ABSTRACT. The French post-structuralist thinker, Michel Foucault, was a philosopher, psychologist, historian and sociologist. He combined this interdisciplinary knowledge to theorize new conceptualizations of discipline, power, and knowledge and their implications for ideas of human bodies, sex, and sexuality, all of which culminated in his overarching quest to investigate the production of truth. Foucault examined how institutions and people regulate bodies, both their own and those of others, in society and rooted his theories in examples of the institutions and discourses of his time while channeling experiences from his own identity as a disciplinary scholar and gay man. Deviating from conflict theory, Foucault theorized truth and power as omnipresent and relational forces constructing all institutions, disciplines, and discourse. Beyond conflict theorists’ critiques of Foucault’s ideas on power, Foucault has also received many critiques from feminist scholars such as Nancy Hartsock and Nancy Fraser who objected to his perspective on power, considering his own position of relative privilege as a man. Thus, his discussions of power, though intended for a universal audience, are less relevant to women’s experiences. Additionally, his conception of power as an omnipresent and relational force limits people’s ability to change power discrepancies. This intellectual biography finds that while Foucault’s own identity and background crucially informed his theories, they also left his ideas vulnerable to the criticisms they face today. Nonetheless, through both his enduring contributions and their continual critique and revision by modern theorists, Foucault’s impact on sociology, psychology, and philosophy, among other things, continue to impact contemporary social and cultural works.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Michel Foucault is a major figure in the poststructuralist wave of thought, connecting to intellectuals from all different fields. At the end of his life, he claimed to be the most prominent living intellectual in France and achieved celebrity-like status. This hubris, while arguably justified, also provides fodder for his modern critics. His work ranges from multiple disciplines, such as history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. He is one of the most cited authors across all of the humanities in general, except for philosophy, the primary subject that he was educated in. Foucault is best known for his critical studies of social institutions, psychiatry, medicine, human sciences, and of course, the history of human sexuality. His fascination with sexuality and the human body likely derived from his personal relationships and sexuality. He proved that understanding one’s sexuality is not as easy as one may think.

Additionally, his theories address the relationship between power and knowledge, and how they are used as a form of social control. He believed that individuals oversimplify
the transition from monarchy to democracy. He also makes the point that where power lies, resistance is also present. Foucault mentioned that all of his work was part of a single project to investigate the production of truth. He continually sought a way of understanding ideas that can shape our present by tracing the changes in their function through history. Michel Foucault is an “influential intellectual who steadfastly refused to align himself with any of the major traditions of western social thought” (Ball, 2013). His interdisciplinary background and elevated vision of his own accomplishments allows him to forge his own path of original theoretical thought.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1926, Michael Foucault, or Paul-Michel Foucault, is a 20th-century French historian and philosopher. As the son of a STEM family, Foucault grew up in a stable, bourgeois family but diverged onto a path of philosophy and psychology. Both parents were children of the local doctor and surgeon; they longed for Foucault to follow in their footsteps. With a medical background from his parents, it would have made complete sense for Michel to follow them into the medical field. Michel, of course, chose a different path while his sister did fulfil their parents’ wish to have a child work in the medical field.

Michel decided to move to Paris to attend the École Normale Supérieure d’Ulm — “the most prestigious institution for education in the humanities in France” and the “standard launching pad for major French philosophers” (Kelly, 2019). At the ENS, he established a reputation as a brilliant but erratic student. He focused his studies on philosophy but also took material from his psychology class, completely defying the wishes of his father. His years at ENS were filled with constant depression, which led to a suicide attempt. After his attempt, Foucault became more open and understanding about his homosexuality. Foucault also joined the French Communist Party but was never active. His experiences with depression and coming-to-terms with his identity as a homosexual man informed his later psychological and sociological works. His political interests coupled with his identity as a white man shaped some of his most well known and oft-critiqued ideas on power.

After obtaining his philosophy degree, he taught psychology at ENS; one of his students being Jacques Derrière, a philosophical antagonist of Foucault. Foucault went on to take positions at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, Poland, and Institute Français in Hamburg before eventually publishing his initial famous piece, A History of Madness. Foucault found work in Paris and forged an academic relationship with Daniel Defert, a student turned sociologist. In the 1970s, he became incredibly politically active and protested on behalf of marginalized groups. He then founded the Prisons Information Group, sometimes known as the GIP. This group worked to provide aid for political prisoners but also sought to give a voice to these prisoners. His work with prison reform inspired his book, Discipline and Punish. In the late 1970s, when the political climate began to cool off, Foucault withdrew from activism and turned his attention to journalism.
Foucault began to spend more time teaching in the United States because he was welcomed by a very enthusiastic audience. In 1983, he agreed to take a position as visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley. A year after taking the position, Foucault passed away from AIDS. He had acquired HIV during his time in the United States, which soon developed into AIDS. His health quickly declined while trying to edit the first two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. He left two volumes to be completed by Defert; however, only one was published. He was working up to the day of his death trying to complete his works. Michel Foucault was a brilliant student and teacher of the humanities with long-lasting theories. He continues to affect society decades later as people both adopt and critically evaluate his contributions.

