

## Work, Subjectivity and Learning: Prospects and Issues

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Work communities are powerful sites of identity, practices and knowledge systems in which individual workers' desires for recognition, competence, participation and meaning are imbricated. In the new times of increased flexibility and rapid transmission of information, people and capital through globalised networks, worker subjectivity arguably has become a primary target of work learning to ensure organisational survival. The researchers contributing to this volume have explored how particular subjectivities are constituted among these varied coordinates, and how learning processes are implicated in individuals' subjections, negotiations, assertions and shifts of subjectivity. Butler (1992:13) maintains that the 'subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process'. In this possibility, in this ongoing constitution, lies the agency of the subject. Subjects are intertwined with the social practice of work in which they participate and from which they learn, reflecting a complex interaction between subjects' sense of knowledge, agency and desire with their immersion in cultural images, invocations and social activities that bring forth practices of subjectivity. These shape how people engage with and make sense of what they experience and perform socially. But clearly, subjects participate in their own constitution in psychic, social and material ways, raising questions about the precise nature of agency and the possibilities of freedom.

Thus there are diverse perspectives of this subjectivation process and its centrality to the processes of learning throughout working life. Some authors in this book view subjectivity as formation of an autonomous identity or sense of self, and propose a direct role for individual agency and intentionality in work and learning. Others view the subject as derived from and articulated in participation and learning through practices, shaped by particular spatial-temporal arrangements of workplaces. Some view agency as a product or effect of discourses intersecting

with material practices: an exercise of power, not an escape from it. As Edwards and Nicoll state, 'Agency is not the opposite of power, but is only possible through forms of order.' Others view agency as an individual's internal resource fashioned as will, intention and capacity to act.

But as Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) has suggested, theorising about the human subject in terms of *what* it is closes down possibilities for subjectivity, rather than opening them up or at least keeping them open. And in the chapters here, authors focus not on definitions but portrayals of subjectivity in motion: desiring and resisting identifications, becoming aware of subjectivation processes, learning consequences of various positionings, sliding in spaces between possible identities, discerning and pursuing what Davies (2000) calls 'lines of flight'. Most authors are concerned that these vital struggles and movements of subjectivity, sometimes at the most intimate levels, are often lost in broad discussions of work learning in which people are reduced to abstractions, or in which learning and subjectivation processes are ignored in a workplace press for productivity and performance. Most authors here are fundamentally interested in promoting more rich possibilities for subjects: confirming the actual and often occluded struggles of subjectivation going on, seeking new figurations of the subject, and opening or keeping open new sites of action and subject constitution, towards new notions of solidarity and community. In this chapter we examine these different perspectives of worker subjectiv/ies emerging in changing contexts of work, and highlight issues of learning and subjectivity towards which authors in this book direct their primary concern. Finally, we look forward to future questions for inquiry: both those raised in the chapters and others waiting to be uncovered. Our readings of these chapters are, of course, partial and idiosyncratic. We do not presume to summarize the authors' arguments, which are far too complex and nuanced to be reduced to a few sentences. We gesture to these arguments, through our limited interpretations, by way of working out our own understandings of work, learning and subjectivity.

## 15.1 Changing Contexts of Work

One of the main imperatives for considering the relations among work, subjectivity and learning has arisen from discourses about the changing nature of work. Edwards and Nicholl have suggested, for example, that we have moved from 'Fordist production lines' to contemporary workplaces where 'there is an eliciting of certain dispositions to be an innovative and flexible knowledge worker'. Apart from the two theoretical chapters, the empirical work that informs each chapter is located in particular work

contexts. It is important to ask: how do those changing contexts affect the subjectivities produced there?

A wide range of different work contexts are considered in this collection, including farms, factories, banks, schools, TAFE colleges, universities, mines, aged care facilities, and fruit and vegetable markets. These work sites are generally characterised by a continuity of traditional work practices, but in most cases it is clear that the context of work is changing. For example, academic work now encompasses e-learning; miners have moved from mining with a pick and shovel at the rock face to mining by remote control in an office block; and farm wives struggle to negotiate new gender relationships. Even where workers have initiated new flexible work arrangements such as those of portfolio workers, many elements of traditional work practice remain. One of the portfolio workers practices homecare nursing, a continuity with much of women's unpaid care work, and another offers graduate classes in two universities as a sessional contract worker. These aspects of traditional work practice are mixed with new characteristics across all of the workplaces.

The predominant change in the work context appears to be in the type of subjectivities 'called forth' in each of these workplaces. Almost all of the workplaces, from the more traditional to the more fluid and contemporary work situations, are characterised by changing discourses of subjectivity. Learning is fundamentally implicated in the process of changing subjectivities. What counts as knowledge has changed, how workers learn has changed, and acquiring new or modified subjectivities requires processes of learning.

