

• Vol. 1, No. 1 • 2021 • (pp. 263-276) •
www.istp-irtp.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7146/irtp.v1i1.127092>

Subjectivity and?

Ole Dreier

Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to give a brief presentation of an approach to developing the conception of subjectivity in psychology. This conception is developed on the background of the science of the subject of critical psychology as founded by Holzkamp (1983) which considers subjectivity as a core concept in human psychology. In the conception presented in this paper, it is argued that human subjectivity must be grasped as grounded in a subject's ongoing situated participation and conduct of everyday life in and across various, structurally arranged social practices. It is argued why such a conception of subjectivity is necessary and its main concepts are briefly presented. A critical identification of methodological and conceptual inadequacies in narrower notions of the psyche and subjectivity paves the way for the line of arguments leading to this broader conception of subjectivity.

Keywords: Subjectivity, agency, critical psychology, social practice theory, nexus

Introduction

The paper briefly presents an approach to developing the conception of subjectivity in psychology. It is argued why this particular conception of subjectivity is needed and how it must be conceptualized. I developed this conception on the background of the science of the subject of critical psychology as founded by Holzkamp (1983) which considers subjectivity as a core concept in human psychology. In the conception I developed, human subjectivity is grasped as grounded in a subject's ongoing situated participation and conduct of everyday life in and across various, structurally arranged social practices. In this paper, a critical identification of methodological and conceptual inadequacies in narrower notions of the psyche and subjectivity paves the way for the line of arguments leading to this broader conception of subjectivity. It rests on an anti-elementarist and anti-dualist conception of

psychological properties which are not defined as mutually independent elements containing their own internal essences. Instead, they are grasped as interacting aspects in varying configurations of psychological processes in the ongoing activities of situated human subjects in varying social practices. In other words, rather than investigating and defining a psychological property in isolation, it is determined by what it hangs together with in such a complex functioning and by how it contributes to it. The question mark in the title of the paper indicates the search for such dynamic nexuses. The first section of the paper reminds us of the prevailing, deep-rooted dualism in the notion of the psyche in psychology as referring to internal processes/properties as opposed to an external objectivity. Subjectivity is mostly conceived as such an internal phenomenon. The second section argues that the prevailing methodology of variable-based research on elements of the psyche maintains such a notion for methodological reasons and, in so doing, restricts our understanding of concrete individual subjectivity. The third section turns to the significance of activity which is bypassed in dualist approaches to the subjective versus the objective. It is argued that an insufficient grasp of the interconnectedness of psychic processes, activity, and the world fosters a skewed understanding of the relations between psychic processes and activity. The fourth section argues that the phylogeny of psychic processes reveals that psychic processes, activity, and the world are linked in other ways than generally assumed in psychology. On this background, the fifth section presents my theoretical conception of situated human subjectivity in social practices. I developed it in order to become able to capture more fully the phenomena and issues I encountered in my empirical research on subjects in social practices. The final sixth section draws conclusions from the analyses in this paper.

Subjectivity and the split between the internal and the external

Subjectivity is not widely addressed in psychology. When it is, it is mostly regarded as an internal quality in the mind characterized by subjective experience, perspective, and intentionality. This internal subjectivity is contrasted with the objective quality of the external, physical and social reality. Such a mentalist and dualist conception of subjectivity versus objectivity has profound impacts on how subjectivity and relations between subject and object and subject and world are conceptualized. When psychology arose as a discipline, it took over such a notion of internal psychological properties from the notions of the soul, mind, or psyche in philosophy and theology. That led to the early psychological paradigm of internal, human, psychological faculties. In such a paradigm, subjectivity is a higher order faculty in the human mind.

Internal elements and their synthesis

Faculty psychology was criticized as being speculative by the emerging strands of a new empirical psychology based on an experimental methodology and a statistical analysis of causal relations between isolated, dependent and independent variables. This empirical methodology was to guarantee that psychology is a non-speculative, scientific discipline (Danziger, 1990). However, while the new empirical psychology focused on the methodological break performed by developing a mainstream empirical psychology as we know it, it preserved the basic ontology of the psyche as internal, general faculties and functions. The failure to recognize this fundamental continuity behind the methodological

break has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of psychic processes and human subjectivity.

