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Collectivity and the Boundary Subject: Between Collective and Individual Subjectivity in Psychology

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Abstract

Across the field of educational and social psychology, the term ‘collective(s)’ has proven to be an increasingly predominating concept in analyzing the preconditions of mental health and wellbeing. However, with the prevalence of self-help practices and literature, we are often left with an unsatisfactory negativity of collectivity, and the general question of whether or how to conceptualize activities of the solitary individual as a social practice. When psychologies deal with collectives rather than collectivity, the collective status of individual subjectivity often remains unaddressed, and this negativity forms the outset for this paper. The paper thus explores the implications of leaving individual subjectivity in the shadows of favoring collectives and collective subjectivity, thus questioning whether the subject as an individual unit is truly non-collective, or if we can articulate collectivity and subjectivity in a way that bridges this gap. To explore this issue, the paper rearticulates the notion of collectivity through dialogical engagements with different receptions of the ‘collective condition’ of subjectivity, i.e., as ideology (Zizek), boundary objectivity (Nissen), and hereditary sin (Kierkegaard). Concepts of uncollectivity and boundary subjectivity are presented as means to overcome the psychological implications when collectivity is only grasped through the external contradiction of individual and collective subjectivity.

Keywords: collectivity, subjectivity, psychology, anxiety

Introduction

To engage with research on psychological phenomena such as anxiety means that one must also engage with the theories and scientific procedures through which those phenomena are examined

and co-produced. Thus, both the phenomena in question, our theories, and the methods of our procedures form crucial parts of a social reality that is not only limited to specific scientific practices, but it holds a generality that might go far and beyond the boundaries of its scientificity (Dreier, 2007). For this purpose, Klaus Holzkamp and Ute Osterkamp (amongst others) founded what is now known as the German-Nordic critical psychology (GNCP). This psychology is based on a methodology that emphasizes reflecting what they termed the *adequacy* of research strategies and theories within psychology (Schraube, 2015). The a priori of such adequacy (which might be more of an ideal) forces the researcher to engage with theory as something that is not only helpful for the immediate analysis of certain psychological issues by means of adequate concepts. Those concepts and theories must also enable and assist reflecting the adequacy of (not just our own but the generally relevant) theoretical concepts and frameworks so that they may be rearticulated, overcoming what Holzkamp would describe as their potential “narrow-mindedness, superficiality, and false knowledge” (1983b, p. 163, author’s translation). In his original work, Holzkamp made the statement that “[s]cience is a permanent questioning of the apparent obvious. In principle, it means swimming against the stream, which also means swimming against the stream of our own prejudices” (1983b, p. 163, author’s translation). However, with the objective of this paper in mind, and reflecting the role and the implications of psychological knowledge, not least for those who struggle with anxiety or other mental illnesses, the philosopher Wolfgang Fritz-Haug (who was also a part of the GNCP group) made the case even more clear:

There is no truly rational approach that does not begin in the world of everyday experience and remains mediated by it. The problem is clear, but the solution is problematic. The problem is: to gather knowledge about the forms in which everything is initially thought of spontaneously. This knowledge is not gained by transferring everyday consciousness, so to speak, into the realm of true abstraction. All well-intentioned manipulation with enticing words such as being–appearance, surface–depth, etc., does not help us any further. The task consists in the transition, the development, from one to the other. The degradation of everyday reality to a ‘pure phenomenal world’ is a verbal stunt. The reality of everyday life is the immediately toughest. To deny its character as reality is to pursue the same policy as the ostrich that sticks its head in the bush, even though it may be a well-read ostrich (1979, p. 162, author’s translation).

Those initial thought-forms of everyday life, as we shall see, is not a neutral ground which psychology *then* intervenes and reconfigures. A part of the legacy of GNCP was the encouragement to formulate a psychology that reflects the ‘nature’ of human beings as developing societies and societally developed.

This meant, firstly, that much is needed to be said and criticized about the psychologies who neglect to reflect this reciprocity of individual and society, and how human beings are immanently preoccupied (perhaps blindly, compliantly, defiantly, or deceived) with the social preconditions for their own individual existence (Osterkamp, 2009). Secondly, this critique would only prove useful if it was based on a different theoretical foundation on the issue of human subjectivity, thus where its negative critique transposes into a positive rearticulation that not only develops theories about the abstract reciprocity between individual and society but also proves to concretize and keep those theories open and developing. Assuming the consequence of their own methodology

requires that theories can be continually criticized and rearticulated, thus concretizing them anew (Nissen, 2019).

This connection – perhaps even separation in some cases – between individual and society proves to be a difficult passage to navigate; it not only seems volatile, narrow, and often quite impassable, but the peril of its course is very reminiscent of the myth of the Strait of Messina and the Scylla and Charybdis that guards it. On the one side, we see what Svend Brinkmann (2023) describes as ‘The Experience Society’ where subjective experience is valued to such an extent that the reality of our everyday lives has been relativized to a purely subjective phenomenon that we cannot seem to move beyond. The works of Brinkmann demonstrate how psychology can help to reflect the developments of our society, and even the relationship between subjectivity and (the ‘real case’ of) what seems to lie beyond it. Even though this analysis has a lot of merit and points to very real tendencies, the Scylla of Brinkmann also leaves behind the Charybdis of those societal tendencies that does the exact opposite. Here, psychology does not assist individuals in analyzing how immediate subjective experience has become the cardinal of social reality, but instead its analyses assist this very social reality by helping individuals understand and recognize that their subjective experience proves flawed, misguided, or disillusioned by comparison to what is hinted as the ‘real’ reality (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1979; De Vos, 2013; Pasgaard, 2025).