**INTELLECTUAL TRAJECTORY**

Michel Foucault's own identity as a gay man, informed by his studies of philosophy and psychology, enabled his inquiry into social narratives surrounding human bodies and sexuality that did not seem to accurately encapsulate his own experience of his body and sexuality. This, coupled with the academic influence of sociologist Daniel Defert, resulted in Foucault introducing the application of a sociological lens to the human body itself and, in particular, to conceptions of human sexuality.

Foucault's theories are rooted in a post-structuralist perspective within the European tradition (Finkelde 2013). As such, Foucault views social institutions and conventions as the primary influences of our sense of self and our subsequent behaviors. In particular, Foucault applies this way of thinking to his examination of the human body itself and how people identify and manifest their sexuality. He recognized that conceptions of bodies are not simply biological, but are socially regulated (Powers 2011). He is especially known for using this perspective to prove that categories of sexuality are social constructions, shaped by the institutions and interactions around us (Beckett, Bagguley, Campbell 2017).

Foucault wrote about institutions as a primary disciplinary force that regulate our ideas and behaviors. He applies Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon model to describe how institutions, which he sees as the primary disciplinary force, all act as a form of Panopticon to describe how people are disciplined by their involvement in systems of constant observation and regulation (Foucault 1979). On an individual level, Foucault traces social change through the continual discipline of bodies, which results in the creation of docile bodies. As we get older, we are subjected to more and more layers of discipline, and the more experience we have within the variety of institutions that we encounter, the more we are taught to regulate our bodies to best fit and function within our society (Foucault 1979).

While this describes individuals' internal development, Foucault also describes how as the world changed with the progression of industrialization and capitalism, so too did bio-power (Foucault 1986). Those developments led to further expansions of institutions, and therefore the expansion of governing discourses, such as bio-power techniques (Gane 2018). Additionally, through discourse, we delineate what is
considered normal, exceptional, shameful, etc. and we can also be empowered by our confessions (Beckett, Bagguley, Campbell 2017). This is because power exists in what is said and what is not said, and is experienced by those speaking and those listening, and thus informs all aspects of our lives.

Foucault delved deeply into investigations of the concepts and manifestations of power and truth. In doing so, he theorizes about the attributes of power in ways that deviate from the conflict perspective on power and its roles. As mentioned, to Foucault power is omnipresent, continually shaped, and constructs institutions and discourse. For example, informed by his work in many different areas of academic study, Foucault argued that disciplines of knowledge use power to grant themselves and their findings legitimacy. Foucault viewed power as relational and identified it when it was being exercised, not when it was used by and on any particular source or target (Foucault 1986). Similarly — according to Foucault — the concept of truth includes all aspects of the discourses produced by all elements of institutions (Deacon 2002). His sociological revelations require us to critically evaluate the discourses surrounding topics of bodies, sex, and sexuality and to recognize their origins in bio-politics to better evaluate their truth (Prozorov 2017). Foucault writes that bio-power imbues biological attributes with their social, political, and economic consequences and leads to increased control of people’s bodies, sexuality, and sex (Foucault 1986). He argues that as the world grew increasingly industrialized and capitalism spread, so too did bio-power. This is because as those developments led to further expansions of institutions, it also expanded governing discourses, such as bio-power techniques. The concept of bio-power is also an example of how Foucault saw power as relational and circulatory and is exercised through discourse.

**CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Foucault was one of the most influential and controversial scholars of the post World War II period. He was regarded as a “master of thought” (Miller 1993). He wrote mostly on philosophical questions with an emphasis on the nature of knowledge, truth, and power. His noteworthy intellectual contribution was his ability to illustrate how these three things were used as a platform of social control through various societal institutions. Some institutions that he discussed included science, medicine, and penal systems. These institutions often created subject categories for people to inhabit and turn others into objects of scrutiny and knowledge. Foucault argued that because of this, there was the creation of hierarchies of power among people and in turn, this produced hierarchies of knowledge. This shaped the idea that when one obtains any form of knowledge, they are also considered to be powerful, legitimate and right. In contrast, anything less of this is considered invalid, inaccurate, and wrong. Foucault argues that those who control institutions and their discourses wield power in society because they shape the trajectories and outcomes of people’s lives (Cole 2019). Therefore, we learn that power is not held by individuals, but rather lives within institutions and is accessible only to those who control institutions and the creation of knowledge.
Throughout his focus on uncovering how “power” was developed through ways of regulating and controlling people, Foucault discussed the “birth” or creation of prisons, madness, education, mental illness clinics, asylums and sexuality (Dillon 2020). In the example of prisons and the reasons as to why they should be created, we realize that with Foucault’s perspective in mind, prisons weren’t designed to lock away criminals, but rather serve as houses of confinements and departments of correction. It was — and still is — a form of power and hierarchy of the police officers and guards within the prisons over the prisoners. Examples of this hierarchy of power include the controlled and supervised daily routines by the armed guards, scheduled and monitored meal times, shower times, visiting hours, etc. Through this, we see that society controls and regulates our human bodies.

CONTROVERSIES AND CRITICISMS

Although Foucault brought many ideas and theories to the table within the realm of sociology, he had many critics. Roger Kimball, an American art critic and conservative social commentator, criticized both Foucault’s sexual ideals as well as James Miller’s justification and support of Foucault’s theories from his book, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. In his article, Kimball argues that arrogance and mystification were two indications of Foucault’s character and writing. Foucault was said to attempt suicide several times as well as threaten it, while self-destruction, sex and death were also some of his obsessions. Miller, however, suggests that Foucault, in his radical approach to the body and its pleasures, was a kind of visionary; and that in the future, once the threat of AIDS has receded, men and women, both straight and gay, will renew, without shame or fear, the kind of corporeal experimentation that formed an integral part of his philosophical conquest (Kimball 1993). Kimball goes on to discuss how Foucault’s ideas of sadomasochism were wrong and disturbing. In one of his interviews, Foucault praises sadomasochism and says that “the idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure and that sexual pleasure is the root of all our possible pleasure” (Kimball 1993). Here, Kimball argues that there are many other ways for a human being to receive pleasure other than sexually. Things such as having one’s favorite meal, getting a haircut, going to the movies, reading a book, spending time with friends and family, etc. can all be considered forms of pleasure.

German philosopher and sociologist in the tradition of critical theory, Jurgen Habermas, is also one of Foucault’s critics. In a 1981 discussion of postmodernism, he referred to Foucault as a “young conservative” (Fraser 2008). Habermas categorized him as such because of his critique of modernity. He was critical of Foucault not because power is incongruous but because Foucault’s conceptions of it inflict environmental damage for which he can be held philosophically accountable (Kelly 1994). Although both acknowledge power and its influence within practices and society, Habermas’ view is different from Foucault’s. He believes that although power is to be considered, it should be done so through a critical theory to be able to make normative distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power (Kelly 1994). Another difference between Foucault and Habermas is their view and stance on modernity. Foucault rejects criticism
of modernity, while Habermas defines it as a set of problems related to the issue of time and relates it to the Enlightenment.

Nancy Hartsock, an American philosopher and renowned feminist, stated that women could “discover their own values and gain authentic agency only through acts of solidarity with feminist protesters and dissenters” (Meyers, 2019). In Foucault’s theories, women are not explicitly examined as a different category. Foucault “... fails to provide an epistemology which is usable for the task of revolutionizing, creating, and constructing” (Hartsock, 2013). In Foucault’s eyes, deconstructing power is only a weakening movement -- one that cannot bring forth adequate transformations. This exclusive definition of power leads Hartsock and other feminists to feel as if “Foucault’s world is not [their] world but instead a world in which I feel profoundly alien in” (Hartsock, 2013). His perspective on power comes from a position of power that does not allow for external reflection. Foucault is in the majority as he is both white and male and has not experienced the struggle to fight the power that he dismisses in his theory. In Hartsock’s critique, she believes that Foucault “…reinforces the relations of domination in our society by insisting that those of us who have been marginalized remain at the margins” (Hartsock, 2013). Despite recent traction, women have been historically oppressed and marginalized. With current feminist movements and media representation women have begun to gain more recognition, but, “his account makes room only for abstract individuals, not women, men or workers” (Hartsock, 2013). Although Foucault’s theories are directed towards the general public, Hartsock reminds his audience that the universal man does not share the same experience as any marginalized group. Despite commonalities, women are different, women have specific experiences, and women recognize that they are not the universal man that can experience the world in the way Foucault imagines it.