The psychological variables in the new mainstream psychology represent general faculties and functions of an internal psyche responding to an external, experimental stimulus. The empirical methodology breaks down these faculties and functions into variables which are investigated and then bundled and generalized into elements of the psyche with separate, general essences. A century ago, Edgar Rubin—professor of psychology at the University of Copenhagen—wrote in the Proceedings from the 8th International Congress of Psychology in 1927 that, “the analytic-synthetic psychology quite speedily finds the elements of the soul. ... [It offers] a more or less detailed account of each of these elements. Subsequently, it attempts to construct the more complex formations from these elements. This psychology is analytic because it goes down to the elements, and it is synthetic because it attempts to use these elements to construct anew with them. ... Its contrived wholes are thought to be built up from contrived elements.” (1949b, p. 9; translation OD. The last sentence is more precise in the German original: “Es handelt sich um gedachte Ganzheiten, die aus gedachten Elementen aufgebaut gedacht werden.“) Rubin regards the “synthesis [as] a makeshift introduced in order to build up the wholes which had been broken by the ‘analysis’” (1949a, p.7-8).

The generalization of a variable by means of statistical analysis represents a population average, that is, a statistical non-person (Danziger, 1990; Holzkamp, 2013a). It offers no precise account of individual members of the population scattered across its normal distribution—least of all those positioned far from the average. The statistical analysis also demands that variables, and the generalized psychological elements based on them, must be independent of each other and stand in a relation of causal determination to each other. Human psychological characteristics must, then, be fixed properties expressed in predictable responses (Dreier, 2019; Raeff, 2019, p. 316).

This universe of mainstream research is depicted in zillions of models showing separate boxes of fixed, generalized elements with arrows of fixed, general causal relations between them. These models claim to map the mind, or particular parts of it, but are just “depicting a world of interacting variables, rather than a world of interacting people” (Billig, 2013, p. 186; Raeff, 2019). What is more, they depict an individual perceiving or responding to something particular: an independent variable in an otherwise indistinct environment.

Those working outside of the mainstream psychology of variables, must be aware of these characteristics of its psychological concepts when they consider whether and how certain insights from mainstream psychology can be reinterpreted and built into non-mainstream theories. If they choose to abstain from doing so, their psychological conception of subjectivity remains too empty, as a theory with only the concept of subjectivity or a micro-theory adding only experience, first-person perspective and intentionality. But if they do incorporate concepts from variable-based research, subjectivity turns into a super-element at the top of a psyche as an internal space with a structural depth. The theory also risks installing inconsistencies and contradictions between its different concepts and that reduces its analytic strength. Such internal conceptual contradictions are, for instance, often seen in personality theories. Many personality theories grasp characteristics associated with subjectivity as a super layer above more elementary, psychological functions. But it is not made clear how these layers work together or whether their premises cohere. Likewise, elements of personality, such as traits, are variabilized but their relations to elementary

psychological functions and to the super-layer of personality are underdetermined. In short, an integration of subjectivity with mainstream psychological functions risks creating an incoherent theory of subjectivity or turning subjectivity into another dualist element in the mind. In search of a robust conception of subjectivity, something important is missing.

Agency and the subject

In order to transcend the dualist split between the internal and the external in the conception of the human psyche, we must emphasize the basic significance of activity in which the internal and the external always co-exist, affect each other and hang together inseparably—in practice. This basic understanding goes back to Marx insisting on conceiving “the thing, reality, sensuousness ... as human sensuous activity, practice, ... subjectively” rather than “only in the form of the object or of contemplation” (1969, p. 6; English translation: Marx/Engels Internet Archive). Always having researched subjects in practices, gradually made me realize how crucial such a theoretical stance is for psychology and why. Activity is an ongoing process (Dreier, 2008; Raeff, 2019) and subjectivity is a complex quality of human agency in ongoing activity (González Rey, 2020). Subjectivity is not only involved before and after an activity—as subjects plan and prepare for it beforehand and reflect on it afterwards—but in their ongoing activity as participants in social practices (Dreier, 2020; in press). This is where, and how, we may rediscover and reconceptualize subjectivity and psychological processes.

But that is rarely acknowledged in psychology which mostly bypasses this basic insight or includes it in limited ways. Subjectivity and agency are, then, mostly defined as separate concepts. Subjectivity then refers to something separate from activity residing in the realm of internal characteristics. Psychological studies of subjectivity, accordingly, focus on experience, meaning, sense, intention, motive, and goal. This is not always due to an explicit delimitation of subjectivity from activity but to a prioritizing of what is studied and what is given only a cursory treatment or left indistinctly in the background. But doing so inevitably leads back into a dualist position of extracting knowledge about general, internal psychological characteristics independent of activity. We also comprehend experience etc. as free-floating if we do not study these internal processes as involved in ongoing activity. Omitting activity and the socio-structural arrangement of practices is, furthermore, promoted by the implicit pre-understanding of how the discipline of psychology is delimited and of what its research must concentrate on and illuminate if it is to count as relevant and legitimate, namely: an internal psyche.

