

Original Article

WHAT DIVIDES THE SUBJECT? PSYCHOANALYTIC REFLECTIONS ON SUBJECTIVITY, SUBJECTION AND RESISTANCE

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Abstract

The paper argues that the meaning of subjectivity is controversial, even within psychoanalysis. While all schools of psychoanalysis agree that the unconscious creates a subjectivity that is divided, there is great disagreement over what divides the subject, particularly what divides it against itself. The paper examines two controversies that bear on the relation of subjectivity and subjection. The author argues that a psycho-social theory of subjectivity has to account for the effects of the social without succumbing to the reductionism of social determinism, and has to account for the idiosyncrasies of human subjectivity without removing subjectivity from its social and historical context. The author roots one relation between subjectivity, subjection, and resistance in what she calls "normative unconscious processes": unconscious collusions with normative demands to split off and project such human attributes as dependency, emotion, and assertion. Subjects comply with such demands in order to be recognized as "properly" gendered, raced, classed, and sexed subjects, but relational repetition compulsions often express simultaneous resistance to and collusion with oppressive norms.

Keywords

normative unconscious processes; subjection; psycho-social; unconscious; resistance

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Introduction

The object of psychoanalysis is the subject, subjectivity. But what do we mean by subjectivity and how does subjectivity come into being? Feminists and others, both within the field of psychoanalysis and outside, have deconstructed the traditionally male version of subjectivity, the bounded, rational, autonomous subject, and many other versions of subjectivity have been proffered in its stead. In this sense of the term, subjectivity is situated, socially constructed, historically mediated, gendered, raced, classed, etc. – subjected to social norms, to be sure, but not necessarily riven by unconscious conflict. While few psychoanalysts feel that the social and historical situatedness of the subject has much to do with psychoanalytic subjectivity, psychoanalysts of all camps agree that the subject is divided, and, more particularly, divided against itself. And, yet, there is controversy here, too, for the many schools of psychoanalysis that currently co-exist define the causes, mechanisms, and stakes of this division quite differently. Is it birth that divides the subject internally? Separation? Annihilation anxiety? Innate aggression and omnipotence? A result of an originary and prolonged state of helpless dependence? Castration and the Oedipus complex? Unconscious narcissistic identifications? Acute trauma? Ongoing interpersonal strife? The answer given to this question differentiates one psychoanalytic school from another.

Assuming, then, that the conceptualization of subjectivity is itself a “site of struggle” – even within psychoanalysis – I will begin by highlighting certain debates among Anglo-American psychoanalysts, debates that shed light on the relation between subjectivation, that is, the process of becoming a subject, and subjection. I will then take up what has most vexed those of us engaged in theorizing psycho-social subjectivity: on the one hand, the need to address psychoanalysis’s collusion with ideologies that separate subjectivity from its situatedness in the social, and, on the other hand, how to address the subject’s emergence within particular power structures without reducing subjectivity to social determinism.

Two psychoanalytic debates on the nature of subjectivity

How one answers the question of “what divides the subject?” depends in large measure on how one conceptualizes the relation between self and other, for, in most psychoanalytic theories, it is the encounter with otherness that divides. And in most analytic theories, this encounter is figured as antagonistic. Thus, the tension between subjectivation and subjection is at the heart of psychoanalytic theory, even if social structures besides the family are rarely considered as sources of subjection. A recent psychoanalytic controversy has led to new ways of thinking about subjectivity and about the relation between self and other. The controversy centered on whether we are born fused with the other, in

a symbiotic tie (Mahler *et al.*, 1975), or whether we are born with an at least incipient form of subjective agency. Daniel Stern's (1995), Lou Sander's (1983), and Beatrice Beebe's (1985) groundbreaking studies of infant development challenged Mahler's view that babies begin in symbiotic fusion with the mother by claiming to demonstrate empirically that infants show signs of a separate subjectivity from the outset, including an innate capacity and need to intuit the intentions of others with whom they engage. In many psychoanalytic theories, the mother is figured as narcissistically enmeshed with her baby and therefore a third figure is needed, usually conceptualized as the father, to rescue the baby from maternal engulfment (and thus begin the process of subjectivation). The infant researchers contested the notion that the first tie is a narcissistic one and contested the idea that subjectivity begins only with separation from the mother. This opened new psychoanalytic possibilities for feminist theorizing about the mother's and the baby's subjectivity, and about the co-construction of subjectivity within relationship.

