

Original Article

SUBJECTIVITY OR PSYCHO-DISCURSIVE PRACTICES? INVESTIGATING COMPLEX INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

Margaret Wetherell

Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Correspondence: Margaret Wetherell, Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK

E-mail: m.s.wetherell@open.ac.uk, URL: www.identities.org.uk

Abstract

This paper considers some of the ways in which the concept of "subjectivity" has been defined and, in particular, the ways in which it has been contrasted with "identity". It argues that given this intellectual history, the concept of subjectivity is a problematic place to begin re-investigating and re-formulating the terrain of the psychological and the social. Problems with notions of subjectivity are particularly vivid in psychoanalytic psycho-social research with its critique of post-structuralist discourse analysis and its re-inscription of interiority. An alternative focus on psycho-discursive practices is recommended. Psycho-discursive practices are recognizable, conventional, collective and social procedures through which character, self, identity, the psychological, the emotional, motives, intentions and beliefs are performed, formulated and constituted. It is argued that qualitative research on identities is now sufficiently sophisticated to be able to leave behind older distinctions between publicly defined "identity" and the private self evoked by the notion of subjectivity.

Keywords

identity; subjectivity; psycho-discursive practices; intersectionality; performance; psycho-social

Subjectivity (2008) 22, 73–81. doi:10.1057/sub.2008.7



Recently I was reading Edmund White's autobiography, *My Lives*, and I was struck by how perceptively he evokes the challenges involved in studying identity. In particular, he captures the over-determined nature of moments of identification, and points to the ways in which these work through dense entanglements of emotion, memory, narrative and embodiment. He reminds us of the territory a journal like *Subjectivity* might cover and why it might be theoretically and methodologically demanding.

Here is one typical vignette from White. He is describing the influence of Jean Genet on his work and what he owes Genet.

Later, when I wrote the life of Jean Genet, I recognised myself in his characters whose very nature is subject to transubstantiation – through First Communion, for instance, or marriage. The bride changes her name, thus her entire identity. It's as if her molecules were being replaced. In the same way in Genet a boy, holding on to a pole in a subway car, suddenly thinks of himself as Joan of Arc grasping a lance – and instantly *becomes* Saint Joan. The idea of magical transformation arising out of a careless gesture, of the miraculous invading the quotidian: these notions were not unfamiliar to me (2005, p. 150)

In White's account the boy in the subway becomes infused and animated by discourse, by a particular, canonical, cultural narrative – the Joan of Arc story. He draws upon that cultural resource for a moment to figure himself to himself. That figuring is immediately embodied. It affects the affordances of his surrounding environment so that the pole in a subway car becomes a lance. It infuses into stance and gesture, into his performance of self, worked up as fantasy and through imitation. Intriguingly, his identification does not follow any neat logic of group- and category-based identities; he incorporates a female heroine. I was less persuaded by White's notion of identity transformation as transubstantiation and thus as miraculous. But I like his evocation, via Genet, of identification as a complex act of meaning-making: simultaneously world formulating and self-configuring. Identification is revealed as integrative, relational and practical – a matter of transforming cultural resources into performances.

How can we do justice, then, to complex phenomena of this kind? It demands a subtle account of the ways in which the social gets packaged in forms that people can turn into identity and make psychological. It also requires analyses of meaning-making (or discourse) in the very broadest sense, incorporating the physical, the visual and the tactile organization of human conduct along with text and talk. It seems to me that social psychology and identity studies are now poised to achieve this. We have a range of new conceptual tools and new qualitative methods and we have moved decisively past some of the time-consuming epistemological wars of previous decades.

A new journal, then, picking up this territory, is timely and promising. But I wonder whether “subjectivity” is the most useful conceptual vocabulary for

trying to make sense of the psycho-social and the complex processes authors such as White evoke so well? “Subjectivity” does have many advantages. It draws attention to the more hidden aspects of the boy’s act of identification in the subway – his internalization of narrative and fantasy. “Subjectivity” recalls the importance of the psychological and links new research into older intellectual histories shaped by phenomenology and psychoanalysis. In the hands of very skilled psycho-social researchers (e.g. to name just a few, Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2000; Frosh *et al.*, 2002), it has been highly generative. But is this still the right conceptual vocabulary for a new and inclusive cross-disciplinary research effort? I am not so sure.