If we adopt an internalized notion of the psyche and the subject, we merely consider activity as an expression of what goes on in the mind. Activity then only matters because it helps us understand what goes on in the mind of others which we have no direct access to. But subjects not only express themselves in activity. They also develop and come to understand themselves through activity in the world. Their present abilities and understandings have developed in that way. A dualist approach to learning understands this process from outside in as an acquisition and internalization in the mind and it regards the process from inside out as an application of what was already internalized. The significance of situated activity in learning (Lave, 1988) is glossed over in the processes going in both directions. And learning is primarily seen as a matter of acquiring and applying general knowledge while a subject’s abilities to do certain things in various situated contexts is glossed over and assumed to be ensured by the generality of the acquired knowledge.

The idea that an individual's activity is governed by his or her internal psychological capacities emphasizes only these internal capacities. But this idea is often expressed shortly after the opposite idea of the individual being determined by his or her external conditions. It then serves as a counter-argument against objective determinism. Having command over his or her activity rescues the individual from external determinism while the contradiction between being determined by the world and/or determining the world through command over one's individual activity persists. It is also mostly argued that individual command only becomes possible by developing powerful, internal capacities which enable a general command over one's activity precisely because these internal capacities are general. The individual, the I, or the subject, is then a commander general.

The idea of internal determination over individual activity is found in much personality psychology. Thus, personality traits are defined as fixed, general causes of individual behavior. They are studied by having individuals fill in questionnaires about, among other things, their behavioural tendencies without studying their behaviours and the situations in which they occur. Trait research has done so for decades, thus, essentially claiming that an individual with a certain trait exhibits a certain typical behavior across situations. But the individual's behavior is assumed to follow the command of his or her internal trait without studying the interplay between trait, behavior, and situation more closely and directly. Trait research continues along this line in spite of a fifty years old, unresolved person-situation debate and more recent voices, such as Funder who, in a review of personality psychology (2001), reminded this field of research that any statement about a trait implicitly presupposes assumptions about the behaviours and the situations in which it is expressed (cf. Dreier, 2011).

In summing up this section of the paper, I pointed out unresolved issues resulting from a dualist notion of the internal versus the external which disregards the significance of activity. Such a dualist notion fosters the vain hope that if only subjects possess the right general capacities, they become masters of their world. But when the course of a subject's activity falls out of focus, so does his or her practical relations with the world in the world. As embodied beings, subjects are anchored in their activities in the world. Their psychological processes are not simply contained in their mind. They are aspects of subjects' participation in situated nexuses of practice. The mind is in the body, in activity, in situated social practices. This understanding will be elaborated in the remainder of the paper.

Psycho-phylogeny and the nexus

I shall now argue that the phylogenetic evolution of the psyche underlines that we must comprehend psyche, activity and world as inextricably connected. I do so by presenting and reinterpreting some key characteristics of the phylogeny of psychic processes as analysed by Leontjew (1973), Holzkamp (1973, 1977, 1983), Schurig (1975a, 1975b, 1976), Osterkamp (1975), and Messman and Rückriem (1978). These authors reconstructed only the evolutionary path leading to the emergence of the human species. Species on later positions in that pathway may, therefore, be assumed to have developed other, more powerful functional potentialities than species on earlier positions in it.

From the very beginning of psycho-phylogeny, in the most elementary form of psychic sensibility, psychic capacities transcend the premises of the dualist paradigm and the experimental psychology of variables. In Leontjew's (1973) well-known example, the

psychic sensibility of a spider triggers and guides its activity towards a prey by responding to the connection between vibrations in its web and prey caught in it. Already this simple sensibility is not a response to an isolated stimulus in the environment but to connections between properties in the environment–vibration and prey–which are inextricably linked with each other. Leontjew states that psychic processes capture properties of the environment in their “Zusammenhang” (1973, p. 37). This term literally means hanging togetherness and it plays an important role in critical psychology which I emphasize and develop even further. In the English edition of Leontjew’s book, it is translated as connection or link. But these terms do not sufficiently connote that properties hang together and cannot be separated from each other. I, therefore, chose nexus as English term. In Leontjew’s example, prey and vibration do hang together. That is what makes sensing the vibration matter to the spider. The genesis of psychic sensibility is, in fact, linked to the transition from a more homogenous to a more heterogeneous environment on our planet where objects are present and hang together in a nexus. Leontjew’s term objective activity, thus, refers to an activity directed at more or less complex objects in a heterogenous nexus where they stand out and can be focused on in activity and psyche as they are present in their nexus. What is more, the evolution of psychic processes hangs together with the animal changing place in the environment, that is, with the relation between the animal’s psychic processes and its activity in a heterogeneous, structured world. Indeed, the evolution of species with more complex and powerful psychic processes is fostered by changes in the environment and activity.