In feminist psychoanalytic theory, Chodorow (1978), working within the object relations and separation-individuation analytic tradition, had already elaborated the differing effects of the 1950s' white middle-class sexist norms on male and female subjectivity. These norms denied mothers any agency beyond caretaking and tending the home; yet, as primary caretakers, mothers were the main figures with whom the child had to negotiate separation and differentiation. Building on Chodorow's work, Benjamin (1988) argued that in conditions in which mothers are denied subjective agency and fathers do not allow their daughters to identify with their agency, a boy's subjectivity is likely to be based in omnipotent denial of need for the other, while a girl's is likely to be based in submissive attachment to the other.¹ But equally important was Benjamin's counter-model of subjectivity. Influenced by Beebe, Sander, and Stern's observations of mother–infant play and mother–infant co-creation of patterns of mutual regulation and mutual affective attunement, Benjamin contested traditional (and individualistic) psychoanalytic views that the primary task of individual development is a progressive process of becoming separate from and independent of others, particularly the mother. Alongside the Oedipal law of “renounce, renounce”, she elaborated a law based in the pleasures of attunement and the pleasures of being recognized as a subject by another subject. This revision of psychoanalytic theory proposes a kind of tie to the other that is neither a tie of identification nor a tie of subjection. Although subjectivity here is inextricably intertwined with (but not pathologically fused with) the subjectivity of the other, the other is not figured as necessarily oppressive or intrusive (nor is the baby figured as destructive and torn by love and hate). We can certainly find in Freud some instances in which the development of subjectivity is grounded in loving relationships with others (e.g., in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1922), but these instances are few, and what dominates instead in Freud's work is a vision in which subjectivity begins

and develops in antagonism toward the other. This view, of course, is one that tends to pathologize dependence and vulnerability, or, perhaps more accurately, it is a view that is unconscious of its anxiety about dependence and vulnerability and rids itself of these dread states through a particular version of developmental theory and Oedipal law (see Irigaray, 1985).

Within psychoanalysis, there continues to be a tension between those who see the endpoint of healthy development as the achievement of separateness from the other, and those whose theories convey less anxiety about dependence and connection. At one end of the spectrum are theories in which the subjection of the subject to the desires and needs of the other is paramount, and the other is figured as narcissistic. Other developmental theories, for example, Kohut's (1971, 1977), posit an original merger in which functions first performed by the parent (e.g., soothing) become internalized by the child, who eventually performs them him/herself. Although Kohut's theory recognizes the ongoing need for what he calls "selfobjects," these are objects used in the service of stabilizing the self, and are not subjects in their own right. At the other end of the psychoanalytic spectrum are theories that assert that subjects develop within relational matrices and negotiate differentiation and connection throughout life. Some of these theories (e.g., see Lyons-Ruth, 1991) argue that an ongoing sense of secure attachment is the necessary ground of the development of capacities for autonomy. In a similar vein, Fairbairn's (1954) model for health emphasized what he termed "mutual interdependence", a capacity simultaneously to be both connected and separate, dependent and independent. And in Benjamin's (1988) model, a hallmark of both health and ethical subjectivity is the capacity to sustain what she calls the assertion–recognition dialectic: a form of subject–subject relating in which each subject is able to both assert its own subjectivity and recognize the subjectivity of the other.