The issue for me as a discourse researcher in social psychology is the boundaries of “subjectivity”. Does subjectivity encompass everything about the psycho-social? If it doesn’t, then what is it defined against, and, crucially, what is omitted as the contrast? Does this terminology not take us right back to some old dichotomies and some intellectually worn out ways of working? In this paper I want to argue that there is this danger. I want to draw attention in particular to the ways in which “subjectivity” is often formulated through contrasts with “identity” and raise some questions and problems.

In his recent book, *The Postcolonial Challenge*, Couze Venn draws attention to the conventional ways in which “identity” and “subjectivity” are defined against each other. In so doing, some of the potential problems involved in marking out subjectivity as the site for new research efforts become evident. “Identity”, Venn claims, “refers to the relational aspects that qualify subjects in terms of categories such as race, gender, class, nation, sexuality, work and occupation, and thus in terms of acknowledged social relations and affiliations to groups – teachers, miners, parents, and so on” (2006, p. 79). Subjectivity, in contrast, indexes the “substantive acting, thinking and feeling being” (*ibid.*). He adds, following Charles Taylor (1989), that subjectivity evokes the set of processes by which a subject or self is constituted. This self, he suggests, is “the product of an interiorization of attitudes, values, expectations, memories, dispositions, instantiated in inter-subjective relations and activities that, through historically specific self-reflective practices of recognition, constitute a particular named person, a singularity” (*ibid.*).

Venn goes on to argue that any complete account of lived lives needs to include both identity and subjectivity. So he wants to investigate the ideological and normative processes that define the content and power of any particular social identity as well as the psycho-social processes involved in coming to inhabit that identity. “Identity”, thus, allows the researcher to investigate what groups and their relations make possible for subjects. “Subjectivity” tells the story of how a specific self lives those available cultural slots, actively realizes them, takes responsibility and owns them as an agent, turning social category memberships and social roles into ethical, emotional and narrated choices. If I have understood Venn correctly, it is “subjectivity” that makes it possible for any

particular social identity to be lived either thoroughly or ambivalently, while “identity” helps specify what there is to be lived.

Venn in his own work thus complicates relations between identity and subjectivity in interesting and potentially useful ways and he goes on to develop some insightful and nuanced accounts of post-colonial lives. But, the damage may be done. The beginning point of “identity” *vs* “subjectivity” has already boxed us in. It doesn’t make it easy for the rest of us to pull together what has been so decisively set apart. “Identity” *vs* “subjectivity” is reminiscent, for example, of some much older thinking in social psychology. It reminds me of Henri Tajfel’s (1981) distinction between “personal” and “social” identity or George Herbert Mead’s (1982) earlier distinction between the agentic “I” which is the core of the self and the various forms of “me” or social presentations of self. Although once exceptionally useful and suited to their times, neither of these distinctions now capture the new directions in which identity studies are moving. Neither distinction picks up the complexities we are finding and which we now have ways of investigating through new forms of qualitative research. Do we want to keep encouraging forms of work that corral the social and the study of identity to roles and categories and separate the subjective from the study of the social? Identity studies and social psychology are already richer than this, so let’s not go back to these older conceptual vocabularies and distinctions.

In a recent interview, the novelist Philip Roth had this to say about identity and subjectivity, and to my mind the assumptions evident in his comments indicate precisely why social psychologists and social scientists should be wary of distinguishing the two, and wary, also, of making subjectivity newly interesting while rendering identity dull.

Roth was asked what he felt about being seen as an American-Jewish writer:

It’s not a question that interests me. I know exactly what it means to be Jewish, and it’s really not interesting. I’m an American. You can’t talk about this without walking straight out into horrible clichés that say nothing about human beings. America is first and foremost ... it’s my language. And identity labels have nothing to do with how anyone actually experiences life.