According to Holzkamp (1983), the next step in the psycho-phylogeny is a change from sensing an object in its nexus to also sensing relations between several objects in a nexus and distinguishing between their properties and positions in it. This is a change in the direction of grasping nexuses as such and of subjectively configuring relevant coexistences and combinations of properties in nexuses.

The evolution of emotional qualities of experience reveals an increased complexity of interrelated psychic processes. Emotions capture, and express an evaluation of, the meaning of properties and nexuses in the world depending on the state of the organism (*ibid.*, p. 95). An animal’s readiness to act and its realization of meaning is thus linked with the state of the organism as reflected in its complex emotional state and variations in this state are the basis for the realization of meaning. The emotional evaluation is an aspect of the animal’s orientation in which cognition and emotion are linked and interacting, rather than separate, psychic aspects (*ibid.*, p. 107).

In the next step in psycho-phylogeny, psychic processes no longer function in a fixed, species-specific way. They become modifiable and the scope of their individual modifiability is a genetic characteristic of a certain species (*ibid.*, p. 123). This modifiability is what we usually mean by learning. So, learning leads to dynamic changes in the relations between activities, life-conditions, and psychic functioning. How these relations are changeable and to what extent, distinguish the various stages in the psycho-phylogeny of learning. Learning is, in other words, not conceived as the acquisition and internalization of general knowledge but as changing the relationship between psychic functioning, activities, and life-conditions. In early forms of learning in psycho-phylogeny, this change of orientation only occurs during the execution of activities to fulfil needs in environmental nexuses (*ibid.*, p. 107). Later, activities of orientation become differentiated from activities of execution and, even later, the learning of orientation and evaluation is internalized.

At his point, my analysis differs from Holzkamp's and Leontjew's notions of internalization as an internalized orientation and evaluation. If the psychic basis of the ongoing activity of a species only consists in executing an orientation which was learned and internalized earlier, its repertoire of activities must be narrow and fixed. The environmental situations and nexuses of its activities can then not vary and change much either. Indeed, the notion of internalization is introduced in animal species with fixed chains of activities. It belongs to a type of learning which Holzkamp (1983) calls subsidiary in which capacities and activities are modified and then persist as fixed orientations in relation to fixed chains of activity. Learning hence represents a feedback from execution to orientation which, thus modified, remains fixed and governs future executions. It establishes a complete governing of execution by a complete prior orientation.

However, the psychic aspects of an animal's activities cannot remain fixed if its environments, and the activities of other creatures in those environments, vary and change. On the contrary, that calls for further learning. The notion of internalization of a set of fixed, general capacities is, therefore, over-generalized if it is applied to later species such as human beings existing and unfolding their activities in complex, varying, and changing nexuses of social practice which call for varying and changing subjective capacities. It is, on the contrary, a necessary precondition for the socio-cultural development of human subjectivity that human abilities are not fixed, internalized capacities but incomplete, general potentials modifiable through open-ended learning (Dreier, 2008). In such forms of life, psychic processes and learning must be involved and unfold ongoingly in, and across, courses of activity. Or else human subjects cannot remain sensitive to situated similarities, differences, variations, and changes of aspects and their interplay in varying and changing nexuses of social practice. A merely general characteristic of a human capacity is, therefore, at best incomplete. And a subject's complex, internal processes are not decoupled from and do not completely command his or her ongoing activities. They are complexly and varyingly involved in his or her varying and changing activities and environments. Indeed, a subject's psychic processes and activities must not only be modifiable but also variable, that is, fitted to the varying, concrete, ongoing situations at hand. A flexibility of functioning involves modifiability as well as variability (Dreier, 2019).

My arguments above have deep implications for our understanding of the evolutionary steps closer to the species characteristics of human beings. In this paper, I shall merely mention a few characteristics highlighted by Holzkamp in later step of this evolutionary pathway. First of all, he highlights the emergence of autarch learning as "the learned changeability of sequences of activity" (1983, p. 140). Here learning unfolds in explorations of the surroundings capturing connections in the surroundings so that the "sequence of activity ... may be structured and centred anticipatorily on the final activity" (*ibid.*, p. 142). He also points to "a general basic need for spontaneous exploration of the surroundings ... [and] orientation about what is new" in exploratory activity and learning (*ibid.*, p. 144; translations OD) indicating an open-ended kind of learning. And he adds that anxiety is linked to autarch learning when encountering something unknown and unmanageable. Like autarch learning, anxiety has an anticipatory emotional character which is also seen in the emotional evaluation of being motivated to get involved in future-directed activities. These anticipatory emotional evaluations are core characteristics of autarch learning. These notions come closer to human subjectivity. But human subjectivity holds even more complex and powerful potentialities which must be grounded in relation to the basic cultural, historical, societal forms of life characteristic of human beings (Holzkamp, 1983).