## **15.2 Issues of Subjectivity in Work**

As many have pointed out, the global forces of what Bauman (2000) has termed 'molten capitalism' combined with various forces of individualisation in work and other sites have fashioned an ideal neoliberal subject. This is the self-made person, flexible, fast and innovative, infinitely capable and mobile, facing eternal choices and personally accountable for making them and suffering their consequences. Alongside this subject persist many other subject positions alluded to in this volume, from aggressively tough masculine labourer (Abrahamsson) to cuff-linked corporate doll (Church). These positions are not closed and in fact, naming them only fixes them momentarily: each represents a complex interplay of discourses and effects, and each intersects with other subject positions. And subjectivity is far more than a process of desiring and inhabiting particular subject positions, or struggling in spaces between them. Nor are people simply subjected to a particular subjectivity, even one as pervasive and compelling

as the ideal neoliberal subject. Desire is a critical dynamic in the process, to possess not just things or states of mind like mastery, but to belong to particular communities and ideologies. Self-regulation is another, for as Edwards and Nicoll show, power works fundamentally through internalised governance. Learning is implicated in all of these dynamics, and some of the most interesting questions are about how subjects learn desire and strategies of self-regulation, how they learn in their activity together to constitute and to recognise these constitution processes of subjectivity, and how they learn alternate passages and articulations.

As Foucault enjoined us, the task is to understand material constitution (and reconstitution) of subjects: ‘we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc’ (1980:97). Further, the task is to deconstruct subject positionings, to apprehend openings for freedom, and at the same time, as Davies (2004) emphasises, to acknowledge the situated contingency of such investigations: ‘all attempts at truth-telling about subjectivities are potentially productive of new or altered subject-positionings’. Bearing in mind this contingency, we turn now to examine the truth-telling of authors represented in this collection.

### **15.3 Constitution and Mobilisation Processes of Subjectivities**

Authors here explore issues about how subjectivities are constituted and mobilised in contemporary work contexts. Thrift and Pile (1995) have categorised six elements of these subjectivation processes: positions and politics of location, movement, social and material practices in particular sites, encounters, representations and aesthetics, and regimes of the visual. While Thrift and Pile are working from a cartographic perspective, ‘mapping’ the subject using constructs of cultural geography, these elements are evident throughout the chapters here and thus make a useful organising device to examine these authors’ issues of subjectivity in work.

#### **15.3.1 Positions and Politics of Location**

From the range of subject positions available in work (within relationships, occupational disciplines, organisations, etc) subjects all confront the task of finding an acceptable position in which to pronounce and live subjectivity. ‘Position’ is a misleading signifier, for it implies a certain singularity and fixity that, even if desired by a subject, is always elusive. Subjects are

always in movement, mobilised by spatial and temporal work arrangements as well as by identificatory desires: to belong to this group or inhabit that identity. Hey (2002) shows that some subjects long for recognition by particular groups, to be/long, and will desire and identify even with positions representing what they loathe. Workplace communities work on these longings to inculcate the subject's desire to self-manage an identity required for the community's continuity. Eteläpelto and Saarinen's study of student teachers seeking to enact a 'professional' teacher identity illustrates this dynamic. In these authors' interpretation, the extent of the students' subjectivation depended on the extent they were able to actively participate in the community. Participation referred to the convergence of the learners' personal goals, plans and intentional projects in a 'favourable environment', that is, that offered resources for them to 'practise agency' within the community. The extent to which students had come to desire the necessary self-regulation to enact the subject position of 'professional teacher' is revealed in their narratives of 'learning': when asked what was their most meaningful learning experience, most mentioned learning to manage their emotions in a 'challenging' situation.

More generative questions of learning tend to examine how subjects become aware of alternate positions, what resources they draw upon to constitute their different positions, or why they do or do not take up different discourses of self. Abrahamsson's study of miners shows that their desire for continued recognition and approval by the traditional mining brotherhood, shifting to a growing awareness of the possibility to belong to an altered masculine identity, mediated their desire to learn the new technologies introduced in the mine. Ultimately learning might be viewed as seeking new figurations, finding new hybrids, even influencing spatio-temporal arrangements to open new possibilities, of subjectivity in work. Alfred's analysis of immigrant women shows how they navigate various positions of self and other, here and there, imagined past identity and excluded present identity, while pursuing a sense of belonging – of home – in their work. This pursuit for Alfred's women was complicated by racism, by external namings of their identity in the US (Black, African-American, minority) that refused the nuanced Caribbean subjectivity they struggled to enact.