Everyday life is a complex ecology already colonized by psychological vocabulary and logics, and these often carry with them the illusive strategies of Fritz-Haug’s well-read ostrich, obfuscating the reality behind what psychology (too easily) dismisses as subjective experience. Thus, psychology plays a pivotal role in the ways people are led to reject it as mistaken or be confirmed in their belief that their spontaneous perception of reality is the right one (cf. Žižek, 1994). This approach also immanently discloses its own ideological nature: it not only neglects to reflect the preconditions of the social reality in which psychological phenomena are ontologically situated and must be situated theoretically, but it does so purposefully because it seems that questioning what is believed to be ‘real’ reality is irrelevant in either case.

Approaching the logics of (pop-) clinical psychology and its persuasiveness

In my previous work, drawing on transdisciplinary analyses of the ideology of psychology, anxiety was shown to constitute a pivotal case of those foundational assumptions within clinical psychology that linger as a naturalizing framing of objects psychologists then proceed to discover as precarious nature (Pasgaard, 2025). This is first and foremost seen within pop and clinical psychologies, even though there might relevant boundaries between the lay and professional (or academic) implications of those interpretations. As forms of knowledge, they are clearly distinguishable as indicated by their situatedness of either professional or existential practices, but on the level of theory, their general underlying assumptions of anxiety are retraceable to the same outlet. One of the core principles within cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), which is generally representative of what is seen as the nature of anxiety across lay and disciplinary boundaries, is that “any emotional reaction, e.g., anxiety or depression, is considered a signal that points out to the discrepancy between self-regulation and of threats to well-being” (Batmaz, 2014, p. 15). With the concept of self-regulation posed as center of intervention, and what we should allegedly ‘care’

about in mental health, anxiety immediately proves to us that self-regulation has gone out of function.

In this view, we are left with an unaddressed dialectic since anxiety is fundamentally seen as a modus of experience that emerges as *consequence* of dysfunctional self-regulation, but at the same time anxiety is seen precisely as a negative emotion since it also constitutes the momentum that initiates self-regulation (Pasgaard, 2025). This maneuver of ‘having your cake and eating it too’ enables this form of psychology to formulate a core object without having to address anxiety outside the premises of its self-regulatory implications. As such, anxiety can serve both as the cause and the consequence of ill self-regulation, but with the functioning of self-regulation conceived as a general psychological competence, it becomes a locus of attention and natural target to instigate its improvement (Pasgaard, 2025). Whether this is viewed in terms of its pop, lay, or clinical contexts, regulatory training is not only a primary modus of its resolution, but it also latently installs a notion of what the problem is represented to be. In the works of Žižek, this would amount to the construction of a social antagonism, i.e., that anxiety becomes socially antagonized for its disruptive interference on our daily life (2006a). As such, anxiety is also believed to come *outside* our daily life, which is not only the outset for those who employ the discourse of psychology, but even for the scientific curiosity of psychology itself. In the works of Kierkegaard, he makes this even clearer, that “[t]he mood of psychology would be antipathetic curiosity,” and that anxiety not only makes itself present through its substantive portrayals in psychology, but that it formatively situates this mood of psychology when it discovers anxiety through portrayals of its own making (1980, p. 15).

However, daily life in this instance is a cardinal reference point for this antipathetic curiosity of psychology. In Danish clinical literature on anxiety treatment, it is argued that anxiety and worrying can be adaptive, thus allowing us to anticipate and avoid danger, but that it can grow out of proportions with the (lacking) reality of such danger (cf. Thastum, 2018). In this way, anxiety can grow to make an impact on our daily lives and how we function in and across the composite nature of our societal existence. It is this functioning in our everyday lives that serves as a yardstick for the pathology of anxiety, i.e., it forms the contours of a framework against which we can recognize its disturbances (Pasgaard, 2025). As such, “anxiety is not seen to be pathological in and of itself: what distinguishes the pathological form of anxiety from the ‘normal’ one (which is only represented as non-pathological, rather than proper normality) is the degree of its intrusiveness” (Pasgaard, 2025, p. 9). We can only really understand the distinction of anxiety in this interpretation as a quantitative one; outside the assessment of its degree of intrusiveness, there is no radical difference with respect to the nature of anxiety. The idea of a ‘normal’ anxiety in these clinical terms is a superficial leftover, and what we are really left with is a form of anxiety that does not warrant or justify clinical intervention. In its radical nature, anxiety, whether ‘normal’ or pathological, are thought to demonstrate an excessive irrationality that does not regard any form of reason or justification (cf. Breinholst, Christiansen & Esbjørn, 2018).

Within this framework, we leave the societal premises of our individual existence and everyday life unquestioned in any case, thus purposefully bracketed, and even though anxiety seems to be the consequence of ill self-regulation (that it somehow also instigates), it appears to be an outsider that belongs amongst what is ‘reasonably’ regarded as threatening to our well-being. Prevailing societal conditions are both represented and accepted as immutable, and the ill self-regulation of individuals is solvable only through successful adaptation and by treating emotions “as a general

source of danger, which must be overcome or at least reined within the individual, i.e., kept away from being transacted concretely” (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1979, p. 258, author’s translation). Thus, when anxiety is seen as negative emotion, we are left with a conception of positive emotional assessment that can only grasp ‘positivity’ in its inseparability from the confirmative stance on the conditions of a given social reality.

