Subjectivity and Social Practice
Subjectivity and Social Practice

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Contents

Preface \hfill 7

1. Personal Locations and Perspectives - Psychological Aspects of Social Practice \hfill 9
   The psychology of subjects in social practice \hfill 10
   The concept of action in psychology \hfill 11
   Towards a psychology of the subject \hfill 12
   Subjects on Location \hfill 13
   Subjects in contexts of action \hfill 14
   Subjects as participants \hfill 15
   Subjects in constellations of action \hfill 16
   Subjective action potency \hfill 17
   Cross-contextual structures of social practice \hfill 19
   Multiple participation across contexts \hfill 20
   Mediations of subjects’ local practice \hfill 21
   Socially mediated subjective complexity \hfill 23
   Subjective standpoints \hfill 25
   Socially mediated subjective conflicts \hfill 27
   Socially mediated subjective trajectories \hfill 28
   Analysis of psycho-social practice \hfill 29
   Therapeutic modes of operation \hfill 29
   Decentered analysis of practice \hfill 30
   Therapeutic analysis \hfill 32
   Positioned concepts of mental illness \hfill 35
   Positioned research practice \hfill 35
   References \hfill 38
2. Client Perspectives and Uses of Psychotherapy 39
   Approach 39
   Design 46
   Results 50
   References 57

3. Subjectivity and the Practice of Psychotherapy 59
   References 68

4. Psychotherapy in Clients’ Trajectories across 71
   Contexts
   Subjects in social practice 71
   A study of psychotherapy 76
   Sessions as part of clients’ social practice 77
   Therapy in subjects’ social practice 83
   Personal social practice and narratives 88
   References 93

5. Personal Trajectories of Participation 95
   across Contexts of Social Practice
   Personal participation in structures of social practice 95
   Social structures of practice 98
   A complex subjectivity in a complex social practice 103
   The personal conduct of life and life-trajectory 113
   The Life-trajectory, structure of personality and identity 119
   References 132

Acknowledgments 141
Preface

The five papers in this volume deal with issues which I have pursued for a long time in my research, and they document an intermediary step in my work between a book I published in 1993 and another book that I am in the midst of writing.

The papers were all written for publication in journals or books. They are placed in an almost chronological order based on when I first wrote them. The second paper in this edition replaces another non-published paper in the first edition, and the fourth and fifth paper were both extended and revised.

I collected this volume because these five papers are published in scattered places so that it is hard for anyone interested in following my work closely to get hold of them all. It also gives me the opportunity to pass them on as a whole to colleagues whom I would like to read them.

The second and fourth paper hold preliminary analyses of some of the empirical materials which will be analyzed at length in the book I am writing.

All five papers were written during my ongoing association with the research group of the Center for Health, Humanity, and Culture, and I prepared the publication of the first edition while I had the great luck to be employed and welcomed as an associate research professor at the center at the Department of Philosophy in Aarhus. I want to thank the - present and former - members of the center for years of a very inspiring collaboration.

Copenhagen, April 2003

Ole Dreier
1. Personal Locations and Perspectives
Psychological Aspects of Social Practice

I have been asked to give a brief presentation of the argument of my recent book (Dreier, 1993). It is a study of a particular area of social practice: the psycho-social practice of psychological therapy and counseling. Prevailing notions about the relationship between theory and practice and about professional expertise are problematic. Hence it can come as no surprise that the construction of analytic tools suitable for grounding and developing current practice is often neglected. All too often, the relevant literature is narrowed down, so as to present only a collection of examples surrounded by sketchy notions. This state of affairs has devastating consequences for our reflection on and development of practice. In order to be able to reconsider and develop our practice in a collaborative and thorough way, we must have an appropriate multilayered conceptual framework at our disposal. Therefore, my primary aim is an analytic one: to develop a set of concepts, a suitable theoretical frame of analysis.

The particular conceptual approach I have elaborated is based on the fundamental work of "critical psychology" (Holzkamp, 1983). It has served as my analytic means to uncover problems and possibilities in current practice and has also paved the way to introduce more specific and concrete concepts about this particular practice. Moreover, my analytic approach is intended to be relevant for the study of problems and possibilities in other areas of practice as well.

It is difficult to present so wide-ranging a topic within the boundaries of a paper. Those interested may consult the English summary in my book (ibid., 309-350). It is divided into nine chapters each of which examines a particular aspect of psycho-social practice from a particular perspective. Analytic concepts are introduced and elaborated when needed along the way. Therefore, I have decided to focus this paper on

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1 I would like to thank Jean Lave for constructive comments on an earlier version of this article and for numerous inspiring discussions on its issues and standpoints.
Subjectivity and Social Practice

the basic framework I developed and applied. In the end, I shall briefly indicate what kind of analysis of psycho-social practice it is geared to open up.

I chose the informal genre of an essay for my presentation in order to avoid a style overburdened with references, comparisons, and critiques, especially since this paper can only provide a sketchy outline of my theoretical framework.

The psychology of subjects in social practice

Psychic processes take place in individual subjects or persons. Hence a key task for psychology is to study persons. When psychologists study more encompassing societal practices, they must include the subjective personal aspects of those practices, so that what they study may remain part of psychology. This throws critical light on dominant research traditions: On the one hand groups, institutions, and other complex social practices are mostly studied without adequate conceptions of their subjective aspects; on the other hand the abstract, functionalist general psychology brackets the place of psychic processes in personal social practice. One might say that the psychology of personality should combine the theoretical disciplines of general psychology and social analysis and, furthermore, build a bridge to the various areas of applied psychology.

But research on the psychology of personality is fraught with recurring crises. They arise because theories are based on a conceptional gap between internal and external determinants. Internal individual properties (mostly personality traits and needs) are placed on one side, and external situational factors (conditions, stimuli, constraints) in the environment on the other. The only escape, it seems to many, would be to combine the two sides of the gap in ungainly mixtures of, say, internal properties exposed to external influences, etc. In psychology and related disciplines such methodologies and ensuing reductionisms are known under various names: Individualism and subjectivism versus social determinism and objectivism, to name but a few.

They all suffer from a common difficulty and deficit: How are we to grasp the ways in which persons develop their "properties", what they do in relation to their "external determinants", how they influence them,
change them, and thus change their lives? When addressing such issues, they either fall back into objectivism and determinism, into endogenous subjectivism, or into pseudo-solutions which mix abstractions from the two sides, claiming that these factors "interact".

The concept of action in psychology

Following A. N. Leont'ev (1978), we may say that proponents of these views, strictly speaking, do not study living creatures. Evidently, at least to a Marxist, they must be studied in practice, activity - or action, as I prefer, following the work of "critical psychology" (Holzkamp, 1983). The concept of action, then, must be our key concept in the study of persons. Action is the third term, the missing link through which the two sides always are combined in practice. Within psychology several attempts have been made to give action a crucial role. To take action as our key concept, one might hope, should imply that psychology moves from considering form or structure as primary to the primacy of practical, relational contents. Nevertheless, two one-sided and mutually opposed, abstract approaches to the study of human action dominate which are unable to accomplish the change we need:

1. Almost all approaches within psychology consider the actions of a single individual in an immediate environment. Most do not even characterize the environment more precisely, but focus one-sidedly on the individual in the individual-environment relationship. They regard an isolated individual's detached actions, goals, intentions, plans, motives, thoughts, emotions, etc. and propose "laws" about this. Yet, such laws are about an abstraction - a ghost. Nobody lives and functions like that. Individuals are part of encompassing societal structures of re-production.