### 15.3.2 Movement

Thus living subjectivity in work is a process of provisional and open-ended movement. Despite repressive positions and identities invoked by work arrangements and discourses, living subjects can and do disrupt limiting significations. Some authors view this as 'full participation' or learning,

believing that agency is exercised in this movement. But as Alfred's stories show, these confrontations and escapes are not without pain. The more contingency and dislocation experienced by the working subject, it seems, the more compelling becomes the desire for 'home' in work. Allan's study of farm women in New Zealand reveals the flip side of this: their isolated home with its rigid gendered codes was the centre of their farmwork and the prison of their subjectivity. Out of deep distress some of these women struggled to identify, open and inhabit dynamic subject positions that their conservative communities and husbands would recognise and approve. In doing so they risk becoming caught in a no-space between the subject positions on offer in a rural community and those aspired to by these women. At the same time, the alternate subjectivities they began exploring invoked responding changes around them, particularly in their interactions with their husbands.

So another learning issue is what strategies subjects learn in order to move amidst the dislocations and contingencies created by contemporary work arrangements, whether transnational migration influenced by growing interdependencies of nation state, changing cultural patterns, or new subjectivities such as the neoliberal flex-worker. The task appears to be on the one hand learning how to maintain continuity while avoiding becoming assimilated into fixed positions, and learning to find fissures within the existing ordering of practices for new expressions. Fenwick's study of self-employed professionals, moving among different organisations and contracted activities, found them longing for continual change in work and identity – novelty – while responding to a countervailing desire for fixity. Their awareness of the constitution of this subjectivity extended only to a desire for self-reflective understanding of their choices, sometimes drawing upon discourses of 'authentic self', to sustain a sense of 'home' amidst the exhilarating but unsettling and fragmenting movements of the perfect neoliberal subject.

### **15.3.3 Social and Material Practices in Particular Sites**

The issue examined here is how the emergence of particular 'subjects' and subjectivities are interrelated with joint activity, particular work tools, spatial arrangements and technologies. In this examination, learning might be argued to include both subjection and resistance to these practices, awareness of them, and play with their boundaries. Learning in this practice-based understanding would be understood to be inseparable from practice itself. People articulate subjectivities, and uncover new possibilities, through various practices. Edwards and Nicoll argue that workplaces need to be examined for the spatio-temporal ordering of practices and the actors

drawn into them. In these practices are played out the exercises of power, 'the subjects and subjectivities associated with them, and the forms of learning that are mobilised to support them.' In particular, these authors focus on the ascendance of enterprise discourses in contemporary work arrangements, supported by discourses of innovation and flexibility. They argue that a 'learning order' in work and society more broadly mobilises different subjects to 'choose to learn' to be flexible, innovative and enterprising. We can see this learning order materialising in and exercised through workplace architectures such as the Bank's self-learning e-stations (Church) or the miner's new tiny electronic joysticks replacing enormous coal diggers (Abrahamsson). New temporal arrangements, where bodies and knowledge are dislocated from joint activity or continuity, such as experienced by self-employed professional contractors (Fenwick), order practices that demand continuous learning as the only possible participation. In these portrayals we see struggles both to learn and to resist learning the 'appropriate subject' demanded by the workplace.

#### 15.3.4 Encounters

How do subjectivities exert themselves at the point of encounter with Others at work (knowledge, persons, new technologies)? According to Thrift and Pile (1995), these encounters provoke different subject expressions, ranging from more sovereign to more subjected. The learning issues then might be what kinds of subjectivities are produced within these encounters, what transformative possibilities open within them, and how subjects become aware of the subjectivation dynamics and openings within these encounters. In work activities, subjects perform in a range of social encounters that are not only marked with multiple power relations but also emotional, sometimes intimate investments. Subjectivities shift moment-to-moment in enacting this sociality in ways that Hey (2002) argues cannot be captured by the 'slower velocities' of theoretical abstractions. Within these encounters and workers' accounts of them we can pose questions about the absence or presence (positioning) of gender, social difference and subjectivity. An example is Billett and Smith's narrative of encounter-reading among workers in the wholesale fresh produce market. Encounters with customers invoked a host of diverse decisions that were overwhelming until workers learned to 'read' the other's intentions. Encounters with the same supervisor evoked different subjectivities for different workers: one acted in ways to gain the boss's approval by learning to 'read' cues of his desires, including desired responses from the worker.