Especially with regards to anxiety, the contradiction between reality and experience proves to be an intricate relationship that often leaves anxiety to be represented in abstract negation – usually indeterminately. It is thus posited that anxiety has nothing to do with anything ‘real’ and that its presence and experience point to no form of objective reality. With this outset, a core objective of cognitive-behavioral therapy is cognitive restructuring, challenging “existing thought, expectations, and assumptions, creating the opportunity for reflection on a more realistic perspective” (Rapee & Thastum, n.d., p. 20, author’s translation). This quote is from a Danish manual from the Cool-kids and Chilled-programs, designed for anxiety treatment with children and youth, emphasizing in their approach to their target audience that the program is about “identifying your inappropriate and unhelpful thoughts and then challenging these thoughts and replacing them with more realistic ones” (Rapee & Thastum, n.d., p. 8, author’s translation). As such, there is some precarious social and existential reassurance implied in positing the ‘fact’ that anxiety is not reasonable, in several connotations of the word ‘reason’ – that it is neither rational nor helpful. It seems quite precarious how it becomes meaningful (albeit perhaps only provisionally) to argue that anxiety does not have any meaning. This was also pointed out by Illouz in her work on the therapeutic discourse:

In calling us to withdraw into ourselves, the therapeutic persuasion has made us abandon the great realms of citizenship and politics and cannot provide an intelligible way of linking the private sphere because it has emptied the self of its communal and political content, replacing this content with a narcissistic self-concern (2008).

As Illouz remarks, the disconnection that constitutes the narcissistic self is somehow and somewhat persuasive. Today, the immediate modus for a *concerned self*, is to be *self-concerned*, which seems to abandon any content outside its egoic confinement that could relevantly connect its concern with its collective, societal, and political conditions. Seeing that psychology assists this abandonment, there is a proper collective gesture to be found when individuals are being purposefully turned away from the kernel of their collective condition of being, founding the subject on the incitation of a self-turning reproach.

The issue with psychology in this way, is the continuation to portray anxiety in ways that abstract from the situated reality of its everyday phenomenon, i.e., first and foremost because its purpose is to help individuals persist the immediate reality of their everyday lives and adapt to its general conditions as if these were given necessities (Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1979; Rose, 1996; 1999). As such, general societal conditions must first be established as given, thus bracketing them reflexively – they are necessarily naturalized to support its reproduction (Danziger, 1997). When theories of psychology assist in naturalizing the general societal conditions of peoples’ individual existences, these theories are inevitably becoming integral parts of those societies and lives, thus

involving themselves not only in the forming of collective conditions but in the immediate experience of everyday life.

Engaging with theory through a transdisciplinary approach is necessary to critically reflect how psychology does indeed begin in the immediate reality of everyday experience, but also to analyze the implications of its outset in and appeal to what remains given – even though it might have been transformed in the process (Hacking, 1995). However, the immediacy of its beginning implies a transposition of everyday life into its own forms of knowledge: the immanent neglect of pop and clinical psychologies to reflect the preconditions of everyday reality is not coincidental as the naturalization of this very reality also happen to constitute the precondition of their particular discourse. Therefore, it is no coincidence that those psychologies end up appealing to the reality of the social practices that constitute our everyday life and its phenomenal world, consequently lining its immediacy in a vastly more impenetrable ‘nature.’

In the works of Steven Brown et al. (2013), they present the concept of *psychologically modified experience* which outlines how psychology becomes a relevant mediator in the lives of psychiatric patients. They show how participating in psychologically informed practices has implications for the experience of symptoms in (and) their everyday lives, and that experiences, in this way, are shaped through practices of cultivating phenomenal modifications. However, the boundaries of the clinic do not delimit this process of utilizing psychological technologies for the (trans)formation of self-relations as patients retain these forms of knowledges and techniques into their everyday lives, releasing them, as they state, “into the broader ecology of the community” (Brown et al., 2013). Here, Brown et al. follow the line of thought represented in the tradition of GNCP, where one key objective of psychological research is to produce knowledge about the ‘ecology’ of everyday life, i.e., the ideology of its reality, and that we must consider that psychology itself has become a vital part of our modern societal ecology.

This is also present with Brinkmann’s work on diagnostic cultures (2016a; 2016b) where diagnoses are seen as a cultivated form of interpretation that has altered how the phenomenon of pathology and mental illness is experienced and lived. Here, we also see a movement beyond the typical explanations that the increasing prevalence stems from better methods of identifying pathology, and even the more progressive – but at least as confirmative – idea, that modern life has created new social conditions of mental illness (2016a). Approaching the ‘culture’ of diagnoses questions how its interpretative form has become part of how we live, and how those interpretations and experiences of mental illness affect our lives – thus not *because* of individual pathology, but in light of its framing capabilities (Goffman, 1974).

The conception of a psychologically modified experience can be generalized beyond its modification of individuals’ spontaneous perception and thinking. Its proliferation and regurgitation are really a collective effort, influencing and modifying a supra-individual reality of a common sense. As such, its generalization not only affects the experiences of individual subjects, but even realities of a more expansive collective subjectivity (cf. Nissen, 2018).