A second and related contemporary debate that bears both on the nature of subjectivity and on the question of what divides the subject centers on how one understands the origins of aggression. And this depends on one's view of human nature: are we born with and primarily motivated by destructive wishes and omnipotent strivings? Are we primarily motivated by relational strivings, longings for love, or, as Hirsch has put it (describing the view of early interpersonalists such as Harry Stack Sullivan), the "striving for safety and security of self and for loved others" (1998, p. 518)? Are we born with both aggressive and erotic drives and is the primary developmental task to temper one with the other (e.g., in Kleinian's theory, where reparation arises from guilt about destructive wishes and acts against the mother)? Most psychoanalytic theorists suggest that we all contend with an originary omnipotence, a wish to impose our agenda on the other. Benjamin (1988), for example, draws on Winnicott's (1971) essay on object usage and object relating to support her view that intersubjectivity, the capacity for mutual recognition, is a developmental achievement that arises from a process of "destroying" the other and

experiencing the other's survival of our destruction. Only then do we have the capacity to conceptualize the other as external to the self. Crucial to healthy development is the experience that interpersonal ruptures can be repaired. While I agree with the latter assertion, my sense is that Benjamin's view of originary omnipotence is not compatible with her views on mutual accommodation and on the pleasures of attunement.

My own thoughts on subjectivity and aggression are more indebted to Kohut (1971, 1977), who contested the twin psychoanalytic beliefs in originary destructive omnipotence and aggressive drives. For Kohut, founder of the psychoanalytic school of self-psychology, omnipotence and aggression are break-down products of narcissistic injury, that is, they arise to defend against further wounding, shaming, trauma. Stephen Mitchell (1988), a founder of relational psychoanalysis, also argued that aggression arises as a product of relational breakdown. In these paradigms, the subject is seen to be divided against itself as a result of either acute trauma or ongoing relational injury. Thus, these theories assert that it is not the mere encounter with a desiring other that inaugurates a subjectivity divided against itself, but rather the nature of that encounter.

Relational trauma and the divided subject

The re-introduction into psychoanalysis of the effects on subjectivity of actual trauma thus provides different answers to the question of what divides the subject, and, in particular, what divides the subject against itself. While my own thinking is largely indebted to the interpersonal/relational schools, which means that I believe that subjectivity is constructed from ongoing relational engagement with both internal and external "objects", I yet have learned what I know about subjectivity from a wide variety of psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic sources. From Freud, I take the idea that all subjects are riven by unconscious conflict, but my work with patients draws me to Kohut's, Winnicott's, Fairbairn's, and Ferenczi's beliefs that what causes neurotic misery is not originary helplessness, castration, or Oedipal struggle, but rather the unconscious conflicts produced by relational trauma – including shaming, humiliation, gross relational unpredictability, and empathic ruptures that are consistently met with retaliation and withdrawal rather than with attempts at repair (Benjamin's (1988, 2004) term, *doer–done to*, well captures this kind of relating, in which one is treated as an object rather than as a subject). I find Klein's (1946) work on splitting and projective identification most useful for understanding the sometimes rapid-fire relational breakdowns that take place between the patient and the analyst in the consulting room. Seligman's (1999) work on the way parental projections and infant introjections fly back and forth from the earliest moments of life and become sedimented into repeated patterns suggests to me that the most painful forms of alienation from self, and the

repetition compulsions that are the source of most people's suffering, have their roots not in the human condition but in early and ongoing relational struggle. Ordinary human unhappiness is a result of what we all have to do to make sense of loss, mortality, generational difference, the birth of siblings, the indifference of the universe, constraints on getting what we think we want. But our cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to the way our significant others love and nurture (or withhold love and nurture) are, to my mind, the source of neurotic misery. The other's consistent or intermittent abuse of our vulnerability, mild or major, the other's consistent or intermittent misrecognition – these are the events that fragment the subject and divide the subject tragically against itself (thus, I have always found the postmodern impulse to celebrate a fragmented subject to be the absolutely wrong response to the bourgeois celebration of a unified rational subject (see Layton, 1998, Chapter 5).