In a different vein, Harteis, Gruber and Lehner examine what happens when university teachers encounter new ('constructivist') knowledge

paradigms entering their work. Their question was the extent to which these subjects engaged in the new paradigms, and how the encounter affected their subjectivity. The findings showed a contradiction between what the university teachers espoused and what they practiced in their 'epistemological beliefs'. But a closer look reveals that these teachers were caught between an ambivalent ideology of 'constructivist teaching' and a contradictory institutional ordering arrangement mobilising them as knowledge keepers, delivering and testing knowledge. What the authors don't draw attention to is the additional subjectivity mobilised and captured by researchers demanding a rational articulation of guiding epistemic beliefs within rigid classifications.

### 15.3.5 Representations and Aesthetics

Practices of dress and symbol inscribe subjectivity but also open sites of play and interruption where new subjectivities can be learned. Church shows how rigid discourses of success are coded in political semiotics such as dress distinct to communities like the corporate Bank she studied. Yet she also shows how subjects become aware of these codes and then choose a position somewhere between compliance, resistance, and bending the codes. Those exercising choice in playing with these dress symbols are, significantly, subjects aware of their outsider status: researchers who don't belong socially or ideologically to the corporate community, and persons with disabilities who manage outsider positions everyday. Church's analysis of the subjectivities resulting from the meetings of these people in the bank shows the conscious struggle to occupy between-spaces (adopting just enough of the bank-coded subject position to be acceptable to the community while retaining codes of ideological distance). She also shows the unconscious articulation of symbols, such as an expensive ring: and the resulting positional signaling and various potential (mis)readings of these which alert subjects to both the subjectificatory codes and the spaces for freedom in particular work communities. At work is what Church calls 'the anxious workplace dance, for example, between visibility and invisibility as revealed by our own clothing practices'.

Salling Olesen points to aesthetics as a realm where experiences are not brought into discursive language, and therefore remain unsocialisable. This is an important observation, pointing to spaces where alternative subjectivities can be enacted. Symbols of identity are embedded in these aesthetics of dress, images, humour, tone, colour, furniture, and so on. From her examination of a mine undergoing rapid change, Abrahamsson concluded that these embedded symbols of identity often become clear during large changes in production or organisation. At the point of their



identification, new and sometimes frightening possible subject positions are opened.

### **15.3.6 Regimes of the Visual**

The issue here is the constitution of subjectivity within the gaze of others, raising questions of who is viewing the subject. Critiques of pedagogical interventions in workplace learning, such as human resource development, have shown how the managerial gaze constitutes a performing, efficient and accountable worker subject. But of course workers are subject to, and self-regulated by, the gaze of all others in a work community. Those seeking recognition from and belonging to particular groups learn to attach themselves to a particular gaze. They also learn to give or withhold recognition as the projectors themselves of the approving gaze of a group. Further, as subjects formed within a gaze, they can learn to look back to resist scrutiny and constitute the gazer subject in particular ways. Fenwick's study of contracted professionals found this hall of mirrors of looking/looking back as subjects named different subject positions that they could choose to occupy or slip out of, according to whether they wanted to attract or avoid scrutiny, dispense recognition and classification or be recognised. In a much different way, Church plays with visual regimes constituting dis/ability in workplaces, turning the gaze onto the abled.

Finally in discussing subjectivity constituted within regimes of the visual, we must remain particularly attentive to the research practices evident in these chapters and in the very writing of this one. As Salling Olesen reminds us, listening to narratives of people takes us into inside encounters with experience, which has its limitations, particularly as we move, as analysts, to a more distant position to interpret the broader discourses that we think we see reflected there. Indeed, subjectivities are opened and closed through these research practices: 'the very telling them as a piece of identity (re)construction, in which a (new) position is taken in the culturally possible interpretations of and positions in this context'.

### **15.3.7 Learning New Configurations of Subjectivities in Work**

So far this discussion has been concerned with what subjectivities are mobilised, how and where they are positioned, and how they are constituted. In considering elements of these subjectivation processes together – location politics, movement, practices, encounters, representations, and visual regimes – questions are suggested around the learning dynamics threaded

through these processes by which subjectivities are constituted in contexts of work activities and organisations. How do subjects become aware of their own constituted nature? What new configurations and positions of subjectivity are possible? How can people learn these new possibilities and subjectivities? These questions touch upon the nature of agency. The wide variation of subjectivities evident in any particular cultural environment indicates that, clearly, human beings are not puppets slavishly yoked to cultural prescriptions and pre-determined identities shaping whatever subjectivity they are compelled to enact. But to presume that agency is some sort of intrinsic force bubbling from within the autonomous individual is to blackbox it: portraying the source of purposeful action as somehow mystically free from socio-cultural webs and discursive constitutions of self, intention, knowledge, and identity.