A prevalent theoretical issue of psychologically modified realities, as indicated by Brown et al. (and still in parallel with Holzkamp), is that the discourse of psychology must first and foremost be taken up as socially situated within the reality of those concrete practices and subjects it informs; and only from this standpoint can we reflect how this reality is transformed, e.g., how the ecology of collectives and their practices are reshaped and resituated by psychology. This dialectic was

also discussed by Jan De Vos, who questioned whether ‘psychologization’ is really something that happens through individuals actively employing psychology to inform their (inter)actions, or if it may in fact be psychology who does the thinking for us, and thus merely ‘hires’ us to (inter)passively follow its guidance (2018). This approach and attentiveness to the collectives and societal ecologies holds great promises, and the fact that the passivity of De Vos is precisely an *inter*-passivity. However, self-help cultures and the industry of educative material either through institutions or a plurality of media also pose the question of how to theorize the status of collectivity when dealing with individual subjects.

Ideology, Collectivity, and Self

Initially, self-help practices are distinguishable from other practices since this notion of *self* seems to contrast with the more general notion of *collective* practices. This apparent dichotomy between ‘self’ and ‘collective’ could quickly lead one to conclude that the lack of others means that there is no collective. Throughout Danish research into education, care, well-being, mental health, etc., the concept of *collectivity* is often overshadowed by the more definite case of collectives. This definite conception generally implies a specification of concrete groups of children or youth in school settings, sports, or certain institutions, but this also means that a more expansive notion of ideology risks being left behind in favor of reducing collectivity and participation to the particularity of immediate social groups and their activities. Generally, this type of research may approach collectives through their social dynamics, cultures, discourse, interactions, etc., but they also seem to conceive collectivity of individual subjects only when they are together and in the immediate presence of other individuals.

More specifically, this is generally the case with different receptions of belonging in and across domains of psychological research, for instance on bullying and school retention (cf. Søndergaard, 2010; Hansen, 2011). These concepts of belonging, however, do not explicitly dismiss that collectivity might be present when individuals are on their own, but they do leave it behind unaddressed as a distinct negativity. A prevalent representation of this negativity is with the needs-theory of positive psychology and its self-determination theory. Here, belonging is posited as a ‘psychological need’ that guides us toward friendships, collectives, and communities where we can satisfy this need to feel as being part of a ‘we’ (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, even though much could be said about needs-theories, to assume a more affirmative stance than positive psychology would allow (cf. Nissen, 2023), I will center my approach around the conceptual negativity from my own field implied with the concept of *participation*.

Charlotte Højholt demonstrates this delineation of whether individual subjects can be conceived as participants if a precondition for (social) practice is the participation of other individuals: “The concept of participation requires a subject (there is someone who participates), some others (you are a part of something in which others also take part), a cause (there is something you participate in – you take part in relation to something)” (1996, p. 58). Thus, with the phenomenon of self-help practices, I am inclined to question what happens with this status of ‘the participatory subject’ and what conceptual consequences we might face if both the concept of subject and cause (or its more general implication as the ‘directedness’ of practice) relies upon a social embeddedness of the individual amongst other individuals. My attempt here is not to deconstruct how such a conception

might be too narrow, but to reflect how we are dealing with different forms of collectivity that warrant distinction and scrutinization. A notion of *uncollectives* might pave a way forward.

Building on the cultural-historical conception of collectivity throughout the works of Nissen, the concept of *collective* entails approaching “any social unit as a unit of praxis” (2012, p. 105). The notion of ‘uncollectives’ is my attempt to question the *social* status of the unit of the individual subject and its practice when its participation in a self-help practice seems to constitute the entirety of the collective. One could say that the unit of the subject constitutes the unit of practice, but what does this imply for the conception that any such unit would be a *social* unit? Can we just proceed to conceive even individual subjects as a form of collective, or are we to go in the other direction and strip these forms of individual practices of their collectivity all together?

In its immediate activity, the singular subject overlaps perfectly with the social unit of the collective, but this also begs the question whether the singular subject can be conceived as a social unit in and of itself, and whether the unit of practice of the singular subject can be understood as *social* practice. Generally, we need to reflect how collectivity takes on its form when the subject is not taking part in any immediate ‘social’ unit of practice and whether the subject is still a participant (thus a *partial* unit) of a collective without the presence of others and how this negativity might be sublated into the very conception of subjectivity.

Conceptually, framing individual subjectivity as an uncollective could initially seem unnecessary as it seemingly indicates that the subject is alone. However, the concept allows us to positively state the passage from collective to individual subjectivity and therefore retain collectivity as indicative in addressing subjectivity even on its individual level. Thus, this uncollective not only grasps the individual in terms of its collectivity, but it also retains the indicative condition of collectivity necessary to understand subjective participation in the (thus uncollective) lack of other individuals. If we were to simply address the individual without this connection to the conditions of its collective mode of being, the individual would be alone, non-social, non-participatory, and self-help practices would not make sense as ‘practice’ proper. On the other hand, if we approach the individual in terms of its uncollective participation, we can question the *form* of collectivity that applies to individual subjectivity, as the subject in and by itself does not make up a collective and yet positively exists as a (negative) *social* unit.