At the same time that I maintain that relationally induced trauma and responses to it are at the heart of the neurotic misery of the divided subject, I also believe that subjectivity is more than what is captured by theories that reduce subjectivity to subjection. For, I believe that we weave our subjectivity – in complex and non-linear ways, to be sure – from our conscious and unconscious responses to the *two* kinds of relational experience that most of us have: one in which we are treated as objects by the significant figures in our lives and one in which we are treated as subjects. One could state something similar in other psychoanalytic terms: for example, Kleinians might say that subjectivity alternates between paranoid–schizoid and depressive positions. But the difference between this view and mine would be that, for Klein, these states arise from the infant's responses to his/her innate destructiveness, and Klein and her followers place far less emphasis than I on what the parents or other significant figures have actually done. In other words, while I do think that mutuality, or subject–subject relating, is a developmental achievement, I believe that it is a capacity that grows from good-enough parenting, the earlier mentioned “pleasures of attunement”, and from having been recognized as a subject by others from the outset (see Benjamin (1990) on the developmental line of mutuality).

Models of psycho-social subjectivity

From the earliest days of psychoanalysis, there have been attempts to account for the relation between the psychic and the social as well as attempts to understand the results of subjection to oppressive cultural norms. One early model conceptualized society as the primary cause of neurotic conflicts, social defenses, and particular character structures. Freud (1908/1959), for example, wrote about the ways that a sexually repressive society could cause neurotic anxieties, and Fenichel (1953) wrote about anal neuroses caused by capitalist culture. Many early analysts and social theorists (e.g., Reich, Fromm, and other

members of the Frankfurt School) understood character structure to be a precipitate of socio-economic structures and contradictions. Christopher Lasch's (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism* and Tod Sloan's (1996) *Damaged Life* are more recent works in this tradition.

Another early model posited the very opposite: that neurotic conflicts are primary in defining the form of a society. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913, 1955), *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922, 1959), Freud argued that the origins of the social lie in conflicts within the primal horde. Here, the sons' rage at the primal father's freedom to exercise his sexual and aggressive instincts without restraint leads them to murder the father. The ensuing sense of guilt ushers in a more egalitarian, but at the same time a far more repressed version of society, in which no one is allowed to enact the primal father's instinctual freedom.

What are some of the implications for a social psychoanalytic theory of the relational views of subjectivity that I have highlighted here? Elaborating a relational view of the development of subjectivity, one in which we are always internally and externally imbricated with others, Butler has pointedly challenged psychoanalytic views that stop short of engaging with social constraints on subjectivity:

The "I" who cannot come into being without a "you" is also fundamentally dependent on a set of norms of recognition that originated neither with the "I" nor with the "you" ... The task is... to think through [humans'] primary impressionability and vulnerability with a theory of power and recognition. (Butler, 2004, p. 45)

One of the main difficulties for those of us who do recognize the effects of the social is how to account for the effects of the social without succumbing to the reductionism of social determinism, and how to account for the idiosyncrasies of human subjectivity without removing subjectivity from its social and historical context (as most dominant discourses are wont to do). How can we capture the way that subjectivity tends to resist subjection to oppressive social norms and simultaneously becomes complicit in sustaining them, the way we simultaneously strive for mutuality and yet tend to replicate doer-done to relations?

As I said earlier, my own way of conceiving the relation between the psychic and the social suggests that subjectivity emerges from an ongoing conflict between relational experiences in which we are treated as objects and relational experiences in which we are treated as subjects. Each of us, if we are lucky, grows up with some predictable experiences of mutuality in relating. But each of us as well is vulnerable to the shaming assaults that arise from being treated as objects. One major source of these shaming assaults is cultural hierarchies of classism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism – the power structures that establish norms of recognition. Such hierarchies tend not only to idealize certain subject

positions and devalue others, but also to do so by splitting human capacities and attributes and giving them class or race or sex or gender assignments. The culturally desirable attributes go to the dominant group; the ones the culture least rewards to the subordinate. Thus, social processes such as gendering, racing, classing, and sexing are at the very heart of subjectivity and subjective trauma, not accidental add-ons (as they are conceived to be in most psychoanalytic theories). We may all be born dependent and helpless, for example, but the way dependency is lived subjectively is very much marked by the ideals of proper masculinity and femininity that circulate within and between classes and races. And these ideals are bound up with a culture's norms concerning whether or not it is shameful to be dependent. Psychoanalysis is well suited to explain how cultural demands to split off capacities such as vulnerability, assertion, connection, dependence are lived both intrapsychically and interpersonally.