My arguments above and in the next section suggest ideas for a renewed analysis of the psycho-phylogeny of human subjectivity and its specifically human qualities.

Subjects situated in social practices

This section presents core concepts in the theory of human subjectivity which I developed. Using the theory of subjectivity in critical psychology (Holzkamp, 1983) to analyse materials from my empirical studies of subjects as participants in social practices, revealed that some conceptual expansions and revisions were necessary in order to become able to capture the phenomena I encountered more fully. These conceptual developments were also fueled by comparing these phenomena critically with prevailing notions in research about those fields of practice.

In one field of my research (e.g., Dreier, 2008), I studied how clients attending therapy address and change their problems across the various situated social practices in their everyday lives including their temporarily added, intermittent therapy sessions. This approach transcends the abstract generalizations of diagnoses, problems and therapy in a population by reconsidering them as parts of the complex, ongoing everyday lives of client subjects.

In another field of research (e.g., Dreier, 2002), I studied how the work of psychological practitioners with their clients is entangled in, and affected by, the social arrangements of their complex, professional work practices. For instance, these arrangements enroll practitioners in contradictions of their practice with clients. On the one hand, practitioners are held accountable for what they do with their clients by abstract, general categories of diagnoses and problems based on generalized population averages and by abstractly generalized procedures of evidence-based practice to be adhered to in carrying out their work. On the other hand, their work is meant to help clients overcome their problems by addressing them in varying ways in between what else goes on in and across the various social practices of their everyday lives. Practitioners must, therefore, account for, reflect on and conduct their work in contradictory ways. These contradictions complicate their situated work with clients, their analyses of their cases, and their evaluations of their professional efforts.

In both fields, I studied processes of change and learning by focusing on subjects participating in situated social practices where they are assumed to apply what they have learned elsewhere but where they do and learn many other things (e.g., Dreier, 2015). Lave's (1988) call for a change of research on learning from studying trees of knowledge to landscapes of practice, inspired this shift in focus on change and learning. Finding similar issues in different fields of research also triggered the development of my theoretical conception. Mainstream research in these fields investigates an isolated expert situation of professional practice assuming that what is found here is the general cause of subjects' activities elsewhere and later. Subjects' ongoing activities are not in focus or merely regarded as the execution of general, mental capacities. An uneasy contradiction between abstract, generalized knowledge and concrete, personal experience—and various attempts to tinker with this contradiction—persists for subjects in these fields of practice as a symptom of the need to reconceptualize these practices and subjects' involvements in them.

These studies underline that a theory of human subjectivity must capture the significance of the social practices which subjects live in for the formation and functioning of their subjectivity. A psychological theory of subjectivity must, therefore, include concepts about

those aspects of social practices that are crucial to comprehend individual subjectivity. I shall now briefly present a set of core concepts about individual subjectivity in nexuses of social practice. These concepts expand the line of arguments in the previous sections.

As argued above, human psychological functions must be conceptualized as ongoing processes unfolding in the ongoing activity of a human subject (cf. Raeff, 2019). Human psychological processes and activity are inseparable, and the psychological processes interact, integrate, and unfold ongoingly and varyingly in a subject's varying activities and pursuits. On the background of what a subject learned earlier, his or her processes of sensing, observing, thinking, imagining, and emotional valuing interact and influence each other in varying configurations in his or her ongoing activity (cf. González Rey, Mitjanz Martínez, & Goulart, 2018; Dreier, in press). The wide-ranging scope of human psychological functioning across time also enables subjects to reflect intermittently, reconsidering and revaluing what happened earlier (Maiers, 1996). But if a subject reflects on an outcome of a past activity without considering how that activity brought this outcome about, he or she misinterprets what went on in the activity and turned into its outcome as if it were already fully present in his or her mind beforehand. A subject's prior orientation then seems to be the necessary and sufficient basis for his or her execution of his or her activity—as in a causal relation between independent and dependent variables. But, on the contrary, reflections beforehand on things to come are enriched and modified as activities and events unfold.