To be sure, with the notion of the uncollective, I am not merely referring to the negativity implied with the lack of concrete others, but to the underlying presumption that units of practice requires a plurality of individuals in order for it to be a social unit, and that this lack of others in self-help practices would have conceptual implications for our understanding of the (social) unit of the individual subject. We can thus overcome this susceptible exclusion where the singular subject (in the lack of others) is assumed to exist properly outside any form of collective – which would be a radical inference of collectivity that presumes the existence of a form of privacy within which individual subjects can be truly non-collective.

In the previously mentioned literature of positive and social psychology where this negativity is represented, they do not explicitly address whether subjects hold such privacy, but their reception of collectivity leaves a distinct space for this negativity to be extrapolated: from the definite positing of *collectives*, there is no clear passage from collective to collectivity as they become indistinguishable, thus interlocking that which properly separates them. This conceptual near-perfect overlapping implies that if those ‘other’ subjects (that are needed for a unit of practice to

be a social unit) are immediately absent, we are left with no positive concept of whatever collectivity or sociality remains. In this case, if the lack of other subjects implies that there is no collectivity, the singular subject cannot fundamentally be conceived as a participant in social practice. However, if we do conceive the subject as radically participatory, and thus as a social unit in its own right, and this subject is engaged in units of practice only with itself as the only participant, it still remains unclear how to account for both the partiality of the individual subject and the supra-individual level of its collectivity. In the following, I explore this question of collectivity outside collectives, further building on this idea that the uncollective of individuals warrants a distinction between individual and collective subjectivity within the individual subject itself.

From ideology to boundary object(ivity)

To overcome this negativity and posit the *uncollective* of the individualized ‘I’ of the singular subject, Nissen emphasizes that collectivity must be taken as the locus of participation and power, i.e., the co-constitution of subjects and collectives, of the ‘I’ and the ‘we’, through relations of recognition (2018). As such, subjects and collectives inter-individuate, they (trans)form each other collaboratively or conflictually, not only shaping the boundaries of the ‘I’ and ‘me’ from the ‘we’ and ‘us’, but by distinguishing their internality by relating to their outside, i.e., the otherness of ‘you’ and ‘them’ (Nissen, 2018). If we expand the notion of collectivity through a critique of ideology, it becomes apparent that the constitution and boundaries of a collective – more specifically its *objectivity* – emerges with the production of its objects and their meaning, tying individuals and collectives together or setting them apart.

Building on the Marxist tradition of GNCP, Nissen defines ideology as the “cultural objects relevant to the constitution of particular participants and collectives as subjects in distinct forms” (2005, p. 154). With the concept of *practice of objectification*, Nissen argues that the objectivity of ideology points to the closure of subjectivity, the substantializing moment of their formation. This objectification involves a flip side, however, implying that the productive (trans)forming of objects is a critical process that involves an opening of meaning that also opens what it means to be a subject. This encircles Nissen’s concept of sense, and thus the ‘subjectivity of meaning’, drawing on Vygotsky and Leontiev for the distinction of sense and meaning: “Sense is personal and subjective, while meaning is socio-cultural and objective” (2012, p. 113). While they might seem interchangeable, the distinction of meaning and sense implies a reflection of what Nissen terms *the referent* and that we can only articulate each of them respectively by also articulating this reference, i.e., the *subjectivity of sense* and the *objectivity of meaning* (2012, p. 113).

We see the dialectics of this notion of ideology in how subjectivity (sense) is constituted in relationships of participation and thus emerges in distinct form through its involvement in practices of objectification (meaning). By engaging in this process, forms of ideology “(and thus, subjects), are both substantialized and contradicted in the transformation of objects” (Nissen, 2005, p. 155). In this way, the notion of ideology expands this idea of collectives as a particular group of individuals, and that the relationships between subjects materialize through the reproduction, the employment, and the transformation of meaning and its objectivity. This implies an interconnection between ‘subjective sense’ and ‘collective meaning’, and that the materiality of practice is the locus of this *ongoing indexical movement*: “Meaning mediates the collective through

the endless texture of praxis, and sense resituates praxis in the collective. Meaning is when sense achieves objectivity in social exchange; sense is the subjective singularity of meaning” (Nissen, 2012, p. 105).

Nissen later expands this notion of ideology in his later works (2023), favoring the concept of *boundary objectivity* – a concept he employs from the works of Susan Leigh Star, James Griesemer, and Geoffrey Bowker. Throughout their work on classifications, the concept of boundary objects is introduced to emphasize that these are “objects for cooperation across social worlds” (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 15). The classifications they investigate relate to interdisciplinary scientific cooperation, and boundary objects both inhabit each field respectively, satisfying their internal requirements, but they also transgress borders, thus maintaining some form of constant identity. Approaching objects as *boundary objects* means to reflect how they are tinkered with by subjects in and across practices, studying the social plasticity of their materiality, but keeping in mind how boundary objects tie together or separate subjects and collectives by imposing a technological means of sustaining, reshaping, or dissolving their ambiguous social link. Followingly, there is a crucial passage from the *ideological boundaries of objects* to the *boundary objectivity of ideology*. First, because the material objectivity of subjectivity has temporal (historical) and spatial (supra-individual) boundaries, and second because the objects within these boundaries constitute the anchoring pivots that link together subjects collectively, and for whom those objects are immanent.