2. The opposite approach does include social structure, but in the guise of some conception of the actions of the individual in relation to the society. This is just another abstraction. It assumes a uniform relationship between two uniform entities which purportedly exists everywhere, and thus nowhere in particular. Since the impact of the society on the individual must be impressive, not to say overwhelming, according to such a view, it emphasizes constraining social determinants and construes the individual from outside and above. Nonetheless, individuals do
Subjectivity and Social Practice

not act from outside and above, uniformly in relation to the social structure. They are located in particular, concrete places, and they act and experience the world differently from those locations.

Towards a psychology of the subject

We must conceive of individual subjects in social practice from the standpoint and perspective of local agents. "Critical psychology" espouses such a general science of the subject from a first person standpoint. This approach has developed in parallel with other more or less similar positions in psychology and neighboring disciplines. My research contributes to its expansion, in part by drawing upon such related work.

Some believe that to include a subjective perspective necessarily leads to methodological individualism. This is not the case. The "science of the subject", as developed in critical psychology, allows us to break out of that unfortunate trap by combining the subjective perspective of individuals with conceptions about the encompassing social practice in which subjects participate. However, the idea is not to avoid one trap only to fall into another. We must also insist that there is no such thing as a supra-individual psychological process. To study psychological processes, psychology must locate them at the level of individuals. The particular subject matter of the discipline of psychology unfolds at this level. Further, we must be careful not to confuse analytic distinctions, concerning "the human psyche", with the real connections in which these analytically distinguished aspects invariably exist. We must not turn analytic units, which cannot exist on their own, into "real things". We shouldn't imbue them with an existence of their own in concrete practice or consider them to be underlying "essences" which determine concrete practice. Psychological phenomena must be interpreted and integrated within an encompassing interdisciplinary approach to research on human social practice. Indeed, we can only really combine the study of psychic processes and social practice from a first person standpoint and perspective in social practice since that is how they are combined in practice by subjects. In short, we must conceptualize psychic processes as aspects of the actions of located subjects in ongoing social practice.
This point of view on individual psychological processes takes us beyond the prevailing, anonymous general psychology of psychological functions into a personal psychology, one that articulates each subject's first person perspective on the social context in which the subject is located and on that subject's actions, thoughts, emotions, etc. in it. Indeed, the world is given to every subject in "my first person perspective". So theoretical research must adopt a generalized first person standpoint in order to develop concepts suitable for each of us to use to make sense of our local practice from our perspective. This is not only so for the various areas of "individual psychology", but also for, say, social psychology. Here too the issue is whether we adopt the third person standpoint of a social psychology "from outside and above" or a first person social psychology in the plural. We should not lose sight of the constellations of first person psychological processes in interrelated, interacting, co-thinking and -feeling subjects. Nor should we regard these processes as free-floating, that is as bracketing the significance of their concrete locations in social practice. These conclusions also hold for the social psychology of groups, institutions, etc..

Evidently, theoretical conceptions about the individual (in some cases supplemented by the activity) in relation to the society are dislocated, decontextualized, deinstitutionalized abstractions. They are embedded in a container metaphor of society which regards society primarily as a structure and, above that, as a totality beyond concrete space and time.

Subjects on location

To adopt the standpoint and perspective of the subject the way we propose, requires, instead, to introduce a concept of location. We cannot combine the study of subjects with the study of social practice in any robust way if we conceive of subjective perspectives as free-floating images. Invariably they are subjective perspectives from concrete locations in social practice. They are anchored in social space and time. My perspective is always from a location where I presently find myself. It is embodied from the place where I am now. In talk, thought, and imagination I may, of course, transpose my perspective into other times and
Subjectivity and Social Practice

places, but that presupposes its present location in the first place. To approach the study of human subjectivity and social practice through the concept of action, then, requires more than that we study them as phenomena in time, as, for instance, in narrative theories. Time does not exist by itself, but as spaces of time in time-space. And so does action. It takes place in social space and time as we move around and from one location to another.

To particular locations belong particular structures of relevance. The latter are particular, locally structured parts of encompassing social structures. The meaning of being at particular locations, then, differs, including the meaning of what can be done with particular local possibilities and which goals and interests are at stake in them. Local subjective perspectives relate to these particular local structures of meaning. They are subjective perspectives on structures of relevance for the located subject.

Subjects in contexts of action

Locations are incorporated in particular contexts of action. A context of action stands in particular relations to more encompassing societal structures of social practice. It is a common set of conditions and the locus for its participants' actions which re-produce and change it.

The concept of context of action is a preliminary common denominator for a set of more differentiated concepts about ongoing social practice. I prefer it to concepts such as situation, setting, field, or sector because it explicitly points to the basic role of action in my theoretical perspective. Social structures, social conditions, indeed, societies do not exist independently of, but, precisely, by virtue of their participants' actions to re-produce and change them. In coming to understand social practice, I contend, actions must lie at the basis of what we address and confront. Until recently, social theory neglected to unfold a more differentiated conception of societal practice, of the infrastructures of ongoing practice in concrete social times and places.

Clearly, contexts of action may exist more or less in passing; they may be, or become, institutionalized in a variety of ways. In any case, they are brought into practice by a greater or lesser number of partici-
pants. Their *goals* and *stakes* are realized in *plural*, by inter-acting participants.

For its participants an action context is characterized by a particular, more or less limited *scope* of *action possibilities*. Basically we regard social conditions not as external determinants or constraints, but as the, more or less restricted, objective scope of action possibilities. This holds for the re-production of action contexts as well as their change. Furthermore, the notion of "scope" directs our attention to issues concerning which possibilities are at hand for changing and developing participants' scopes, depending upon participants' degree of *disposal* over their context of action.

As stated earlier, every person participates in a context of action from his or her location. In practice these locations may constitute a set of prestructured, interrelated *positions*. Positions are a sub-category or specification of locations in the sense that we proceed from a quasi-physical definition of space and time to the level of a societally organized and institutionalized space and time and its implications for subjects' practice. A set of possible, more or less clearly interrelated positions may belong to an existing social context of action. To varying degrees, participants may select among them, neglect, and change them. From their particular locations and positions, participants have particular scopes of personal action possibilities, optional *contributions*, *interests*, and perspectives in relation to the present context. This applies to the re-production and change of the context as well as to their lives, and the lives of some or all other participants, in relation to it. So participant interests and optional contributions depend upon their particular part in disposing over the context.

**Subjects as participants**

To unfold concepts which basically regard the subject or person as a *participant*, implies to study closely a person's particular way to participate in, to be a particular part of, to partake of a context in a *particular* and only *partial* way in relation to the practice of that context, the realization of its goals, its re-production and change, etc.. It propels us to
consider both personal modes of functioning and the meaning of personal participation to be partial and particular in relation to a context.