Moreover, as an embodied being a human subject is always situated. A subject's ongoing activities and psychological processes—including his or her reflections—unfold in a situated way in a local social context, that is, in an arranged local nexus of social practice. His or her activities and psychological processes are not a response to an isolated stimulus but inextricably and variably situated and involved in a nexus of social practice with other qualities than the environmental nexuses of animal species. In targeting his or her current pursuit of concerns, a subject focuses on certain aspects of this nexus. And he or she configures his or her psychological processes ongoingly and varyingly from his or her first-person perspective in his or her ongoing pursuit of this concern in this nexus—and so forth as his or her chain of ongoing activities and concerns unfolds. A subject's psychological processes and activities must, therefore, be grasped in more comprehensive connections in the world than merely in relations between subjects as theories of subjectivity mostly do if they reach beyond the skin of a single subject. A subject's inner world exists, is configured, and unfolds in the nexus of a local context of social practice. What is more, a local context of social practice serves particular purposes and is arranged accordingly in particular ways. It holds particular positions for taking part in it with particular scopes of possibilities for those occupying them and particular relations between participants on different positions in its ongoing social practice. A subject's participation in it is a matter of its meaning and scopes of possibilities for him or her and of his or her pertinent abilities. A social practice is also marked by social contradictions and conflicts between participants leading to struggles and alliances between them. These contradictions and conflicts may be overcome, more or less, by subjects joining in the pursuit of common concerns. All this affects how subjects configure and unfold their ongoing participation with its psychological processes.

Subjectivity must, therefore, be conceptualized as involved in situated participation in a nexus of social practice. Human subjects are participants, and their activities are a personal social practice. If we do not theorize them as such, they remain conceptually underdetermined. Subjects' processes of sensing, observing, thinking, valuing, imagining,

reflecting, etc.—as well as how they draw on prior learning and abilities—belong to and unfold in their ongoing participation. The participatory nature of human subjectivity and activity underlines why internal processes in an individual subject cannot hold complete command over his or her activity. In fact, subjects re-produce and change their lives by taking part in re-producing and changing their social practices together with, and in struggles with, other participants and, ultimately, by contributing to re-produce and change current societal practices.

But the conception of subjectivity must be extended even further. In living their lives, subjects take part in many different social practices in different, local social contexts. This distribution of different social practices into different contexts is an important characteristic of the structural arrangement of the social practice of a society and subjects take part in them by moving into them and across them in their personal trajectories of participation. But the social practices in their other contexts serve other purposes and hold other arrangements and positions, co-participants and scopes of possibilities. In their trajectories of participation, subjects take part in re-producing and changing these social practices and their structural arrangements. But in their other social practices, subjects take part in other ways and pursue other concerns—or the same concern in other ways. How they participate, then, varies and differs across space—not just across time as most psychology claims. Subjects' varying, situated participation across different social practices increases the complexity and variability of their personal functioning. They configure their participation differently from their different positions and situated first-person perspectives with varying involvements and configurations of their psychological processes of feeling and motivation, sensing, observing, thinking, and imagining across different nexuses of social practice. Mainstream research in psychology does not focus on such variations. It captures variations between subjects in an isolated situation as variations in a population while variations in individual subjects can only be captured by studying their participation in various contextual nexuses of social practice. Strictly speaking, research limited to one situation per subject can not prove that subjects function in a uniform manner on the basis of general, elementary psychological functions as necessary and sufficient conditions.

A final extension of the psychological theory of subjectivity is necessary. A subject's trajectory of participation is involved in how that subject conducts his or her everyday life together with his or her various co-participants in and across his or her various contextual social practices (Dreier, 2011, 2016; Holzkamp, 2013b). Living in a complexly arranged societal practice, subjects must take care that their complex life hangs together and does not fall apart. They must also take care to get done what is necessary for them and what matters most to them. To accomplish this, they must make arrangements of their everyday lives and their participations in its various nexuses of social practices. They must also coordinate these personal arrangements with their various co-participants and with their joint arrangements of their shared social practices and, furthermore, they must construct their arrangements in relation to the societal arrangements for living everyday lives. As a consequence, particular social practices and particular personal activities and concerns gain a particular status and meaning for a subject in the nexus of his or her conduct of everyday life. What is more, as parts of their arrangements, subjects must develop routines to get done what they must do more easily and in accordance with their preferences. These routines can be more or less fixed or open to variations. Individual subjects often have different preferences about that and this fuels recurrent conflicts and negotiations between them. They also differ in how uniform and predictable or varying they prefer their everyday lives