Here, Bank (2016) and Nissen (2016) point to the standardizing quality of boundary objects in that they imply technical properties (certain forms of regulating practices and activities) as well as ethical properties (regulating the subjects who use them and who may be the target of its activities). A key point of Bank (2016) is that subjects and standards co-constitute each other, and therefore the immanent quality of such standards means that their boundary objectivity is not initially *given* and *then* reshaped by subjects. Conversely, we are urged to think about objectivity as something which is never given and that the dialectics of the reciprocity of subjectivity and objectivity implies that subjects not only subject themselves to standards, but that they are also those who forge them. To be sure, the materiality of those standards we think of as given – or simply *lack* to think of for this very reason – are not at all given, but are historically developed, developing, and contingent to their very core.

This is indeed the case if we look at objectification from a broader sociological perspective, i.e., on the side of objectivity (Nissen, 2008). But, with this conception of objectivity, we also risk overlooking its subjective counterpart, or rather, the formulation of this particular passage from object to subject gives the impression that there is an external contradiction between subject and object which completely bypasses the dialectical approach to see this contradiction internally. This internal contradiction is crucial in Zizek’s reception of Hegelian dialectics where the gap that separates subjectivity (subjective spirit) from objectivity (objective spirit) is to be found within individual subjectivity itself, and that this gap must be included into the very conception of the subject (2012, p. 98-99). Where Bank tends to favor reflecting the material boundaries of a supra-individuality as (what Zizek would term) a “*non-psychological ‘objective social fact,’*” we risk overlooking the subjective internality of how common sense also cultivates the nature of what is (now, immediately) given and immanent.

Thus, we must take into account how the co-constitution of objectivity and subjectivity allows for an object that we know to be *bounded* to emerge subjectively as *given*. And furthermore, that the

boundaries of such an object implies that the subject to whom this object is common-sensical has emerged along the boundaries of an objectivity beyond its individual subjectivity. Subjects are in this sense *boundary subjects*, emerging as those in the eyes of whom a particular object is given. Through this reflective premise of the nature (and always-already indicated naturalization) of social reality, we see the contingency of the objects that mediate the boundaries that link together subjects and collectives or separates them from each other as non-given others. As such, the contradiction between collectives and individuals seems to express that collective subjectivity has to do with collectives and individual subjectivity with individuals. However, Žizek encourages us to expand this contradiction inwards, and thus to step beyond its external expression in the gap between individuals and collectives, but to see this gap within the individual subject. Thus, we need to think about individual subjectivity as an ambiguous amalgamation that already comprises the boundaries between collectivity and individuality within itself.

The Adam Problem

To be sure, my attempt here is not to overcome the distinction and contradiction between the unit of the subject and the unit of the collective – of sense and meaning – but to retain it, and at the same time thoroughly conceive their gap as indicative of subjectivity as such. Otherwise, we will face the problem that was already laid out by Kierkegaard when he described how to fit Adam into history as his individual sin also put sin into the world (1980). The terminology of Kierkegaard proves quite complicated to rearticulate – but also a fruitful endeavor. In the following, I will attempt to draw on Kierkegaard's disquisition on the thematic of Adam and sin as a means of overcoming the external contradiction of subject and collective, reflecting why it has become prevalent in psychology to put the solitary subject outside collectivity, and thus outside objectivity.

The problem with the sin of Adam begins with the fact that the sin of Adam was the first of its kind, and as such Adam's fall into sin put sin into the world, initiating its worldly history, and those who follow would no longer be first, but would inherit their sinfulness. However, the individual sin of Adam is initially also the only sin, which entails that the first sin is not only what begins its history, but makes it a part of history, and makes it the whole history at once (Kierkegaard, 1980).

Even though the concept of sin is rather foreign in contemporary psychology, the dialectic approach of Kierkegaard closely examines the status of participation with regards to individuality and collectivity. When Kierkegaard asks if the first sin of Adam (as individual) brought sin into the world, he also asks how this first sin could also reflect hereditary sin in Adam; how would his individual sin make him a part of the human kind¹ if he himself did not inherit it? Thus, the initial offset of Kierkegaard implies an interrogation of the obscurity that if we view the individuality of Adam in this way, he would be the only individual without history, which would mean that human kind would begin with an individual who is outside human kind, canceling both the idea of human kind and individual (1980, p. 10). The problem with the sin of Adam is that it is ambiguous in another sense than the ambiguity of the sin of any individual that came after him: for individuals, as with Adam, there would be a first sin, but this would only be the first sin of the individual and

¹ In different translated works of Kierkegaard, 'Slægt' has been translated into 'race', but I will refer to this term as *human kind* throughout the article as this has closer connotations to his original work.

not of human kind. The first sin of the individual would thus instigate its participation in hereditary sin, which began with Adam, and which places the subject in relation to Adam both as individual (another subject) and as hereditary sin (the historical collectivity of the human kind). Ultimately, this is what Kierkegaard asks: “Does the concept of hereditary sin differ from the concept of the first sin in such a way that the particular individual participates in inherited sin only through this relation to Adam and not through his primitive relation to sin?” (1980, p. 26).