[Later in the interview]

I am interested in the object, the ...the thing, the story, the aesthetic jolt you get from being inside this ... thing [character]. (Krasnik, 2005)

It is hard to work out quite what Roth identifies with and at what level, and what he means by his comment that being Jewish is not interesting. Part of his point seems to be about the taken-for-grantedness of identity. People simply are Jewish or American and that’s woven so tightly into who they are that it can be “black-boxed” as an unnoticeable but central part of how they operate rather like language.

But Roth is clear that when we do start “talking identity” there is an aesthetic failure because the public language of identity doesn’t capture experience. Here, in a familiar way, he divides public from private, collectivity from singularity, banality from authenticity, and these divisions are laid over what is recognizably “identity” *vs* “subjectivity”. As in the conventional definition Venn sets up, identity becomes constructed as the public face: about groups and the external. It is about social categories, horrible clichés and modes of conduct derived from those social categories. It is how the person is known to others in the broadest, most general and least interesting ways. Subjectivity, on the other hand, or singular character, sums up the actual complex person and lived life. Subjectivity annexes the aesthetic and the experiential, the feeling stuff, the personal in contrast to the ready-made, and the “real” as opposed to the ideological.

As a self-confessed identity researcher, I am piqued! And not just because it seems real life is being lived and studied elsewhere by much cooler and more creative people. I want to note three particular problems with distinctions between “identity” and “subjectivity” and with adopting the term subjectivity to mark out new research sites.

The first problem is that with this division of labour we immediately miss something very important about the nature of social identities and category memberships. We are likely to miss the ways in which practices allocated to “subjectivity” such as self-reflexivity and the patterning of affect and emotion are absolutely integral to the very construction and definition of social categories and their cultural imagining. To give an example, Bev Skeggs (2002), for instance, has recently argued that supposedly basic psychological properties such as self-reflexivity cannot be mobilized equally (see also Adkins, 2002). Self-reflexivity has become particularly associated with, used to signify and mark out, middle-class subject positions just as lack of reflexivity, “bad choices”, bad taste and inappropriate self-revelation have come to signify working class. Older concerns with “respectability”, particularly for women, have been re-worked in new genres and through new subjectifications.

Skeggs, Wood and Thumim tracked these themes in their research on identity formation and the new genre of “reality television” in the ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme (www.identities.org.uk and Skeggs *et al.*, 2008). Their work demonstrates how social class is being symbolically re-worked through evocations of universal moral value and worth which are then presented back, via reality television formats, to audiences for entertainment and judgement. In this analysis social class emerges not just as a material position but as a position in an affective hierarchy where value is assigned to particular kinds of emotional displays and bodies (see also Ahmed, 2004). These are then “individualized”, dramatized, and used to “read” and figure class.

It is not, therefore, that social scientists can first define social categories and social identities and then see how these are instantiated through subjectivity.

Rather, features conventionally marked out as to do with “subjectivity”, as Venn might be the first to acknowledge, are intrinsic to the formation and cultural representation of what gets marked out as “identity”. Banal identity labels, in other words, turn out to be not so banal. In Roth’s terms, identity labels in these individualized times come in fact with the “aesthetic jolt” already accomplished, woven into how an identity can be lived and taken up.

A second problem with a conventional distinction between identity and subjectivity is that in marking out subjectivity as the interesting element we are failing to rise to the challenge of the new work on intersectional identities. Work on intersectionality (Brah and Phoenix, 2004) demonstrates, for example, the ways in which identities based on social categories are inextricably inter-linked and mutually articulated. This research has shown the ways in which social categories based on race and ethnicity are in complex interaction with social class and gender (to name but three social categories). It shows how identity categories are related to and defined through each other, constantly being re-configured across social contexts. Intersectional positions become translated into motivating and canonical, narratives and stories that, as White’s example shows, are part of the currency through which people live, recognize and take up the social. Such research has powerfully demonstrated the difficulties of decomposing identities as they are lived into constituting categorical fragments in any meaningful way. The standard definition of identity as the thing that is simple, public and uncomplicated, a matter of social category memberships, power relations between groups and social roles, once again begins to fray. The recent explosion of qualitative research on identity is demonstrating that social identity cannot be taken for granted as any simple “outside” to subjectivity or simple content for subjectivity to work upon.