After all, the goals of a context of action are not realized solely by one participant, but by a plurality of participants in a particular, located, and positioned interrelationship. What happens in the context, even the consequences of my own actions, do not depend directly and exclusively upon my individual actions and intentions. It is not only up to me. This claim implies a fundamental critique of any abstract-individual conception of individual action, goals, plans, intentions, etc. A person is no "autonomous unit" in the sense that its functioning and structure can be conceived of by itself. Every person is a participant. As a participant, a person must direct his or her actions and intentions according to the scope of his or her particular, anticipated part in the practice of the context and the consequences he or she may aim to realize or, conversely, fear to come true.

As a subject, I specify and articulate my particular goals, interests, etc. in relation to the overall goals, etc. of the context. From my particular position, I have particular possibilities, interests, and reasons to participate in it. Out of this particularity I configure my particular stakes in the context. Individual possibilities, interests, perspectives, knowledge, and stances become particular ones. Individual action and awareness are not omnipotent and all-encompassing. They are particular and partial phenomena. So if we want to assess the consciousness, meaning, knowledge, reasons, and abilities which subjects actually bring to bear, we need to approach them from their local position in relation to the context. We cannot merely attribute knowledge and reasons to them from some position outside or above them - say, some researcher's position. That would not tell us in which partial ways particular participants configure their particular perspectives and actions from their local positions in relation to the context.

**Subjects in constellations of action**

In order, among other things, to grasp how subjects configure their relationship to the contexts in which they take part, we must distinguish analytically between a context of action and a *constellation of action*. Every participating subject considers and evaluates his or her relation-
ship to the context, to other participants in it, and to the events which may come to pass or which they may bring about, by relating their own actions to the actions of others during their course of action. We each weigh, evaluate, and direct our actions with and against each other in some emerging constellation of actions. In addition, a constellation of actions is but one among several possible concrete realizations of the given scope of the context. Any context is realized and changed in particular and partial ways in the constellation which emerges out of the particular relationship between participants' actions. Indeed, constellations of action may be composed of actions which are more or less well-integrated, conjoined, coordinated, heterogeneous, even mutually opposed, conflicting, and contradicting.

Subjective action potency

The set of personal preconditions to participation in my position in the context of action is my personal action potency. While an action context defines the scope of objectively possible action for participants, the action potency defines the scope of subjectively possible action. But this is a relational definition. Indeed, only when taken together do we arrive at the practical scope of action. Subjective potencies are only so in relation to what is objectively possible in an action context. The subjective action potency is defined locally in relation to what it requires of me to be able to participate in the action context from my position and in relation to what other participants are able to do in our constellation of actions. It is defined concretely, relationally, contextually, and positionally. What psychology ordinarily designates as "properties" of the person, are aspects of the action potency. They develop as aspects of it and may contribute to its further development. Potentiality and modifiability are crucial features of properties, capacities, and abilities. As a subject, I may develop my action potency in order to extend my participation in the context and in our disposal over it, in order to follow changing demands and possibilities in it, and to take part in developing it and my scope of participation. Just as objective possibilities are characterized by a particular dual pattern through which participants both act within and dispose over and extend them, so my subjective action potency is charac-
Subectivity and Social Practice

terized by a particular pattern of ways to act within and take part in extending present objective scopes.

To make action potency the core concept in characterizing subjective preconditions, emphasizes the practical nature of subjectivity. The conditions of possibility for human consciousness are rooted in personal participation in social practice. Basically a person is not defined by some stipulated ability for reflection, self-consciousness, identity, a self, second order desires, or whatever, but by those properties necessary to be able to participate in complex societal practice. Reflexive consciousness, then, is conceived as the necessary first person perspective and standpoint on my context of action (in its encompassing connections), my position and participation in it, our constellation of actions, and the meaning of all this for each of us, including me.

We may pursue this approach into the study of the particular psychic functional aspects of personal action potency. Personal thinking consists of directed, hopefully mutually related and coordinated, thought processes from participants' particular positions in the constellation of actions in the context. My analytic aims of thinking and the significance of my thoughts depend upon what other participants do and think, and upon the kind of context we are in. My thinking depends upon the kind of analytic aims we set ourselves in that context, and upon the way we distribute and coordinate them. Our thinking and knowledge, then, are not merely individual, nor merely distributed among us. They are interrelated, negotiated, disputed, and contested in a particular constellation. Likewise, our personal thinking and knowledge are partial and located. Furthermore, the relationship between my personal observation and thinking is mediated by what is immediately at hand, but also by things not directly available from my particular position and perspective in my particular context. In my thinking I include those aspects of social practice which are not immediately observable and available to me in my present time and space, and I relate them to my ongoing observations and actions.

The same holds for emotions. My present, complex emotional state is a particular, concretely located, subjective evaluation of how I am where I am now. It emanates from my present location in relation to others in a particular context and expresses my evaluation of its particular relevance structure to me. In a more or less encompassing way, then, my emotional state reflects my overall evaluation of the context, my possible
meaning for it, and its possible meaning for me from my present location in it. In so doing, my emotions reach selectively and re-constructively into my past and stretch anticipatingly into the future as my motivation or coercion to act in particular ways. As in the case of thinking, when I transpose my frame of evaluation in time and space, my emotional processes do, of course, rest on and incorporate my present location.

**Cross-contextual structures of social practice**

At this point we must extend our analytic framework for subjects' social practice one step further. We talked about *the* action context as if there were but one. Or, to put it differently, as if the context were an isolated island. That, of course, is yet another abstraction. In reality, action contexts are part of more encompassing *structures of social practice*. This is the case in any complex societal structure of ongoing practice. In fact, only when we cease to consider action contexts one at a time, do we move beyond "container" notions of contexts.

At issue here are particular notions of social structure. More and less institutionalized and transitory contexts of action are objectively related in particular ways, thus making up particular social structures. Particular *connections* and *disconnections* exist among them and allow us to elaborate notions of societal *infrastructures* of ongoing social practice. We need to work out which connections and disconnections exist between which contexts among a multitude of social contexts. To do so, we must focus not only on existing connections and *intersections*, but on particular *separations* and *barriers* among them. And we must work out their *diversity, heterogeneity*, and *contradictions*.

This argument rests on the contention that social structures do not exist independently of social practice. They are structures of social practice which are re-produced and changed through human social action. We need a concept of structure that does not depict it as external to practice, but as the structure of social practice. Structural conditions, constraints, and demands are not external to practice, but rather aspects of ongoing practice. A theory of society can only distinguish structure and action analytically.
Subjectivity and Social Practice

In complex structures of societal practice, particular contexts of action may be organized to take care of particular goals and affairs and assigned particular tasks for a particular society, particular members and participants. Members differentiate and structure their societal practice across space and time in relation to such arrangements.

All this has multiple implications for subjects' actions, not only for the present participants in a particular context of action, but for potential and more or less passing participants as well. To what degree, from where, for whom, and for which purposes contexts are open or closed, defines - more or less modifiable - particular scopes of action and modes of access and sequestration, inclusion and exclusion. These define which personal action possibilities are available and which personal action potencies are necessary for pursuing particular interests, stakes, and goals in and across particular contexts.

To put it differently, power over contexts and inter-contextual relations as well as influence upon them are exercised by organizing these contexts and inter-contextual relations in particular ways. Power restricts influence over contexts to particular parties and particular ends while closing them off, keeping them separate, keeping other potential participants out, constraining their access and the ends they are able to pursue. In this way, participation in contexts and the optional use thereof in the pursuit of one's interests are controlled and unevenly distributed; also contradictory interests are accentuated among involved parties. On the other hand, influence over contexts may be democratized by extending connections among them, common access to them, scopes in them, and disposal over them in the pursuit of common goods. Along these lines, we may pursue a democratic perspective on social practices and their development.