It is here quite fortunate that Kierkegaard decided to use the term ‘participates’ as this will make my passage even more straightforward. Sin is the mediated process of subjectification where the subject is constituted by assuming the symbolic space that is carved out for it in the texture of meaning. The (pre-objectified, in becoming) subject participates in the objectification of its own sense, involving itself in what Nissen (2023) describes as the closure (the positive condition) of its own being through which it emerges in an always-already objectified self-relation (the constitutive movement of perversion in psychoanalysis, cf. Butler, 1997; Žižek 2006a). With this approach, Kierkegaard encourages us to grasp the ambiguous status of both Adam, his sin, and the relation between Adam and his sin. That the individual sin of Adam was also the first sin implies that the objectification of the sense of Adam was the first to achieve objectivity, and thus to materialize as meaning, which makes him the first (and momentarily the only) singular subject. On the other side, the hereditary nature of Adam’s sin implies that with the possibility of his sense achieving the status of meaning through a practice of objectification, his sin mediates a supra-individuality beyond the sense of his individual subjectivity, thus situating a collective through a praxis which, as he is the first to sin, would only be counting Adam as its participant.

This ambiguity of the status of Adam thus implies that he cannot fully be understood as subject, or maybe the coincidence of Adam’s individuality and the supra-individual rather makes him *too much* of a subject. First due to the fact that the originality of his individual sin prevents him from resituating his praxis into a collective (as this would require a pre-given texture of meaning which would imply that the sense of another individual would have already been objectified). And second, if the sin of Adam in its hereditary sense would instigate the material beginning of collectivity, he cannot retain this status as initiator and at the same time be conceived as subject on the inside of history, i.e., his being as individual subject would have emerged as a consequence of the very objectivity that his being was the cause. For this, Kierkegaard critically remarks that:

No matter how the problem is raised, as soon as Adam is placed fantastically on the outside, everything is confused. To explain Adam’s sin is therefore to explain hereditary sin. And no explanation that explains Adam but not hereditary sin, or explains hereditary sin but not Adam, is of any help. The most profound reason for this is what is essential to human existence: that man is *individuum* and as such himself and the whole race, and in such a way that the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race (1980, p. 28).

Here, we see some of the implications of the Hegelian legacy with Kierkegaard as he describes the separation between the individual and the race, not only with Adam but with humanity as such, proposing the concept of *individuum*. To be sure, the problem that Kierkegaard puts forward, is that the sin of Adam would either place him *outside* history, and in this sense his sin would initiate collectivity – the first mediation of sense and meaning – but without him being a part of it. As a result, there would be no hereditary sin in Adam, but only in subjects that come after him. Or he

would be placed *inside* history as a subject whose constitution implies a pre-given texture of meaning, i.e., subjecting the sin of Adam to an antecedent objectification of the sense of a subject that came before him. As a result, there would be hereditary sin in Adam, but it would not have begun with Adam. With the concept of *individuum*, we see not only their external mutuality, and thus how individual and race relate to one another as respective entities, but we also see how they are already implied within one another. In this way, the point of Kierkegaard is not to overcome the contradiction between individual and race, but precisely to retain it, and to see this gap as implied within the being of humans itself.

The previous quote and the initial question posed by Kierkegaard clearly outlines this simultaneity: the individual subject *does* participate in inherited sin through its *relation to Adam*, but with the individual's fall into sin, it also participates in inherited sin through its 'primitive' *relation to its own sin*. This means that collectivity is not only implied intersubjectively with the subject's relation to another subject (the sin of Adam as individual), and not only is collectivity implied with the subject's relation to meaning (the sin of Adam as hereditary, i.e., in its already generalized, indexical, and material form as social reality), collectivity is implied even within the relation between the subject and its own sense. To be sure, what collectivity fundamentally implies is the very existence of this contradiction internal to subjectivity, i.e., between the subject and itself, and thus, to put in the words of Kierkegaard (1941), this symbolic contradiction is foundational to the disrelationship of subjective spirit that institute despair, and through which the subject can be addressed as a Self properly.

A boundary subject?

What Kierkegaard allows is for us to grasp the respective statuses of the subject and the ambiguity of the concept of Self, as it contains internally a contradiction between 'the subject' and 'itself' reflected with respect to its own sense and the supra-sensible. This passage also enables us to articulate the transposition of the notion of ideology found with Nissen's concept of the boundary objectivity that composes the material (trans)formations of relationships between subjects and collectives (2005; 2023), moving through to the notion of ideology found with Žižek, where it retains its subjective immanence as the spontaneous way of perceiving reality without any constructs or metaphysics (1994).

With Bank (2016) and Nissen (2016), we saw how boundary objects are never initially given and *then* tinkered with, but are always-already contingent in their appearance. This might indeed be the case when we look at boundary objects from the side of their objectivity (and with the retrospective that subjects were already involved in the objectification of a sense that has now materialized as meaning). However, if we look at those objects from the side of subjectivity, we see an even more intimate relation between subjects and the appearance of social reality that materialize with boundary objects: even though we know of this objective 'social fact' of their contingency, boundary objects precisely *do not appear* to be historically developed, developing, and open to transformation. Even though the idea of boundary objectivity represents the 'fact' of external social reality, it does not open up the internal boundaries of sense (individual subjectivity) and the supra-sensible (collective subjectivity), or what Žižek following Lacan terms *appearance as appearance*: "Ideas are not the hidden reality beneath appearances [...]; Ideas are nothing but the very form of appearance, this form as such" (2012, p. 31). In this sense, the objectivity of the

supra-sensible inherently expresses itself with the very form of the boundary object when it appears as given. Its boundary objectivity only reveals itself within the immediate perception of reality, thus through the subjectivity for whom a particular object is given, and it is with this volatile contingent nature of *givenness* that the objectivity of the supra-sensible appears as appearance.

