knowledge Claims

The linguistic turn, or the relation of meaning and discourse to power, identity, and society, problematizes experience as authoritative evidence, emphasizing instead the discursive constructions that lead to the effects that are then experienced and interpreted by the individual. Joan Scott, in “The Evidence of Experience,” discusses what happens to women (rape, domestic abuse) as the effect of discursively constructed systems. She argues that as feminist researchers, we should change our object of study from events and “reality” to discursive systems that shape experience; for example, alongside studying the experience of American slaves in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, we should study the discursive systems of racism and capitalism that produced slavery as an effect. Scott points out that the tendency to use experience as evidence naturalizes, or reifies, discursively-produced identities such as gay, lesbian, woman, Black, and transgender. She critiques studies that “take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference” (p. 777). An example of Scott's approach is to, instead of studying workers, study the concept of class, how it is discursively produced, and how it produces the identity category of “worker.”

The calling into question of women's experience as authoritative and true was the most significant blow to feminist standpoint theory, as it cast doubt upon the fundamental basis of the theory. However, poststructuralist feminists also criticized the totalizing notion of a monolithic “women's experience” and “feminist standpoint.” Such notions essentialize the category of “woman” and do not take into consideration power differentials among women. In addition, poststructuralist feminists problematized reality, truth, objectivity, and the standards for evaluation of knowledge claims. Feminist standpoint theorists had assumed that the feminist standpoint was better and resulted in a more accurate knowledge claim because the oppressed group can see the world from its own point of view and from the point of view of the ruling class. The poststructuralists and postmodernists disagreed. There is no objective reality that can be known, by feminists or anyone else, they argued. Knowledge is perspectival, and the feminist perspective does not necessarily have epistemological privilege. It is partial, just as the masculine perspective is partial. In response to this point, Harding, Hartsock, and Hekman replied in defense of standpoint theory that the feminist standpoint is indeed partial, but it should be privileged over a masculine standpoint because it leads us to a more just society and to oppositional subjectivity. The poststructuralist and postmodern feminists also complicated the notion of power—instead of the top-down structural totality conceptualized by standpoint, poststructuralist and postmodern feminists espoused a Foucaultian view of power, in which agency and subjectivity are both
enabled by and constrained by the possibilities within discursive power formations. Power is not simply possessed by one group; it flows throughout society and can be exercised as small-scale tactics or large-scale strategies.

**Reconciling Feminist Research and the Postmodern Turn**

It would seem as though many differences exist between feminist standpoint theory and poststructuralist and postmodern feminist theory. The stakes of the debate, for feminist standpoint theorists, include the loss of political ground gained, the loss of credibility of feminist knowledge claims, and the loss of epistemological privilege. However, I would argue that one important similarity exists that open up a space for feminist knowledge claims: Both groups of theorists are studying formations of power in general, and both have a political goal, specifically the liberation of women and an egalitarian society. In my reading of feminist standpoint theorists vis-à-vis poststructuralist feminists, I have noticed that, whereas feminist standpoint theorists are studying the knowledge that are and are not legitimated by masculine domination, poststructuralist feminists are explicitly studying the discursive formations that shape social relations and knowledges. This is a subtle difference; both groups have a similar object of study—power and knowledge—but poststructuralists approach the object at a deeper level, language. I am persuaded by the poststructuralist and postmodern critique of knowledge claims and see value in poststructuralist feminists' work. Any new knowledge building that feminist researchers do must address the poststructuralist and postmodern critiques and must use terms such as "woman" accordingly, qualifying the terms to avoid hegemony and essentialism. The argument that power, knowledge, and society are embodied in and expressed through discourse must be taken into account. I believe this can be done with a political goal in mind.

Poststructuralist feminists have often been criticized by feminist standpoint theorists for eliding issues of power; in other words, poststructuralist feminists study and theorize difference and are dismissive of power. I would argue that feminist standpoint theorists are making straw men of poststructuralist feminists' arguments, implying that the linguistic turn in feminist analysis is socially irresponsible, "elitist and exclusive," and that such researchers are unconcerned “that their work ignores power and masks inequality” (Scott, “Response to Gordon,” p. 859). I believe poststructuralist feminists' arguments are being misread, but also that poststructuralist feminists are not sufficiently explaining the political implications of their work. That the material violence and injustice against oppressed groups is important to poststructuralist analysis is apparent in "The Evidence of Experience." Scott argues that historians (and feminist researchers, I would add) should try

> to understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced, and which processes themselves are unremarked and indeed achieve their effect because they are not noticed. To do this a change of object seems
to be required, one that takes the emergence of concepts and identities-as-historical events in need of explanation. This does not mean that one dismisses the effects of such concepts and identities, nor that one does not explain behavior in terms of their operations.

(p. 792)

The way Scott presents her argument here is indicative of a problem in poststructuralist feminist analyses. I am sure that Scott takes very seriously the effects of such discursive constructions as race and sexuality. In fact, I believe poststructuralist feminists want to study the discursive constructions precisely because the effects of such constructions are utterly devastating. They do not want to tell a woman who has been raped, patronizingly and smugly, from an elitist stance, that there is no reality and that her experience has no authority because it is simply her interpretation of the event, no better or more credible than the rapist's interpretation of the same event. My claim here is simply that poststructuralist feminists have not emphasized and foregrounded the political implications enough. Instead of making the political implications clear, they leave it up to the reader to extrapolate them, and when their work is criticized as being depoliticized, they insist that their research is political, but do not show exactly how it is political. Studying the discursive construction of identities and phenomena while foregrounding the political implications and the specific ways that one's research contributes to an emancipatory agenda, as Grewal and Kaplan's model shows very well, is what feminist researchers should do to make the most potent knowledge claims.

(1) I use only "poststructuralist" here and not "postmodernist" because the term "poststructuralist" seems to be more closely associated with the linguistic turn than the term "postmodernist." In using "poststructuralist," I also mean to convey the assumptions of postmodernism: the rejection of modernist dichotomies, universality, progress, rationality, and objective reality.