Multiple participation across contexts

The extension of our analytic framework to encompass a plurality of contexts calls for a similar extension of the study of subjects in social practice. Literally speaking, it is misleading to conceive of subjects as merely being in a location, or position, even in a particular context of action. So they are, some of the time, while standing, sitting, lying
around, etc. But, clearly, acting subjects often move around in and across contexts. They participate in more than one. There is a striking silence about this in psychology. Personal practice is not studied as concrete movement in social space and time. Concepts of the person are of creatures seemingly immobile in social space. According to some conceptions, persons do move in time, through the span of their life-histories. But these conceptions conceive of time without social space, an abstraction of time, an abstract trajectory in time. Still, it is a basic practical condition of being a human subject to participate in complex and encompassing re-productive structures of social practice. In relation to these objective structures of practice, persons structure their possibilities, actions, and the subjective meaning of participation in diverse contexts. Of course, this does not eliminate the local and positioned character of personal practice. It merely sets it on the move.

As mentioned earlier, various contexts of action typically play different parts in attending to particular societal goals and affairs. They are diverse and heterogeneous. Facing them, subjects confront different stakes, interests, and scopes of participation. Their access to action contexts and their influence upon them differ as do their positions and potencies for participating in them. So contexts have different meanings to subjects, and their goals and subjective reasons to participate in them differ. To put it briefly, (aside from variations in the ways different subjects participate in the same context which we dealt with above) the same subject participates in different ways in diverse contexts. As a subject moves across contexts, he or she varies his or her mode of participation, according to the particular nature of the present context, the subject's position in it, and the stakes he or she pursues. Indeed, a subject often has good reasons to participate in different ways in different contexts. All of this, creates a high degree of complexity and heterogeneity in the practice of every subject.

**Mediations of subjects' local practice**

Any subject moves more or less routinely and deliberately from one context to another. Subjects pursue their configurations of goals and interests across contexts. Sometimes they pursue a particular goal and interest across contexts. These moves are incorporated in more or less re-
current patterns of the everyday time-space of our personal practice, to which persons add moves into particular, less frequent, occasional, or one-time-only places. Indeed, we often participate in a particular context mainly for reasons that are aimed at realizing goals and interests which primarily originate in and "belong" to another context. In so doing, we make use of particular connections that exist between these contexts, or that we and others create and extend, and that make it possible to pursue goals and interests in one context by taking part in another in a particular way. In fact, this is another neglected feature in theories of subjects' social practice. Human action has a potential and varying cross-contextual scope, scale, or reach.

On the one hand, then, participant actions, goals, and intentions are localized phenomena. I always am in a local position with its perspective on current relations and events, including my part in them. My actions, goals, and intentions unfold in particular ways in particular contexts, often for good reasons. On the other hand, we do not bring about these subjective variations by operating, so to speak, a switchboard of contextual roles. There are particular subjective connections at play in our pursuit of a subjective configuration of goals and interests or a particular goal and interest across time and space. The subjective meaning of participating in a particular way and the subjective reasons for doing so, do not exclusively originate in and "belong" to the present location. They include concerns of a cross-contextual nature, stretching into social space and time. Hence a subject's current action in the present context is partial in yet another sense beyond those discussed earlier: It is part of his or her more encompassing participation in interrelated societal contexts. It is incorporated in his or her short- and long-term trajectories across contexts.

Due to the cross-contextual nature of individual existence, subjects are bound to take direct as well as indirect relationships into account in their local action. In order to configure their local reasons for action and to direct their local action in their present context, subjects compose local constellations of direct and indirect concerns. Thus subjects' direct, immediate relationships and actions are mediated by indirect ones in localized ways. Subjects include indirect relationships in particular ways in order to achieve particular ends in their present context. For the same reasons they may tell about and account for aspects of their lives in other
times and places in particular ways. Moreover, in the present context they may pursue ends which reach beyond its boundaries aiming at particular effects they wish to achieve or seek to avoid in other times and places. Indeed, the inclusion of indirect relationships is essential to the way subjects, with more or less deliberate intentions, bring about indirect effects in some other time and place. Subjects allow indirect relationships to influence their immediate action in a way they hold necessary and suitable to bring about the spreading indirect effects they seek to propel. This cross-contextual mediation of individual action is another familiar feature of everyday personal practice and of the functioning of many social institutions. It is often neglected in studies of the practice of subjects and institutions. Subjects' present action is influenced by and also may influence relationships in other times and places. In allowing for this, subjects link the goals, stakes, and interests they pursue as participants in different contexts of action. Indeed, the other contexts from which they include concerns or into which they seek to bring about effects may be ones in which they themselves participate or in which only other participants in the present context take part.

We may pursue this line of analysis into the study of psychic functions. Individual subjects configure and define their thought processes inter-contextually. They negotiate, coordinate, and contest them inter-subjectively. And their thoughts unfold in an ongoing constellation of actions in a local context. Likewise, a participant's emotional state is a complex evaluation, composed of mediations between his or her present location and his or her indirect relations in time and space. Indeed, the potentialities of complex human thinking and emotionality unfold along the dimensions of locally evaluated, anticipated, and remembered trajectories in social time and space.

Socially mediated subjective complexity

Evidently, the complex social mediation of individual phenomena does not undo and replace a first person standpoint. It remains a necessary grounding and perspective for individual subjects' located participation in social practice. But the meaning of a present context to its participants varies, in part because the other contexts in which they participate, or the
ways they participate in them, differ. There is a distinct unfolding structure to particular subjects' overall participation in social practice which gives the present context a specific status and meaning in their practice. Each subject must identify its relative significance for his or her particular purposes, or for the mode of life he or she takes part in sustaining and developing through his or her practice in and across contexts. In some contexts, then, some subjects participate in ways which must primarily be understood from their other contexts. There is a structure of relevance at play here, based upon the meaning of a subject's particular participation for the way he or she sustains, unfolds, and develops his or her social practice. And this individual structure of relevance is part of the particular, local, and cross-contextual (but socio-structurally mediated) form of life in which that individual is a particular participant.

To the person, the complex, cross-contextual, diverse, even contested nature of his or her participation accentuates the issue of which inter-connections among his or her activities are relevant in order to sustain, unfold, and develop his or her practice: How do I avoid acting at cross-purposes with some of my own goals, acting disconnectedly, acting in total self-contradiction, or stumbling over my own feet in pursuit of my interests and goals? In a particular context, how do I keep my stakes together, connect my actions, interests, and goals, separate what I believe needs separating, structure my affairs as I see fit, also in relation to others' activities and stances across space and time? This amounts to a personal endeavor to a) sustain a sufficient measure of interconnection among my complex activities, b) in so doing, to consider the objective interrelations of contextual activities, and c) to secure a sufficient measure of overall integration of individual sustenance and development in my changing scopes, activities, and potencies. In doing all this, I relate subjective and objective aspects of my practice.