Even though Nissen (2002) reflects a more expansive concept of participation than the introductory definition of Højholt (1996), his distinction of ‘the subject’ from what he terms ‘the collective subject’ (referencing Højrup’s work (2002) with Althusser’s theory of interpellation), Nissen still retains an external contradiction between collective subjectivity and individual subjectivity. The negativity that I am trying to overcome is once again this ‘collectivity only on the outside’, i.e., in the contradictory movements of identification and differentiation only between individual and collective. Nissen’s concept of ‘the collective subject’ does pose a relevant notion of the supra-individual that ties together subjectivity and collectivity. However, we must be very careful here not to conceive subjectivity *only* from the side of the collective – as *collective subjectivity* – but also articulate *a subjective collectivity*, i.e., the form of collectivity that expresses itself with the individual subject as the (boundary objective) precondition for the (boundary subjective) experience of appearance.

Boundary subjectivity and boundary objectivity both engage with the issue of internality and externality, and we need both concepts as they each designate a different specificity of the internal and external in terms of subjectivity or objectivity but also the relationship between them respectively. For this, it is necessary that we stay and reflect internality and externality within each their own domain of mediation. With the concept of boundary subjectivity, we can conceive of its mediator as sense which, on one side, pivots the internal relationship between the subject and itself, and on the other side, sense pivots the external relationship of the subject to the supra-sensible, i.e., a supra-individual subjectivity beyond the individual (which would be Nissen’s idea of the collective subject). What we see with this passage, as described by Kierkegaard, would be the transposition of *the relationship of the individual and its sin* through to the *relationship of individual sin and hereditary sin*.

Followingly, if we are to stay true with the above-sketched rearticulation, we see that supra-individual subjectivity is the precondition of the Self and its defining internal gap of *sense on sense* – or that it can be ‘sensing sense’. The relationship between the subject and itself requires for the latter to be already objectified and have taken on this form of appearing as appearance.

To put this into context, what was only implied with Brown et al. (2013) and the idea that experiences can be informed and remodified by psychology is that subjects have an intimate reflexive relationship with their own mode of experiencing social reality. With anxiety as clear case, the contradiction that indicates the *boundary subjectivity* of the individual subject is the ambiguity that anxiety not only constitutes a phenomenal experience but it also sensible appears as an object with a particular meaning that affords and represents the boundaries of a collective objectivity. In this sense, the ambiguity is really with the individual subject in its internal contradiction between the experience of anxiety (as phenomenon) and its appearance (as boundary object), and that the disrelationship of this internal contradiction also situates the individual subject in an external contradiction between the appearance of anxiety (as boundary object) and its meaning (as collective objectivity).

To some extent, this is similar to Žižek's rearticulation of hysteria through Althusser, and with references to Shakespeare's Juliet, stating that the most fundamental form of critique of ideology is to pose the question of "why am I that name?" (2006a). In this psychoanalytic view, the gap of sense and supra-sense, which leads to the questioning of (a pre-given) symbolic identity, ultimately implies that the subject can never truly become or dissolve what it identifies with, however positively or negatively. The problem comes down to the point that the texture of the supra-individual (collective) subjectivity preconditions the sensibility of individual subjectivity, and thus the Self emerges out of the necessary disrelationship between the openness of sense and the closure of its own pre-given texture.

The point of this rather complex disquisition is to show how the boundary object is the minimal intermediary unit of both self and collective; of both sense and meaning. Followingly, whilst the concept of boundary objectivity accounts only for the externality of the Self and the internality of the collective, we need the concept of boundary subjectivity to properly reflect the difference in occupation of the boundary object respectively with regards to the subject and its objectivity. The near-perfect conceptual overlap of the supra-sensible of subjectivity and the intra-collectivity of objectivity means that in order to differentiate and articulate the 'meaning' of the boundary object we are forced to take a firm stance, which can either be intentional or derived, but nonetheless it would be reflected in any representation when we view the boundary object either in terms of its subjectivity or its objectivity.

Where the concept of boundary objectivity implies that we see subjective sense in an external relationship to its own objectification as meaning, we only see subjectivity through the outer contradiction between sense and inter-subjectivity. Here, the boundary object mediates the inter-subjectivity of sense which translates into the intra-collectivity of meaning – and thus, we arrive at its objectivity. With the concept of the boundary subject, however, we can bridge the subjectivity of meaning through the intra-collectivity of sense represented with Žižek's rearticulation of Lacan's concept of the supra-sensible (2012).

Hence, we face a conceptual conjuncture between the inter-subjectivity of the boundary object and the intra-collectivity of its (thus common) sense, or what could otherwise be coined as the Janus head of the boundary object, reflecting that its contradictory kernel compels our discursive approach to comply with its ambiguous substance. However, the notion of boundary subjectivity allows us to articulate the boundary object from a subjective standpoint, and we get to see how the external contradiction between individual and collective (between sense and meaning) transpose an internal contradiction within sense regarding the individual subject and the supra-individual within itself (between sense and the supra-sensible). In this way, meaning and collectivity is implied even with this utmost intimate self-relation of the individual subject: the contradictory nature of the boundaries of sense is what imposes the assertion or questioning of self-identity that characterizes subjectivity. By taking this stance with the boundary subject, we also see that we have rendered ourselves unable to reflect the boundary object in its abstract-constitutive form. It very much makes itself present, but we are blinded to it through its intermediary functioning in social reality, concealed by its immanent appearance as that which is given.

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