Davies (2004) suggests another reading of agency, as 'the capacity to recognise that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted' (p.4). Agency, in such a definition, comes from the freedom to recognise multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one's identity. In this reading, autonomy is 'the recognition of counterpower and counterforce within power and force, and the awareness of new life forms capable of disrupting or even overwriting hegemonic forms'. With this reading in mind, we turn to questions of learning and subjectivity.

***How do people learn new subjectivities? (What and how can they come to recognise constitutions of subjectivity and their own capacity to influence these?) What new possibilities can open for this learning?***

In this volume, authors have explored a variety of possibilities for learning new subjectivities in work. Each suggests a particular conception of human agency and freedom within workplace practices and structures, including discursive and space-time arrangements. Or to be more precise, as Edwards and Nicoll point out, these arrangements open certain possibilities for subjectivity while they close others. In tracing these openings and closings, Casey shows how what she calls the worker-subject refuses reduction to the hyper-rationalisation of organisational production. In her observations, workers increasingly bring complex desires and imperatives for agency, freedom, self-expression and creation. These can become attached to prevailing arrangements and discourses, but workers also are 'newly demanding', resisting these to imagine alternate social arrangements. Salling Olesen indicates that even while human consciousness seeks harmony and avoids conflict, embedded in these mechanisms of consciousness building is

awareness of problems, alternative social practices, 'unlived lives' from one's own life history, and painful experiences from the past. This awareness holds the potential for seeing things differently and for alternative social practice: that is, the potential for learning is embedded in everyday life practice.

For Eteläpelto and Saarinen, subjectivities are shaped at the same time as agency (independent purposeful action) is enabled through participation in collective experiences. If people do not experience agency they will not construct the 'positive identities' that enable them to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded in workplaces to develop 'rich' subjectivity. The priority for Eteläpelto and Saarinen is to identify the work conditions that help promote individuals' full participation, thus enabling new and rich subjectivities. In circling around similar issues, Billett and Smith examine how work culture is transformed through particular forms of individual participation. Their issue is: How do combinations of personal agency (constituted by subjectivity) and socialisation determine the ways people participate in work communities, such that this participation contributes to transformation of practices and culture?

Migration across cultures is increasingly a learning space for this transformation of work communities as well as new subjectivities such as the hybrid identities that Alfred describes. Migrant subjectivities belong to more than one world, speak more than one language, have more than one home, can negotiate and translate between cultures, and can speak from the in-between of cultures, unsettling the assumptions of one from the perspective of another. In these unsettling and in-between spaces – not just in-between cultures but also multiple discourses and subject positions in work activities and communities – people appear to be apprehending.

***What strategies do people learn in order to cope with repressive regulations of subjectivity?***

Authors in this volume have stressed various regulations of subjectivity in contemporary workplaces, which often have repressive effects. The dominant neoliberal worker subject is flexible, entrepreneurial, independent, constantly learning and self-responsible. Workers are pressed through a variety of technologies and pedagogies to sublimate their own desires and attachments with this prescribed subjectivity. Walkerdine (2003) maintains that women in particular are the new target of the neoliberal subject. Women become caught in the desire to be that subject, that Other, of the mobile, self-made successful worker. Walkerdine offers an example of a young woman working ceaselessly in unpaid overtime, always feeling

'behind' the load of work which increases daily, longing to maintain her reputation as highly efficient, responsible and capable. Walkerdine's explanation shows that any possibility of the woman recognising her own exploitation is occluded by, on the one hand, her sense of success being inscribed as entirely self-managed and, on the other hand, her projection of obvious problems leaking out from this identity (e.g. stress, illness, despair) to psychological pathologies which, again, were to be privately managed. In fact, Walkerdine shows that ultimately, it is impossible to achieve any simple classification such as the unitary subject of neoliberalism: 'I am this'. The subject experiences this as a perpetual and anxious failure to become the subjectivity that one continues to desire. Butler (1998:20) argues that at this point, when choice is impossible, the subject pursues subordination in order to exist, to be, something.

Yet other choices do appear to open for workers, in the form of strategies adopted to manage their subjectivities. In their case studies of two women (a teacher and a team facilitator in a manufacturing plant) Scheeres and Solomon show how these workers construct multiple identities from available discourses: they carefully work out their positions as authorities and knowers in their shifting work situations, and interweave these identities with discourses of retirement, financial security, and life outside work. These women are caring for as well as governing themselves, in Scheeres and Solomon's analysis. In the case of 'boundaryless' workers moving among different contracts and activities simultaneously with multiple employers, Fenwick also finds people managing their subjectivity in ways that provide both security and novelty. Through a dual movement these workers created an anchor of identity, a fixed image of self and set of stable locators, and at the same time inhabited various moving subjectivities constituted according to the needs of particular organisations and their flexible adaptation to these. Even in the more conservative and static work conditions of farm labour, Allan indicates that amidst the rigid gender identities available to rural farm women, some manage to use humour, to resist the prescribed subjectivity without risking complete rejection. They develop a subject location that is recognisable to themselves as well as to the conservative others in their community, from which they can participate more fully.