My third and main concern, however, with taking subjectivity as our analytic starting point is that once again we may end up over-emphasizing interiority and privacy. “Subjectivity”, when contrasted to publicly available “identity”, risks becoming privatized and individualized. Experience becomes not just singular but also introspective, emerging from life re-lived internally. It should be the case that the study of subjectivity should no longer index the self-authorized introspections of the sovereign individual. Post-structuralist discourse theory, more than any other line of research, has deconstructed privacy and interiority through its analyses of subjectification. Yet, this lesson seems fragile – particularly so in psychoanalytically inspired psycho-social research on subjectivity. The recent critiques of post-structuralism found in some of this work seem to suggest that the concept of subjectivity continues to be a refuge for older psychological and romantic models of the self.

Psychoanalysts have for some time now talked in a more constructionist vein, describing the ways in which people build personal meanings (e.g. Mitchell, 1993). They no longer assume that it is possible to identify what “really happened” in the past. What is now seen as more crucial is how an individual

has constructed the meaning of what happened, developing a personal idiom (Bollas, 1989) and associations, and their own, enabling or disabling, narratives. Interpretation in therapy no longer claims to be authoritative, omniscient and final but simply positive and generative of new ways of being. The focus, too, for many, has moved to the web of relations in which the child and then the adult are embedded, as opposed to lone struggles to reconcile id and super-ego forces.

There has been a useful rapprochement, therefore, with some aspects of less individualized and privatized perspectives on subjectivity. But this constructionism is highly partial and often combined with a critique of discourse analysis and post-structuralist work on subjectification. A false, straw person, contrast is often constructed between discourse research, which is said to deny agency and has a simplistic social determinist view of cultural inscription, and psychoanalytic psycho-social approaches which rescue agency and subjectivity (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson (2005) and see the response by Wetherell 2005). This, then, is one dominant account of subjectivity which, for me, raises concerns about what the general intellectual trajectory of subjectivity entails as the topic for a new journal.

It does huge violence, of course, to ethnomethodology, linguistic ethnography and conversation analysis, which have been such a potent influence on discursive work in social psychology, to read them as cultural dope accounts uninterested in agency. More to the point, however, such a reading loses out on the lively, active account of inter-subjectivity and relationality found in this work. What is often missing from psychoanalytically inspired studies that privilege a conventional view of subjectivity is an understanding of the patterned discursive practices of social interaction, along with any sense of how narrative and meaning-making work as social action. The individual may have been placed in imagined relation but is not yet in everyday interaction.

We are left with the person out of context, pulling meaning from mind, from out of the psychological depths, an account that neglects the social psychological order contained in the routines, procedures, communicative practices and action sequences in which people are embedded and through which we perform identity. The empirical study of conversation, dialogue, interaction and relationships has highlighted the communicative practices through which we relate, present ourselves, organize our responses to each other, construct contexts and jointly build meaningful worlds. As discursive research in social psychology has revealed, these communicative practices are both socially regular (like “identity”) and person constituting (like “subjectivity”) (Wetherell, 1998, 2003).

These trends, then, and histories, explain my suspicion of “subjectivity” as the analytic starting point. My own preference in trying to make sense of both the cultural resources for identity work and *in vivo* identity performances is to make

psycho-discursive practices the unit of analysis (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). Psycho-discursive practices are a particular class or kind of discursive practices – not all practices are discursive (making, communicating and organizing meaning as their main object) and not all discursive practices implicate a psychology or implicate an identity, although many do. Psycho-discursive practices are recognizable, conventional, collective and social procedures through which character, self, identity, the psychological, the emotional, motives, intentions and beliefs are performed, formulated and constituted. Forms of investigation such as discursive psychology (not just in its current narrow conversation analysis manifestations but more broadly defined), narrative analysis, some psycho-social methods, sociolinguistics, psychological anthropology, ethnography, cultural studies and textual analysis, and so on, take these as topic.