Because cultural hierarchies split and categorize *human* attributes and capacities, subjectivity is marked by unceasing conflict between those unconscious processes that seek to maintain the splits and those that refuse them. I call the ones that seek to maintain the splits "normative unconscious processes" (Layton 2002, 2004a, 2006a b), that is, processes that pull for us to repeat those affect/behavior/cognition patterns that uphold the very social norms that cause psychic distress in the first place. Repetition compulsions are the place where the struggle between coercive normative unconscious processes and counter-normative unconscious processes are enacted, where we will find the conflict between those parts of self that are shaped by relational trauma (and that divide the subject against itself) and those parts of self that have known and are able to seek out relationships based in mutual recognition of self and other as separate but interdependent subjects. These repetitions tend to be stirred up and played out in relation, particularly at moments of heightened vulnerability. Because the result of splitting is to keep what has been split off near, because we project what we repudiate onto others, the ways in which WE have been wounded will inevitably stir up the wounds of those with whom we seek intimate contact. Thus, the defensive aspects of our identity investments implicate us in each other's suffering.

Let me give an example: Norms for what it means to be a proper boy operate from the moment of birth, in the very ways a child is held and spoken to. A male child comes to know quite early what the norms are for a proper boy of his class and race, what it will take to get the love and approval of parents, teachers, parents' friends, etc. (contradictory though these demands may be). To be a proper boy generally requires splitting off ways of being that are not considered desirable for a boy, many of which are associated then with femininity. The ways of being that are split off are central to being human: anger, emotionality, assertiveness, dependency longings. And so the way we experience our gendered identity becomes inextricably interwoven with such universal staples of subjectivity such as emotion and assertiveness. Let us look at what

happens when, to be a proper boy requires that the child split off dependency longings: (1) That which is split off, as Freud (1915) said of what's repressed, "proliferates in the dark ... and takes on extreme forms of expression ..." (p. 149). Split-off dependency longings do not disappear, even when projected onto another. The process of splitting off dependency longings conditions both the way the child experiences independence and how he experiences and defends against the emergence of any feelings of dependence. The version of independence that emerges from split-off dependence takes an extreme, even monstrous, form, for example, omnipotent assertion. (2) In the boy's female complement, a cultural mandate to split off assertive strivings, combined with the boy's projection of dependence onto her, might produce an agency marked by hostile dependence. Thus, the multiple forms of splitting and projection that go on between those in dominant and those in subordinate positions in the social hierarchy have psychic consequences for those "below" that reverberate back onto those "above"; the split polarities of omnipotent assertion and hostile dependence will tend to mark the form of relations between dominant and subordinate subjects. (3) Splitting results in what we might call reversible structures. Hostile dependence and omnipotent assertion are in fact psychologically complementary and not opposites (see Benjamin, 1988), and it is easier to shift into a complementary structure than to undo the splitting on which it rests (Layton, 2004b c). (4) What is split off must be kept near, and relational repetition compulsions will aim to heal the split while simultaneously preserving it. (5) Those who split off dependency and defensively keep longings at bay cannot see themselves in the dependent longings of the other, and in fact will experience these longings as oppressive. Thus, the way we defensively use our own investments in class, race, sexual, and gender hierarchies to distinguish ourselves as superior to others perpetuates our own suffering and blocks our capacities to acknowledge the way we are mutually implicated in each other's suffering (Layton, 2007). What divides the self ultimately divides the self against others.