Thus, people do find coping strategies and spaces of resistance to processes of subjectivation in work. These include adopting dual or multiple identities, following dual trajectories of simultaneously grounding and dispersing their subjectivity, practices of playful subversion, cross-dressing, and rhetorical strategies to insert new signifiers or reinscribe existing terms of received identities in work communities.

***What is the relation of the body to individual's constitution of subjectivity as well as their priorities in learning to move as particular subjects?***

Critical geographers such as Soja (2000:361) view 'the space of the human body [a]s perhaps the most critical site to watch the production and reproduction of power'. This perspective applies as much to the workplace as any other social site. In her chapter, Somerville has suggested that the body is a useful meta-category through which to view the constitution of subjectivities at work. If we examine the contributions in this collection from the point of view of the body we can see changing bodies and materiality in new work practices.

Drawing from psychoanalysis, Salling Olesen regards individual subjectivity at work as having embodied, material and cultural elements that impact on a theory of learning at work. This means that the individual subject will not necessarily have conscious awareness of the forces that impact on embodied learning which is often largely tacit and unconscious. Focussing on bodies and spatiality of work in mining and aged care workplaces supports this idea as Somerville demonstrates how the subjectivities of workers are formed in the dynamic of bodies, space and workplace cultural practices. Edwards and Nicholl also draw attention to the materiality of workplaces and the dynamic 'entwinements' of the human and physical worlds in the constitution of working subjects. They describe the physical world as including 'tools, pens, computers, mobile phones, charts, machinery' in networks of connections and emphasise the significance of the spatio-temporal orderings of the places of work 'to particular possibilities for knowledge production, power and subjectivity'. The application of this broader understanding of subjectivity can be seen in both mining work sites discussed in this collection (Somerville and Abrahamsson) where the subjectivities of miners are inseparable from the changing technologies with which they do their work. Materiality can be equally important, however, in the constitution of subjectivities 'on the fly' (Fenwick 2001) as portfolio workers move from one site of work to another forming mobile and shifting work identities.

The physical world for Church includes dress, jewellery and wheelchairs in her consideration of how the research team presents their (dis)abled female bodies in the public work space of the bank. Clothes in this study stand in for the body. A detailed micro analysis of dress enables her to take up these issues of body and presentation for the whole team and to call into question the binary of abled and disabled bodies through which 'Some bodies disrupt accepted notions of 'appropriate embodied employment,' The dress practices of mine workers also reveals the changing subjectivities of mine workers in Abrahamsson's study. When they moved from working at the rock face in heroic versions of masculinities to the

7th floor of an office block – to remote control of the mining processes – the mine workers continued to change their clothes after every shift in spite of the fact that they were ‘just as clean as when they arrived’.

Bodies and place are also critical in Alfred’s analysis of ‘women of color’ in academe. The opposition of white and black bodies and cultural systems is used to symbolise the marginalisation of migrant women in their academic workplaces. The idea of ‘women of color’, however, problematises the imposed black white dichotomy and her interviews reveal the complex identity work required for these women as they ‘negotiate their identity, place, and their roles as professionals in the White academy’. The major category here, however, is not the body, but race, and these meta-categories of race, class and gender are significant in several of the studies of work subjectivity and learning in this collection.

***What are the influences of discourses of class, gender, race and disability on individuals’ struggles to constitute identities?***

Theories of workplace learning have been described as ‘gender blind, issuing prescriptive and descriptive statements concerning a seemingly homogenous workforce, irrespective of issues of class, race or gender’ (Butler 1997). Class, race and gender feature in several of the studies in this collection. Alfred, as discussed above, employs several strategies to disrupt the black/white binary. As women of color, these women celebrate their blackness and their cultures of origin, privileging the degraded side of the binary. They also disrupt the binary in their ability to cross the borders between their homeland and their new culture. Common approaches to the oppressions inherent in class, gender and race binaries include equalisation, as in Church’s chapter on (dis)ability; centring on the degraded side of the binary, as in Allen’s chapter on farm women; or deconstructing the binary, as in Abrahamsson’s chapter on changing masculinities. All of these approaches may be present at once, in different combinations and different degrees and all have been used as successful strategies in the workplace learning and change.