However, it would be mistaken to believe that these issues of subjective complexity, integration, and development turn an individual subject into a "multiple personality", a chameleon, or a fully integrated unity with no loose ends, ruptures, or contradictions. Probably every individual subject expands and accentuates common features in its preferred modes of approaching and participating in even partly diverse contexts - thus providing an extra measure of individual, subjective parsimony, so to speak. And it is a basic practical necessity to sustain a sufficient
measure of subjective interconnection. Any subject must struggle to keep a grip on his or her trajectory in the particular ways in which he or she moves around in, and across, societal contexts of action. Yet, personal-ism and related holisms in psychological theories of personality oversimplify matters by presuming that an "integrated" person is an internal, strictly personal "unity" in which everything is synthesized in perfect wholeness - a sort of person it is easier to imagine in others, especially in those we do not know well. Actually, any subject is more complex than that - differentiated, varied, incomplete, full of ruptures, conflicts, and contradictions. This is what any subject must try to hold on to, in ways that are suitable for sustaining and extending his or her grip on his or her complex and diverse existence. In personalism personal cohesion is not primarily considered a practical matter, but turned into a merely internal, mental, or even spiritual matter. To presume that purely conceptual or spiritual integration may be obtained, is to simplify the diversity of subjects' social practice and, in effect, to abstract and detach the issue of personal integration from the objective relations of concrete practice. If we conceive it to be a purely cognitive achievement, we turn cognitive categories into free-floating generalities.

Subjective standpoints

From their practice in local contexts, subjects evaluate, articulate, connect, and generalize the premises of their participation and points of view on social practice in its local, contextual diversity. Thus, a subject actively adopts, elaborates, and composes a personal standpoint or stance. It is a stand I take in, to, and across the mediated social contexts of my trajectory, and it allows me to direct my actions as coherently as possible, to connect and configure my diverse participations in diverse contexts and at different times. My standpoint is not merely a passive result of my, more or less typical, objective conditions and positions. I may develop and modify it. And I may work it out and over more or less deliberately and coherently, drawing upon the always more encompassing practical background for my articulated standpoints. Sometimes I adopt a particular standpoint merely "in passing", though. Its reach into other
times and places, participants and parties may, indeed, differ. It is never final and complete.

Though I elaborate my standpoint from local foundations in the first place, it stretches across time and place from where I am now. Still, it gives me good reasons to act, think, and feel differently in different times and places, depending upon the particular context, my participation, and upon the place they occupy in the interrelated contexts of my trajectory in social practice. It is no contradiction in terms to say both that a standpoint stretches across time and space to articulate and pursue connections among them, and that it also gives me good reasons to act, think, and feel differently across time and space. On the contrary, that is part of living a complex life. A standpoint, then, is no fixed structure of traits or goals, but a configuration of more general premises through which I direct my social practice. I combine it, more or less flexibly, with my particular current context, needs and interests to guide the subjective structuration and direction of my particular activities.

In fact, a subject adopts a complex structure of more or less coherently and deliberately interconnected standpoints. I weigh and interrelate my standpoints in accordance with the structures of relevancies of my complex practice in order to sustain and develop my participation in a local, mediated form of life. I work out, articulate, coordinate, negotiate, and contest my structure of standpoints with other participants and other parties in societal practice. The fundamental condition of possibility which allows this process to take place, is what we have called a "generalized first person standpoint". The subjective stances I take may be more or less opposed, particular or general, depending upon whether their premises are opposed to the premises of others, encompass particular parties, or may, indeed, be shared by everyone. In order to be able to take part in changing present positions, contexts, and structures, we must take stances, more or less in accord with those others take. We negotiate, fight, engage in conflict and oppose, make alliances and join together over them.

So my complex standpoints are no purely cognitive features, but features of my ongoing actions. They do remain attached to and are elaborated, articulated, and pursued in my local participation in and across time and space. Still, I do not work out my personal standpoints independently of existing societal forms of thinking, linguistic and cul-
tural forms, social knowledge, other existing stances, etc. Neither must I, nor do I, just take them over or subsume myself to them. Rather, I take my stances in relation to societal forms and include them in so doing. Compared to them, my personal standpoints remain restricted and partial, with areas left more or less unaddressed or indistinct.

**Socially mediated subjective conflicts**

Contradictions and *conflicts* abound in societal practice, across and within contexts, among its various parties, and about and for its subjects. The present context may be contested and made an object of struggle. Various constellations of common and opposed interests may be at stake. All of this affects the goals of the context, participants' reasons for taking part in them in particular ways, and the standpoints they adopt in relating to them. In order to identify a perspective that may allow us to overcome these conflicts, we must adopt, elaborate, and pursue a generalized standpoint.

Although conflicts play an important role in everyday practice, they play a strikingly minor one in personality theories which mostly consider "personality" and "personality development" merely to be a kind of "task". Instead, we must conceptualize personality development as conflictual. Its direction and course is not straightforward, but a contested, zig-zagging one, marked by progressions and regressions. It takes place in social contexts, marked by opposed interests among participants. These conflicts turn subjective reasons for action into conflicting ones and create numerous forms of personal ambiguities and alternating standpoints and voices, which can only be disentangled and located with great difficulty. They make it difficult for us to predetermine the consequences of intended actions and create intersubjective and subjective discords and contests of interpretation about events, reasons, and personality properties. They personalize discords and instrumentalize intersubjective relations, filling them with compromises, compensations, unequal benefits, and sacrifices. They also affect our socio-cultural notions of love, care, and service.

Conflicts may set their stamp on interpretations of the present context of action, of particular participants' significance for its state of af-
Subjectivity and Social Practice

fairs, and of their reasons for participating in particular ways. Indeed, interpretations may become a method by which participants engage in conflicts and in struggles for power over the context. By being subjected to conflicts of interpretation, the significance of the context for particular participants, their own evaluations and standpoints with respect to their actions, intentions, reasons, goals, properties, thoughts, emotions, etc. become complicated and entangled. Especially in conflict, multiparty practices are often interpreted - even theorized - from particular positions which are not made explicit and amenable to common reflection. Particular parties more or less monopolize interpretation and may instrumentalize it as a particular way to pursue particular interests. Then confounded perspectives of interpretation, action, and account spread among participants.

Socially mediated subjective trajectories

As my line of argument has unfolded, we have gradually related physical time-space and societally organized time-space to subjective trajectories. These trajectories are not trajectories in pure time, though, abstracted from the social structures of space. The meanings of and reasons for concrete participation depend on more than their locus in such an abstract "story". Rather my trajectory takes place in and across concrete social locations, positions, and contexts. In its course I move in and across places, and my trajectory of locations is part of ongoing socio-historical practice. Some societally prestructured dimensions of inter-contextual relations furnish an objective structure to my trajectory, in relation to which I structure and unfold it in practice. Thus, trajectories relate objective and subjective aspects, on an individual-historical scale, of existing and changing structures of social practice. Besides, my trajectory of participation has meanings that go beyond the personal. It has meanings in and for social practice since in the course of my daily life I pursue particular goals, interests, and standpoints in particular contexts of social practice. My partial participation has meaning to me, to others, in and for particular contexts, to our society, and to the common good. There is a societal dimension to the standpoints and meanings of the trajectory I pursue. In other words, there is a social dimension to my identity, rea-
sons, knowledge, potentialities, cognitive and emotional processes. In defining it, I relate my present possibilities and potencies to those of others, and to other contexts in the structure of societal practice. In this more or less global perspective, I identify opposed, partial, and common features of our interests and standpoints. In short, my trajectory is firmly anchored in the history of local social practice and its mediations, where it, too, may become a matter of mutual, personal conflicts.