to be and in which respects. Finally, subjects encounter more encompassing aspects and contradictions of the dynamic structure of a society as they are involved in and affect various parts of their conduct of everyday life. How these encompassing aspects and contradictions matter to them and how they may address and influence them, vary accordingly. When they engage in influencing them more than occasionally, they must rearrange their conduct of everyday life. The concept of conduct of everyday life comprises all the complex endeavours sketched above. In its concrete complexity, subjects' conduct of everyday life affects their various participations and the relative significance of their various pursuits and concerns as well as their processes of change and learning (Dreier, 2015; Schraube & Marvakis, 2016). The concept offers a complex frame for reaching a coherent grasp of human subjectivity in the complex lives of subjects in concrete social practices.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that we must change our conception of psychic functions instead of taking over their characteristics from mainstream research. Mainstream research captures them as mutually independent, average population elements and as necessary and sufficient causal conditions for a response. But they are interacting and varying aspects of subjects' situated participation from their first-person perspective in structurally arranged nexuses of social practice. They can, therefore, not be defined as a fixed generality and their definition cannot be well-defined in the sense of a delimited, complete, and isolated entity and a necessary and sufficient cause (Dreier, 2019). Notions of internalization of so-called higher psychic functions also assume a generalized uniformity of functioning rather than that more complex psychic functions are more variable and modifiable. Psychic functions are configured by a subject in his or her ongoing situated participation in and across different nexuses of social practice. This is what subjectivity accomplishes and what we must capture in its definition (cf. González Rey, Mitján Martínez, & Goulart, 2018; Holzkamp, 1983). When a subject configures these interacting, functional aspects in his or her first-person perspective on his or her ongoing situated participation, they integrate in complex qualities of subjective processes such as the subjectively experienced, complex emotional state guiding his or her involvements (Dreier, 2020; Holzkamp, 1983).

It should be clear by now why this paper is called "Subjectivity and?". An elaborated theory comprises a nexus of concepts. A psychological conception of subjectivity which does not include concepts about its aspects and processes is too empty. Elaborating a conception of subjectivity, requires conceptualizing it in a differentiated way. Doing it rightly, implies conceptualizing it as it exists and unfolds in a subject's situated trajectory of participation and conduct of everyday life from his or her first-person perspective in nexuses of social practice. We may then grasp how human beings live by taking part in reproducing and changing their complex social practices.

However, many psychological researchers fear that we lose the subject if we attend too much to social processes and formations. In contrast, I argued that our grasp of psychological phenomena disintegrates in an internal and an external part unless we conceive psychological capacities and formations as I suggest. While so much work has been invested in examining the internal per se, the external has been included too narrowly, and there is a huge neglect in addressing and conceptualizing the two as they hang together in subjects' ongoing, situated participation in nexuses of social practice. Psychology remains analytically and conceptually underdetermined until this is done more broadly. To do so, we must become better at characterizing socio-cultural, historical practices, contexts,

and arrangements in terms particularly relevant and necessary for psychology stimulated by a more adequate and elaborate interdisciplinary collaboration with other social sciences. How can we fear to lose the subject if we believe in its worldliness but have only just begun examining it? Arguing that we are losing it, echoes a deep conceptual chasm of subject versus object. The qualities, significances, and courses of internal processes cannot be grasped adequately and completely if not in and through subjects living and functioning as participants in nexuses of situated social practices. Culture, society, and history are then not external to their functioning and course but in them. It takes profound reconsiderations of the internal processes, functions and capacities to connect them adequately with subjects' ongoing participation in social practices. This is the challenge we face.

References

- Billig, M. (2013). *Learn to write badly: How to succeed in the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Danziger, K., (1990). *Constructing the subject. Historical origins of psychological research*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dreier, O. (2002). *Psykosocial behandling. En teori om et praksisområde*. Dansk psykologisk Forlag.
- Dreier, O. (2008). *Psychotherapy in everyday life*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dreier, O. (2011). Personality and the conduct of everyday life. *Nordic Psychology*, 63(2), 4–23. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1901-2276/a000030>
- Dreier, O. (2015). Learning and Conduct of Everyday Life. In J. Cresswell, A. Haye, A. Larraín, M. Morgan, & G. Sullivan (Eds.), *Dialogue and debate in the making of theoretical psychology* (pp. 182–190). Captus University Publications.
- Dreier, O. (2016). Conduct of everyday life: Implications for critical psychology. In E. Schraube, & C. Højholt (Eds.), *Psychology and the conduct of everyday life* (pp. 15–33). Routledge.
- Dreier, O. (2019). Generalizations in situated practices. In C. Højholt, & E. Schraube (Eds.), *Subjectivity and knowledge—Generalization in the psychological study of everyday life* (pp. 177–193). Springer.
- Dreier, O. (2020). Critical psychology—Subjects in situated social practices. In M. Fleer, F. González Rey, & P. Jones (Eds.), *Cultural-historical and critical psychology—Common ground, divergences and future pathways* (pp. 11–26). Springer Nature.
- Dreier, O. (in press). A cultural-historical theory of human subjectivity. In D. Goulart, A. Mitjanz Martínez, & M. Adams (Eds.), *The study of subjectivity: A cultural-historical perspective*. Perspectives in cultural-historical research. Springer Nature.
- Funder, D. C. (2001). Personality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 197–221. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.197>
- González Rey, F. (2020). The rescue of subjectivity from a cultural-historical standpoint. In R. K. Beshara (Ed.), *A critical introduction to psychology* (pp. 9–25). Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