Church, as described above, disrupts the category of (dis)ability by reading against the grain, focusing on clothes and asking questions about the extent to which her own disabilities are concealed and her colleague is constructed as disabled. Allen uses a different strategy in her examination of gender relations in the lives of farm wives, privileging the degraded term of the binary pair and making visible the struggles of these women to negotiate a viable identity. Abrahamsson works to disrupt hegemonic masculinities in her analysis of changing discourses of male and female work when the traditional work changes from hard, dirty and heroic work at the rock face to clean office work managing remote controlled mining processes. The

issue of class is not explicitly addressed but permeates the stories of coal miners and aged care workers. The intersection of strong working class and highly gendered subjectivities produces resilient embodied subjectivities that are resistant to change, even when the changes appear to be in their interests. These analyses that deploy meta-categories of class, race, gender and ability make apparent the modes in which power is realised, taken up, and resisted in contemporary workplaces, for as Edwards and Nicholl remind us, agency is the exercise of specific forms of power produced by particular forms of social ordering.

#### **15.4 The Individual and the Social in Subjectivity and Learning**

In considering the relationships among work, subjectivity and learning, all of the authors focus to some extent on the question of the relation between the individual and the social. They see the individual and the social as in some ways imbricated in each other and struggle to articulate the nature of this relationship. It seems useful, therefore to offer an overview of approaches to the question of the relationship between the individual and the social in considering work, subjectivity and learning. For the purposes of such an overview, notions of 'subjectivity' can be taken to address the question of the individual; 'work' can be seen as representing the social; and learning mediates between the two. Using this idea of the relationship between the individual and the social, as mediated by learning, the contributions in this collection can be roughly organised on a continuum with the two theoretical papers by Salling Olesen and Edwards/Nicholl at each end of the continuum. Salling Olesen views the relationship between the individual and the social from the perspective of how to theorise individual subjectivity and Edwards/Nicholl from the perspective of how to theorise social formations that produce those individual subjects.

The 'life history approach' to individual subjectivities proposed by Salling Olesen is underpinned by critical social theory and ideas from psychoanalysis. In this sense his focus on the individual moves away from the autonomous rational individual of liberal humanism (Davies 2000). In this approach, individual human subjectivity is understood as constituted through conscious, preconscious and unconscious psychic processes which include materiality and the social. This dynamic process is conceptualised as a process of *learning* in relation to a biologically and historically produced reality. The lens is through the perspective of the individual and learning through experience at work is seen as an individual achievement of meaning making. While Edwards and Nicholl also argue that workplace

learning is a process of producing particular subjectivities, their interest is in how regimes of social ordering produce particular subjectivities: 'Wherever the learning takes place, 'learners' are required to bring forth their subjectivities for disciplining, to become a particular type of person'. Actor Network Theory elaborates the conditions in which different subjectivities are produced through different spatio-temporal orderings. Their lens is the social, and their aim to understand how the social produces different subjectivities through the different technologies of workplace learning.

The empirical chapters in this collection differ widely in the theoretical tools that they bring to the analysis of their data. These theoretical tools include postcolonial theory, life history and biography, feminist post-structuralism, gender analysis, Foucaultian discourse analysis, and theories such as communities of practice informed by social psychology and anthropology. The deployment of these theoretical frameworks, in turn, provides a distinctive theoretical lens through which the relations between the individual and the social are articulated. The chapters that are more focused on individual subjectivity reveal the way individual subjects negotiate complex identities in relation to the social. In Allen's chapter on how farm women negotiate their gendered identities, for example, we can see the struggle of these women to negotiate a meaningful and viable identity within a conservative farming community. In the chapter on the formation of new subjectivities for practising teachers, we are able to see how different individuals take up the learning and experiences of teacher preparation differently within the same regime of preparation (Etelpälato and Saarinen). Alfred demonstrates how 'women of color' negotiate diasporic identities in the white academy and for other academic workers the epistemological beliefs of teachers is shown to be implicated in the take up of e-learning (Harteis et al.). All these chapters illustrate different negotiations between the individual and the social from the perspective of individual identity.

Billett's and Smith's chapter appears to be positioned in the middle of the continuum with Billett's theory of co-participation and relational interdependence. In a large number of studies including coal miners, hairdressers, counsellors, motor mechanics, Billett has developed the idea of a workplace learning as the outcome of a relational interdependence between individual ontogeny and workplace affordances, such that each is constitutive of the other. Smith contributes an understanding of the role of epistemological agency in individual ontogeny, as seen in the learning through work of market workers (Smith 2004). This provides the ground for a focus on individual agency as the neglected focus in communities of practice. However, in Billett and Smith's formulation, individuals and social practice are still conceived as separate entities, albeit linked by the concept of relational interdependence.