Nancy Fraser, a prominent feminist professor, expanded on her critiques of his theories by saying that his work was too tied to the idea of “docile bodies,” which denied the fact that people have the ability and desire to resist power. When Foucault talked about resisting and reproducing power, he argued that there would always be unequal power relations, thus silencing any argument and ultimately reproducing power. The idea that the relations between race, economy, gender, etc. cannot change only further the discrepancies between men and women. For women, resisting power is a means of change and a fight for equality. To ignore that in his theories is as if to say that women do not deserve the same rights. These ideas benefit white male hegemonic ideologies and construct a view of gender and sexuality that are limiting in their beliefs. His theories are rather gender-neutral and do not acknowledge how vastly different women and men are impacted by the hierarchies of power. Foucault does not agree with the Enlightenment theory that truth is directly opposed to power, which undermines the emancipatory goals of feminism. Fraser argues that Foucault’s non-partisan opinion on power does not support feminism because it lacks resources that could criticize his hierarchy of domination and facilitate social change.

CONCLUSION
Foucault’s particular blending of his own identity-specific experiences, his varied academic interests, and his formidable intellect resulted in contributions to sociology, psychology, and philosophy that are both respected and critically reckoned with today. From his initial years in France, he was able to develop some of his theories on power, knowledge, and the way society upholds certain hierarchies. He was most known for his idea that power is controlled by people and communities through certain acts of force and control; power is not in the hands of a single ruler, but rather omnipresent. His work covered a broad range of subjects and his theories on bio-power continue to influence studies in philosophy and political science. Michel Foucault was a revolutionist for his time, as he was able to explore many ideas that had not been elaborated on by other sociological theorists. He became enthralled by the concepts of punishment and discipline and actively sought engagement in communities that expressed unique methods of surveillance such as mental asylums, prison, schools, factories, and other workplaces. These environments allowed him to explore his ideas on power and see how they were manifested in places that had direct sources of domination. Through his personal understanding of sexuality and gender studies, Foucault was able to better analyze how such topics were presented in the 19th century. Even though he despised the term homosexual and often grappled with his sexuality, he applies his sexual curiosity to his work in France. However, though Foucault utilized his own identity and experiences in these instances to gain especially incisive insight, his areas of privilege insulated him from other perspectives, such as a feminist perspective, among others, and inform critiques of his work today.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FOUCAULT’S MAIN WORKS**

 Much of Foucault's work surrounded theories of madness, power relations, bodies and sexuality, and the orders of life and knowledge. His work reflected the environments that he was in whether it be academic settings, specific organizations, or personal endeavours. The evolution of Foucault’s personal growth and sociological analysis is evident in his critically acclaimed pieces, *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *Discipline and Punish*, and the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.

**Madness and Civilization**

This is a historical examination of the concept of madness and the role that madness has played in all facets of society, whether in ideas, behaviors, or institutions. This work is formed from both Foucault’s extensive archival work and his anger at what he saw as moral hypocrisy. Foucault also argued that the antithesis of madness is Reason, but that newer supposed treatments of madness are essentially controlling forces.

**The Birth of the Clinic**

Building off of his previous examination of the medical profession concerning the treatment of madness, in this book Foucault focuses on the development and function
of teaching hospitals. Additionally, he evaluates the power and limitations of the medical regard/medical gaze.

**The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences**

Foucault interrogated assumptions of truth throughout history and proved the malleability of truth depending on the conditions surrounding its construction at the given time, place, and context. Foucault offers an analysis of what knowledge meant, as well as how it is changed in Western thought from the Renaissance to the present.

**The Archeology of Knowledge**

This was a notable publication because it marked both Foucault's foray into methodological writing and his first in-depth discussion of the power and role of discourse, which became central to his theories and his particular conceptualization of post-structuralism.

**Discipline and Punish**

In this work, Foucault heavily critiques systems of punishment and contrasts historical punishment that was exercised via repression tactics with modern era disciplinary styles of punishment that are enacted by "professionals" with authority over prisoners. This has inspired many of the prison and disciplinary institution reformists and is also where Foucault detailed his influential application of the Panopticon model to larger societal functions.

**The History of Sexuality (3 Volumes)**

These three volumes had slightly differing focuses but all were set in the 1800s to the present, which was a more modern focus than his previous works, which had all extended further historically. These works formed some of the most potent elements of his legacy today since they featured discussions of sexuality, the politics of sexuality, and the relationship between sexuality and the rise of bio-politics. Foucault achieved this through an examination of both expressions and repressions of sexuality.

**REFERENCES**