- González Rey, F., Mitján Martínez, A., & Goulart, D. M. (Eds.). (2018). *Subjectivity within cultural-historical approach: theory, methodology and research*. Springer.
- Holzkamp, K. (1973). *Sinnliche Erkenntnis. Historischer Ursprung und gesellschaftliche Funktion der Wahrnehmung*. Fischer Athenäum Verlag.
- Holzkamp, K. (1977). Die Überwindung der wissenschaftlichen Belieblichkeit psychologischer Theorien durch die Kritische Psychologie. *Zeitschrift für Sozialpsychologie*, 8, 1–22 & 78–97.
- Holzkamp, K. (1983). *Grundlegung der Psychologie*. Campus Verlag.
- Holzkamp, K. (2013a). Missing the point: variable psychology's blindness to the problem's inherent coherences. In E. Schraube, & U. Osterkamp (Eds.), *Psychology from the standpoint of the subject. Selected writings of Klaus Holzkamp* (pp. 60–74). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holzkamp, K. (2013b). Psychology: Social self-understanding on the reasons for action in the conduct of everyday life. In E. Schraube, & U. Osterkamp (Eds.), *Psychology from the standpoint of the subject. Selected writings of Klaus Holzkamp* (pp. 233–341). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lave, J. (1988). *Cognition in practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leontjew, A. N. (1973). *Probleme der Entwicklung des Psychischen*. Fischer Athenäum Verlag.
- Maiers, W. (1996). Historicity of the subject: Subjectivity of life history. In Ch. W. Tolman, F. Cherry, R. van Hezewijk, & I. Lubek (Eds.), *Problems of theoretical psychology* (pp. 62–72). Captus Press.
- Marx, K. (1969) Thesen über Feuerbach. In K. Marx, & F. Engels. Werke Band 3 (pp. 5–7). Dietz Verlag. English translation [Marx/Engels Internet Archive](#) 2002.
- Messman, A., & Rückriem, G. (1978). Zum Verständnis der menschlichen Natur in der Auffassung des Psychischen bei A. N. Leontjew. In Rückriem, G., Tomberg, F., & W. Volpert (Hg.), *Historischer Materialismus und menschliche Natur* (pp. 80–134). Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag.
- Osterkamp, U. (1975). Grundlagen der psychologischen Motivationsforschung 1. Texte zur Kritischen Psychologie Bd. 4.1. Campus Verlag.
- Raeff, C. (2019). From objects to acting: Repopulating psychology with people who act. *Theory & Psychology*, 29(3), 311–335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354319844603>
- Rubin, E. (1949a). Preface. In E. Rubin, *Experimenta psychologica* (pp. 7–8). Munksgaard.
- Rubin, E. (1949b). Einige prinzipielle Gesichtspunkte. VIIIth International congress of psychology 1927–Proceedings and papers. In E. Rubin, *Experimenta psychologica* (pp. 9–18). Munksgaard.

Schraube, E. & Marvakis, A. (2016). Frozen fluidity: digital technologies and the transformation of students' learning. In E. Schraube, & C. Højholt (Eds.), *Psychology and the conduct of everyday life* (pp. 205–225). Routledge.

Schurig, V. (1975a). *Naturgeschichte des Psychischen 1. Psychogenese und elementare Formen der Tierkommunikation*. Campus Verlag.

Schurig, V. (1975b). *Naturgeschichte des Psychischen 2. Lernen und Abstraktionsleistungen bei Tieren*. Campus Verlag.

Schurig, V. (1976). *Entstehung des Bewußtseins*. Campus Verlag.

About the author

Ole Dreier is Professor emeritus at the Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen and at the Inland University of Applied Sciences in Lillehammer, Norway. He has held the Wilhelm Wundt chair in Leipzig and been affiliated with universities in Mexico, Germany, and the United States. His research background is in critical psychology where he has worked on the conception of the subject and on practice research, in particular on change and learning in relation to psychotherapy, health care and education. He is an approved specialist in psychotherapy and supervision.

Contact: Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen. Email: ole.dreier@mail.dk