Conclusion

Unconscious conflict, to be sure, is not produced solely by oppression. The subject is divided by experiences of loss, by confusing experiences that the organism might be too immature to comprehend, by desires that are blocked by various kinds of limits. But I have argued that it is relationally inflicted wounding, not ordinary human unhappiness, that is most inimical to the development of the kind of subjectivity that a psychoanalysis mindful of the workings of power and mindful of the cultural constituents of subjectivity would hope to nurture: a subjectivity with space for reflection, for imagination, for dreaming, for the capacity to be both self-critical and critical of authority, a subjectivity that can acknowledge both destructiveness and vulnerability,

a subjectivity that fosters versions of agency and connection that acknowledge mutual interdependence and accountability to others.

This psychoanalytic ideal stands in radical opposition to the versions of subjectivity on offer as “ideal” in the US today. In the past thirty years, neoliberal economic policies have created enormous disparities between the rich and the poor; this situation of gross class inequality, together with neoconservative foreign policy and the experience of September 11, 2001, that allowed that policy to become dominant, has created what Hollander and Gutwill (2006) call a traumatogenic environment. Our government has increasingly retreated from providing any functions that might contain anxiety and trauma; on the contrary, government, in concert with the media and corporate policies, has done its best to keep people frightened. Fear has led to splitting and projective identification, and large segments of the population, traumatized in different ways depending on social location, have taken up polarized positions of “us” *vs* “them”. Instead of mourning the losses produced by corporate and government policies, or challenging these policies, most subjects have sought refuge in the narcissism of minor differences and/or an intensified individualism. Indeed, I believe it is no accident that the very decades marked by neoliberal economic policies have been those in which virulent backlash movements against women, immigrants, racial, and sexual minorities have arisen.

People on all sides of the political spectrum in the US feel frightened, helpless, and vulnerable – vulnerable in relation to foreign and internal “others” who hate “us” and who threaten “our” way of life, vulnerable in relation to being disposable and replaceable in the workplace. Neoliberal subjectivity, built on a denial of vulnerability that it both stokes and deems shameful, encourages those who are able to do so to disidentify with dependence, need, and other forms of vulnerability, and to defend against such states with manic activity – punctuated, to be sure, with all the meditative and restorative services that people can afford to purchase. We have become so caught up in saving our own skins and soothing our own anxieties that we can no longer see how our fate is intertwined with the fate of others.

The power of psychoanalysis to effect social change is, of course, limited. But my sense is that the kind of subjectivity psychoanalysts want to foster cannot emerge from a psychoanalysis that splits the psychic from the social, one that does not take cultural power differentials and oppressive social norms into account (see Layton, 2006b). Indeed, a psychoanalysis that separates the psychic from the social is likely to collude with individualist trends and to produce healthier versions of narcissism, thereby failing to produce subjects who can see themselves in others outside the intimate circle of family and friends. Clinicians who know what trauma does to subjectivity, clinicians mindful of the way that social norms and social policies affect processes of subjectivation, subjection, and resistance, can at the very least challenge

splitting processes and thus challenge the ways that difference becomes vulnerability-denying distinction. To do so requires, among other things, coming to terms with how our own identity investments sustain both our suffering and the suffering of those with whom we relate. To that end, we need to understand that the very way our psychic structures become intertwined with split gender, race, sexual, class, and other identity investments not only divides subjects against each other, but divides the subject against itself.

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Note

1 Note that in mainstream psychoanalytic theories, neither historical nor cultural factors much matter in the constitution of what is essential to psychoanalytic subjectivity. Primary are oedipal issues (sexual difference and generational difference) and pre-oedipal issues (annihilation anxiety, separation, and individuation) that, to a greater or lesser degree, are figured as independent of environmental factors. Thus, much of what I will be talking about as constitutive of subjectivity would be considered in classical and other mainstream theories as either epiphenomena, as the accidents of fate, or as preconscious material.

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