To conclude, the aim of the editors of *Subjectivity* is to rethink the terrain of the psychological and the social in new and appropriately complex ways. And the intention is to do this at a moment in the social sciences when even disciplines like geography, social policy and politics – formerly contemptuous of the psychological – are becoming interested in identity and emotion. At a point, too, when those developing new, global, ethical and political analyses of current social contexts (e.g. Walkerdine, 2003; Gilroy, 2004) include psycho-social accounts of subjective states in their arguments. Gilroy, for instance, in his work on contemporary complex multicultures, outlines what he calls the melancholic standpoint taken by many white English citizens in the face of ethnic difference and imperial history. The challenge, I have tried to argue, is to do this without eviscerating the social and “dulling down” identity defined as the “other” to subjectivity. I would very much like to see the journal become an opportunity to play with new conceptual vocabularies. Subjectivity may be a useful starting point but it will not be, I hope, the final word and I hope, too, it will prove possible to move beyond some of its existing connotations and the highly contested psychic/social distinctions that still seem to plague the study of subjectivity and identity.

About the author

Margaret Wetherell is Professor of Social Psychology at the Open University and Director of the ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme. Her research has focused on developing theory and methods for discourse analysis in social psychology and has included empirical work on masculine identities, “race” and ethnicity and, recently, discursive democracy and citizens councils. Among other publications, she is the co-author of *Citizens at the Centre* (Policy Press), *Men in Perspective* (Prentice-Hall) and *Discourse and Social Psychology* (Sage) and co-editor of *Discourse Theory and Practice* (Sage), *Discourse as Data* (Sage) and *Analyzing Race Talk* (Cambridge University Press).

References

- Adkins, L. (2002). *Revisions: Gender and Sexuality in Late Modernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bollas, C. (1989). *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brah, A. and Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a Woman?: Revisiting Intersectionality. *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 15(3), pp. 75–78.
- Frosh, S., Phoenix, A. and Pattman, R. (2002). *Young Masculinities: Understanding Boys in Contemporary Society*. London: Palgrave.
- Gilroy, P. (2004). *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*. London: Routledge.
- Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*. London: Sage.
- Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2005). Panic and Perjury: A Psycho-social Exploration of Agency. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44(2), pp. 147–163.
- Krasnik, M. (2005). Interview with Philip Roth – ‘It No Longer Feels a Great Injustice that I have to Die’ (translated S. Paisley). *The Guardian*, 14 December.
- Mead, G.H. (1982). *The Individual and the Social Self*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Mitchell, S.A. (1993). *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis*. New York: Basic Books.
- Skeggs, B. (2002). Techniques for Telling the Reflexive Self. In May, T. (ed.) *Qualitative Research in Action*. London: Sage, pp. 349–375.
- Skeggs, B., Wood, H. and Thumim, N. (2008). “Oh Goodness I am Watching ‘Reality’ TV”: How Methods Make Class in Audience Research. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(1), pp. 5–24.
- Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human Groups and Social Categories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Venn, C. (2006). *The Postcolonial Challenge: Towards Alternative Worlds*. London: Sage.
- Walkerdine, V. (2003). Reclassifying Upward Mobility: Femininity and the Neo-liberal Subject. *Gender and Education*, 15(3), pp. 237–248.
- Walkerdine, V., Lucey, H. and Melody, J. (2000). *Growing Up Girl: Gender and Class in the 21st Century*. London: Macmillan.
- Wetherell, M. (1998). Positioning and Interpretative Repertoires: Conversation Analysis and Post-structuralism in Dialogue. *Discourse and Society*, 9, 431–456.
- Wetherell, M. (2003). Paranoia, Ambivalence and Discursive Practices: Concepts of Position and Positioning in Psychoanalysis and Discursive Psychology. In Harre, R. and Moghaddam, F. (eds) *The Self and Others: Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political and Cultural Contexts*. New York: Praeger/Greenwood Publishers.
- Wetherell, M. (2005). Unconscious conflict or everyday accountability. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44(2), pp. 169–175.
- Wetherell, M. and Edley, N. (1999). Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: Imaginary Positions and Psycho-discursive Practices. *Feminism and Psychology*, 9, pp. 335–356.
- White, E. (2005). *My Lives*. London: Bloomsbury.