**Analysis of psycho-social practice**

Having outlined some main features of my analytic framework, let me now briefly indicate what kind of questions it enables us to address and to what kinds of research it may lead. As I said in the beginning, it is designed for use where it is essential to combine psychological and social science studies of human practice. In my book, I used it to re-search the psycho-social practice of psychotherapy from various major positions and perspectives in turn. Here I will try to sketch, very briefly, some common features and main points of the analytic approach developed in much greater detail in the book. My analyses are founded on my empirical studies of ongoing therapeutic practice, studies of the training and clinical supervision of therapists, and on materials from a series of research conferences convened to study psychological practice.

**Therapeutic modes of operation**

Predominant forms of thinking and research about therapeutic practice construe and account for therapy outcomes as effects of the therapist's doings in the encounter. The therapist is some sort of a *maker* of therapeutic proceedings and outcomes. Notions of therapeutic *expertise* and the therapeutic *mode of operation* are marked by abstract individualism. If we take their word for it, therapy is a *profession-centered* service in which professionals, when it comes down to it, more or less *monopolize* interventions and interpretations and, thus, misconstrue and lose sight of many of their clients' activities and interpretations. Within the action contexts of therapy sessions, the participants' actual, multiple first person
Subjectivity and Social Practice

perspectives and standpoints are entangled and confounded - in a practice nevertheless claimed to be executed for the good of the client.

The analytic framework I developed offers quite a different approach to the study of therapeutic practice: Like many other institutionalized societal practices, it is the goal of therapy to improve problematic aspects of clients' lives in their everyday contexts outside the therapy encounters. So in my research on this multi-contextual practice I investigated not only the complex inter-action in clients' and therapists' immediate encounters in therapy sessions, but also clients' everyday lives and therapists' institutional working contexts. If there were no connections among these contexts, encounters could have no effects on clients' everyday practices. Given my theoretical framework, it is obviously essential to examine the interrelationships between these contexts and parties in order to develop a new and more comprehensive approach to the mode of operation of therapy, and, more generally, of institutions in relation to their users.

Decentered analysis of practice

To clients, the context of the therapy encounter which they share with their therapists, is a peculiar, additional, temporary "time-off" sort of context. If we consider the constellation of contexts in and across which clients participate, other contexts are more significant for their personal social existence, including which problems they run into and their possibilities to address and overcome them. In other words, the therapeutic encounter lies outside clients' primary contexts where therapeutic impacts, nevertheless, first of all are to be realized. So it is the main objective for therapy encounters to be of significance for clients' actions, reasons, relations, trajectories, etc. in contexts which are customarily viewed by therapists as outside and elsewhere. The mode of operation of therapy action contexts on clients' everyday lives is mostly indirect and mediated. In fact, we must decenter our comprehension of the effects of therapy and focus on how clients may locate and anchor its cross-contextual impacts in their main everyday contexts. To understand the operation of therapy, we must, first of all, approach it from clients' positions in their primary everyday contexts. Ordinarily, conditions, events,
and processes outside the immediate therapy encounter are crucial in determining whether and for what clients use it, i.e. its concrete effects. The main processes take place outside, in between, and afterwards. In spite of this, mostly the therapeutic mode of operation is regarded as a matter of transfer from the encounter which is, thus, misleadingly presumed to be clients’ primary context. Also transfer is generally presumed to occur, but rarely researched in a comprehensive way. Instead, we need a broader, decentered approach which rests on a comprehensive view of clients as acting and experiencing subjects in and across their social contexts. Treatment is a problematic part of conflicting everyday contexts. In fact, it obtains its actual meanings precisely by being so. This should lead us to consider how it is included or excluded in everyday contexts, and how its meanings are contested here. The contested, indirect workings of therapy follow changes outside of it and in relation to it as, mostly, only a secondary part thereof.

In the secondary context of the therapy encounter clients include phenomena and concerns from other places. Their state of well-being, perspectives, interests, reasons, and actions in therapy sessions are mediated. More or less deliberately and conflictingly, clients may direct their actions within therapy encounters, in an attempt to achieve more or less clearly anticipated, indirect effects on their lives in their main everyday contexts, at other times and places. In so doing, they take into account particular features of the immediate context of the encounter. They are concerned with which objective connections and disconnections exist between the encounter and their other contexts, which connections they may influence and create, and which they may prevent. Though they deal with their conflicts in several contexts, they do so differently, depending upon the concrete meanings of the context at hand and its connections with their other contexts. Their state of well-being, interests, standpoints, and actions vary across contexts because of these differences and interconnections. Their conflicts have different meanings to them in different contexts. In order to pursue their interests clearly, it is important to them to determine which particular restrictions and possibilities encounters offer. In all this, the standpoint from which they participate in the encounter is mediated. The question is: How do clients include aspects and effects of their primary contexts in the therapy encounters in the ways that they give accounts of participation in those contexts, and in the ways
they functionalize encounters? And how do clients use encounters to introduce changes into their conflicting everyday contexts?

**Therapeutic analysis**

If we consider the constellation of contexts in and across which therapists participate in social practice, there is a different structure of relevance at play than that of their clients'. Of course, therapists and clients alike are citizens of a society, and as such they are related to, connected with and separated from each other in common and diverse circumstances. As citizens other contexts than their professional working contexts form part of therapists' social practice. But the prevailing practice and ideology of professionalism brackets the significance of therapists' lives as citizens. It transforms their therapeutic practice to make it stand out as separated from, and from that position directed at clients' everyday lives while being involved in societal, institutional power structures in a less tangible and accessible way. As professionals, then, therapists carry out their therapeutic practice as seen from their working contexts, and their professional, institutional contexts are their primary contexts. Their professional perspectives, interests, reasons, tasks, standpoints, etc. in the encounter are mediated through these other contexts. Hence, interactions between therapists and clients in encounters are marked by diverse mediations from each their opposite primary contexts. Their perspectives and standpoints are mediated from opposite primary directions. The intersubjective exchange of perspectives between them is a significant part of the processes by which encounters obtain effects, but these perspectives are mediated in *opposite* ways. In order to understand their intersubjectivity in the therapy encounter, we must recognize these opposite mediations. Since therapists' interests, perspectives, and standpoints in the encounter are primarily mediated through their working context, while therapy is primarily to be directed at clients' everyday contexts, a *diversion* of therapists' concerns may arise. This may create problems of perspectives, interests, and standpoints for therapists, especially when their working context and their clients' everyday contexts appear to stand in a relation of (partial) conflict. The former may then inhibit and disturb
rather than enable client treatment. Uncontrolled and unadmitted switching between standpoints and perspectives may occur.