The contributions that take up a poststructural or Foucaultian theoretical analysis view the individual and the social as mutually constitutive. There is no individual separate from the social, nor a social that is separate from the individual. The questions addressed by these studies focus on how regimes of social ordering produce different subjects. An ongoing concern of these studies, however, is also to identify sites of individual resistance and agency in the 'cracks and fissures' of mobile networks of power. These studies tend to work to disrupt hierarchical binaries and to be interested in contradiction, paradox, and playful resistance. Scheeres and Solomon, for example, using a Foucaultian discourse analysis identify the ways two women employ discourses of non-work to flourish in contemporary work situations. Portfolios workers are described as 'boundaryless' but Fenwick tracks the work of boundary making, in their contradictory subjectivities. Coal miners and aged care workers negotiate precariously in embodied learning through collective practice and miners in Sweden juggle new worker identities and old masculine storylines in the context of new work technologies. Church extends playful resistance to the work of researchers destabilising fixed categories of abled and disabled in the conservative corporate context of the Canadian bank.

The purpose of such a typology is to assist in providing an overview of theoretical formulations of the relations among work, subjectivity and learning and to gain insights into what different perspectives offer. Research that privileges the individual tends to offer a greater understanding of individual meaning making, throughout the course of a life spanning many years of work, in different workplaces, through changes over time, and in identities across work, home, and community. The individuals in these studies are understood as bounded individuals in their relation to the social. The research questions addressed by these theorists focus on the negotiation of individual identity. Billett has offered the most comprehensive and elaborated formulations of the relationship between the individual and the social, in his work on co-participation, relational interdependence and workplace affordances, however the individual and the social remain separate, albeit interacting, entities. Research that focuses on the social in this collection is influenced by Foucault and related poststructural theorists and operates from the assumption that there is no binary between the individual and the social, but that each are mutually constitutive. In these contributions, the challenge is to identify the sites and mechanisms of agency and resistance because ideas of the social are highly deterministic. These contributions identify spaces between binary constructions, such as between bounded and shifting identities, between docile bodies and embodied subjects, as fissures where there are possibilities for agency, change, and learning.

## 15.5 Concluding Comments

Increasingly, accounts of work learning are recognising that along with systemic analyses, considerations of subjectivity are vital to understand processes of development and change in work knowledge, practice, relations and culture. As work activities and structures become transformed in these new times of knowledge work, globalisation and liberalisation, new forms of subjectivity are induced and articulated. Authors in this volume represent a range of theoretical positions which they have brought to their examinations of subjectivity, learning and work in these new times. They explore how worker subjects live the new times, with real concern for disordered dispositions as well as possibilities for self-invention. Authors also examine the sorts of resources making up subjectivities, what new subject positions and subjectivities are opening up in work and how subjects seek them. Some like Church, Somerville and Allan have also explore the resources drawn upon by subjects to take up or refute subject positions as gendered, classed, raced or disabled.

Some literature (e.g. Rose 1999) has painted a depressing picture of governed subjectivities, but these chapters indicate many playful or liminal spaces and strategies available in work settings that people are using to manoeuvre their subjectivities in work and gain a sense of control and security. There also seems to be greater awareness than ever among individuals of the subject positions they occupy and how they are constituted as subjects, and there seems to be increasing recognition of and play among difference in subjectivities and their interaction in work activity. As Salling Olesen points out, social meanings established in language use are always surrounded by a 'halo' of surplus meaning and experience that is not socialised, and therefore remains at the borders. In this surplus seem to lie new, less socially-regulated, even transgressive possibilities for subjectivity. Much of the 'work' conducted in labour is arguably the work of subjectivity, managing multiple identities and inventing new ones by drawing upon various discursive, psychological, social and material resources.

Of course, additional questions arise from these chapters that require further consideration. How do generational differences influence the articulation of subjectivities, and how are these changing as cultural norms related to concepts of career and aging are shifting? What forms of subjectivity are learned, enacted and subverted in forms of work that require transmigration or involve transnational communities? What new subjectivities are negotiated amidst dynamics of institutional racism and colonialism? How do non-western or indigenous worldviews conceptualise the signifiers of and relations among subjectivity, learning and work? And, what subjectivities are we enacting as we focus research on the constitution

and emergence of new articulations of subjectivity? Indeed, as we continue to inquire into these questions, we may well recognise that the dynamics under study slip the bonds altogether of these categories of work, subjectivity, and learning. Our own articulations surely must be recognised as constituted by our object of study, which we must allow to shift even as we explore new possibilities of articulation in this work of learning about subjectivity.

## 15.6 References

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