Since my aim is to develop analytic means which therapists may use to think through and develop their practice, let us briefly look at the analytic features of therapeutic competence, i.e. therapeutic modes of thinking. A more comprehensive standpoint on psycho-social practice must lead to correspondingly more comprehensive *modes of thinking*. As is the case for all human thinking, therapeutic thinking does not occur in abstract heads. It follows us around in our social practice. It is localized, positioned, and in perspective, and from here it is related to our ongoing observations. It interchanges with the thinking of others' present and with the materials and means of thinking at our disposal in the current context. Among other things by means of thinking, we establish connections between contexts and become able in one context to deal with and influence phenomena at other times and places. In our local doing and thinking, we draw particular connections between what we do and think in different contexts. Our thinking plays a crucial part in our recognition and deliberate use of objective connections in the world to pursue our tasks and interests and to influence them. In the case of a therapy encounter, it is primarily a matter of including problematic relations outside of it, in order to overcome them in those other contexts. We not only think in constellations within the encounter, but beyond them, into other contexts and back again. When we think about such comprehensive cross-contextual matters, we may realize their essential, internal connections. We accentuate particular connections and combine them into more comprehensive assumptions about the internal connections, relevant for defining problems and opening up new possibilities of action. We make them less equivocal and generalize them.

In the processes of thinking within therapeutic encounters, therapists should recognize and make use of the fact that not only they do the thinking. Therapeutic thinking is distributed and coordinated. It is an intersubjective process, negotiated among its participants who are in different positions, with different interests and perspectives on current conflicts and possibilities. Disputes may occur over what to accentuate and generalize, i.e. over which assumptions are important and general to understand, and which might influence current conflicts and possibilities. We re-examine, dispute, reject and question, modify, piece together, rec-
Subjectivity and Social Practice

...ognize, confirm, etc. each others' contributions. When we manage to create an interconnected construction, it remains heterogeneously constructed, maybe even intersubjectively disputed, differently conceived and used - although, when successful, we combine our views, at least enough that some form of coordinated or joint action among us becomes possible. In any case, if we want to overcome current conflicts, we need to relate and combine our thoughts about them.

We think about problems as parts of social practice in a more comprehensive sense and include other social contexts, interests, experiences, and standpoints in the way we think through problems and possibilities. We also include absent parties' actions, thoughts, etc. in our local thinking. Moreover, we relate our thoughts to encompassing societal forms of thinking. In our personal thinking we include and may contribute to societal knowledge, disputes, alliances, developments, etc. Still, our personal thinking remains partial. It is characterized by particular points of emphasis and areas unthought of. We should recognize these differences in positions, approaches, and partiality in relation to our current conflicts when we relate and combine our efforts to think them through. We each adopt partial standpoints, negotiate and combine them with others' partial standpoints.

The above arguments are more comprehensive than what therapists normally accomplish in practice. In fact, they are so for good reasons. They are meant to enable us to analyze our current practice in the direction of developing a more far-ranging practice. Nevertheless, I contend, they unavoidably are part of current practice and not some abstract norms imposed upon it. This is so because the analyses point at existing scopes of possibilities which are not fully realized in current practice, but which practitioners and others involved may set themselves the goal to pursue and extend in the interest of improving therapeutic practice. Indeed, already in order to be able to carry out their everyday practice the way they do now, therapists must take them into consideration in more or less explicit, systematic, restricted, and transformed ways. At the same time, and contrary to this, they must keep a good deal of their thoughts in therapeutic sessions to themselves, and they must pretend they are the ones who have done all the responsible thinking when they account to outside parties and authorities for what they do. In their social practice therapists are caught in a double bookkeeping system concerning...
their thoughts and actions. The necessities of accountability and sole professional responsibility lie behind their mystifying "profession-centeredness". This restricts and counteracts the necessary decentering of their practice and its analysis which is, nevertheless, called for.

**Positioned concepts of mental illness**

Let us now sketch some issues of analysis related to the psycho-social dimensions of concepts of mental illness. Since these concepts are used by practitioners, we must - from a standpoint of a science of the subject - inquire into practitioners' use of them in their local professional practice in relation to their clients. We must determine the function and place of their concept of illness in their social practice. Conceptions of illness have a special and limited place in their practice since the whole rationale of a social practice cannot be compressed within one personalized concept. Evidently, the professional concept of mental illness is used by one party from his position about another party in it. It reflects therapists' judgments about their clients. To comprehend the concept, we must consider the therapist and the use of the concept by the therapist in relation to the client. As already stated in general terms: In social practice we face a plurality of interrelated subject standpoints. A party's concepts are part of his or her dealings with his or her practice from his or her position, affected by his or her needs, interests, reasons for action, tasks, responsibilities, accountabilities, etc.. In contrast, existing professional and theoretical concepts of mental illness seemingly stem from nowhere. They are abstracted from practice, decontextualized. This state of affairs is even seen as a guarantee of scientific objectivity, and it implies that practitioners do not appear in them. Therefore, such concepts offer therapists insufficient grounds to guide their own actions in concrete practice. They, and we, need a theory about professional subjectivity in context, or else the activities of diagnosis and therapy cannot really be combined.

Conflicts play a crucial role in the psycho-social dimensions of mental illness in clients' everyday life. Psycho-social practice pursues the task of finding such conflicts and helping to realize possibilities to overcome them, primarily in clients' everyday contexts "out there". This is
what a concept of subjects' mental illness should primarily address. My reasons to become ill are grounded in conflicts among participants in my social practice. If they were not, I, or we, would already have overcome the trouble. As it is, conflicts make us block each others' ways and get stuck in various constellations. We prevent the resolution of our interpersonal and personal conflicts, for reasons which have to do with the contrary possibilities and interests of our respective positions in our context. Perspectives become dislocated and entangled. Often some participants are put under pressure to reinterpret their views. Participants may gradually come to articulate reasons for their actions from the perspective of other dominating positions. My standpoint becomes a mixture and confusion of dislocated perspectives and interests, of voices seemingly without clear local grounding, thinking all sorts of things from different angles. This seems typical of clients' ways of being confused and getting lost. When a client's standpoint gets entangled in these conflicts, it becomes problematic and unreliable. He or she must seek to disentangle and reconstruct the plurality of perspectives involved in it.

Mental illness is not first of all a personal attribute or property. It is something I am in my context. It primarily has concrete, practical meanings for me and other participants. Put differently, everyday ways of being mentally ill are the practical basis for concepts about mental illness. Contrary to this, in the forms of thinking of prevalent professional concepts of mental illness, it is somebody else's judgment about me, my properties, subjective state, and behaviors. Such professional concepts bracket differences between my perspective and, in particular, the perspective of professional judgment. My mental illness is reinterpreted from their position. Hence, my own perspective on it may become further mixed up, confounded and heterogeneous.

Since existing concepts implicitly are construed from particular locations, we must comprehend them reflexively as concepts articulated from there, and as being about complex multiparty practices across contexts. Furthermore, the various parties involved pursue partly diverse tasks because they participate primarily from positions in different social, institutional contexts. In psycho-social practice different parties meet and interrelate. They come from different primary contexts and different institutions. When they meet, they negotiate, cooperate, and fight over their diversely mediated concerns. When the parties move across
social contexts, they "carry with them" the concerns and tasks of their primary institutions in mediated ways.

**Positioned research practice**

When the practice of particular research institutions and projects are connected with psycho-social practice, different relations may arise. These relations may be problematic and lead to conflict with and within the practice under study in ways which do not contribute much to its development. We need to unfold concepts and forms of research which are better suited to developing a more useful psycho-social practice. Much prior theorizing about the practice of therapy implicitly applies a researcher's or, at the most, some top professional agent's position, perspective, and standpoint to those clients and users for whose benefit this practice is claimed to be executed. When we use the concepts I have proposed to examine psycho-social practice, the theoretical problem becomes one of understanding all participants' diverse positions and diverse trajectories in relation to each other. These concepts direct us towards developing more democratic, user-oriented forms of research and practice. They propel us to ask how to organize practice in such a way that user access and influence may be increased and the direction of services towards users' everyday lives emphasized. This requires a commitment to shift our predominant ways of comprehending clients from a perspective that conceives them as patients to a perspective in which clients are viewed as users in social time-space, engaged in pursuing their concerns and goals.

In the book my framework forms the basis of a conception of *practice research*. Such research must investigate and analyze the interconnected personal perspectives on complex practices, of participants who find themselves in different, mutually related positions and contexts. It throws light on particular participants' different interests, possibilities, and reasons for participating in particular ways. These may then be made available to other participants. Participants may reconsider and reevaluate their reasons in light of the resulting relationship between their actions and the often surprisingly diverse significance which that which takes place has to each of them. Our research may focus on the concrete
constellations of actions, problems, and possibilities which arise among and for the parties in a context, and point to possibilities by which participant actions could be combined to improve their grasp on common goals.

Such research is geared to produce results which participants may use to identify, handle, and develop problems and possibilities in their historically concrete local practice in encompassing societal relations. I have tried to show why it is that in order for analytic concepts and methods to be used that way, they must be based on a generalized science of the subject, articulated from participants' interrelated positions and perspectives in practice.

This holds for the conception of research practice, scientific subjectivity, and knowledge, too. In practice, research is founded on its particular prior knowledge of, connections with, and participation in the problems and possibilities of the practice it studies. If that were not so, it could not reconstruct a practice from its participants' first person standpoints (from which participants, hopefully, are to put the results to use). The research may miss its target, i.e. the practice as performed including its problems and scopes as experienced. Risks of being taken in by widespread mystifications about a practice, as its practitioners themselves see and perform it, may be countered by acknowledging that research is a special social practice with a special epistemological approach and particular interests, goals, and tasks in relation to the area of practice it studies.

References


2. Client Perspectives and Uses of Psychotherapy

Abstract: The present paper argues for the importance of studying user perspectives on ongoing psychotherapy. Four approaches to such studies are discussed. In particular it is stressed that studies of user perspectives may allow us to develop a broader and more robust understanding of clients as the primary agents of their own change processes. And if these studies focus on clients’ everyday lives during the course of psychotherapy, they allow us a better understanding of how clients include their psychotherapy, give it a particular significance, fight over it, and transform it as a part of their changing everyday practice in other places than the session. The rationale and design of such a study is presented. It is a study of a small number of family therapies with the present author as a co-therapist. Some preliminary findings from this study are presented. And finally it is related to other studies of user perspectives and to the existence of diverse formats and traditions of doing psychotherapy.

Key words: Psychotherapy; user perspectives, everyday life; transfer.

1. Approach

To claim that professional perspectives dominate user perspectives, and that we need to research and include the latter more strongly, is a paradox and a provocation to many dedicated practitioners in the health care services. After all, they practice for their patient's good, and they must attend to their clients' perspectives in order to serve them well. This is true, in a sense, and it is of great importance in the field of psychotherapy. But if we take it to be the whole truth, another paradox turns up: Why, then, is research into user perspectives so rare? Does it not indicate that this professional self-understanding is problematic? After all, many practitioners report running into various difficulties when trying to ascertain whether their practice proceeds according to their intention. The significance of their consultations for client life quality often seems
complexly blurred, and the efficacy of their advice and treatment seems difficult to distinguish and is too vaguely known. The prevailing understanding of how health care practices work is given a severe blow by the fact that up to half its clients do not comply with their practitioners' advice (Donovan and Blake 1992; Roberson 1992). The increasing critique of communication in the consultation and the rising number of dissatisfied and demanding clients is another troublesome issue (Freidson 1988; Mishler 1984; Silverman 1987). On top of this, we find similar patterns of self-understanding combined with surprisingly similar problems in other sectors of institutionalized service (Dreier 1996; Lave 1988). These, and other unsettled issues, point to a need for studies which reconceptualize current health care practices in a way that includes user perspectives and activities more fully. This is not intended to replace practitioners' perspectives, but to enable us better to address the relations between the involved parties' perspectives and activities more comprehensively and to conduct health care practice in fuller accord with its general objectives.

My research on psychotherapy led me to conclude that client problems and treatment are normally not accounted for from the user's perspective, but rather implicitly from another position and perspective: their psychotherapist's. Likewise the psychotherapist couches his/her own reasons to act as he/she does from his/her interpretation of his/her client's perspective. So neither of the two key parties' actions and problems are represented from their own positions and perspectives. Instead, they get entangled in complex interpretative webs. As a result the field is dominated by reinterpreted and disguised differences in perspective, and a corrective re-search is called for to re-direct practice (Dreier 1993). The few existing studies of users' perspectives on psychotherapy emphasize that psychotherapist and client perspectives in many ways differ much more than generally assumed (Barham and Hayward 1991; Dreier 1991, 2000); Eliasson and Nygren 1983, Howe, 1990; Malucio 1979; McLeod 1990a, 1990b; Straus et. al. 1988). As things stand, it is therefore problematic to define psychotherapy outcome and process without examining user perspectives. We need research into client perspectives and actual uses of psychotherapy and to change its forms, processes, and procedures accordingly. Actually the practice of psychotherapy is carried out by a plurality of subjects. It emerges from more than one participat-
Client Perspectives and Uses of Psychotherapy

ing subject's actions. This calls into question the prevailing understanding that professional expertise and competence are a purely individual property. In effect, psychotherapy works by means of inter-action and inter-subjectivity. Its expertise and competence are an attribute of an organized collaboration among its participants - an attribute which even cuts across the boundaries of the context in which the session takes place (Dreier 1996).

How then have user perspectives been introduced in research on psychotherapy? Are there limitations to the ways in which it was done, and can we establish guidelines for the future? I shall sketch this briefly, reflecting recent developments in basic approaches to this issue and moving from more narrow to more comprehensive understandings. In this way I shall introduce the stance on which my study rests.

In the first approach, user perspectives are seen as subjective experiences in contrast to an objective, scientific account of their illness and its treatment in terms of a diagnosis and a cure. This distinction enables practitioners to address discords between their practice and accounts, on the one hand, and clients' reported subjective well-being, on the other hand. It also springs from a growing recognition that we can not disregard patient experiences if we want to understand how treatment works. However, the distinction is mostly drawn in a way which does not acknowledge that the scientific account is also a positioned perspective which springs from the tasks and experiences of practitioners in a particular social practice. Scientific and professional concepts of illness and treatment are not conceived as parts of the social practice of health care and as constituted out of it - and therefore, by the way, it becomes difficult for practitioners to ground their concrete local practice upon them. One might say that "expert stances" represent nobody’s perspective. They are gathered from anywhere in general and nowhere in particular. Actually the concept of perspective was not introduced in the literature until user stances were taken up, signaling a switch to a merely subjective dimension. The vast majority of studies understand user perspectives only in this sense. The very term user perspective is taken to imply that something objective and public is contrasted with something subjective and internal. User perspectives remain free-floating experiences. We need, instead, to conceptualize experience and action as combined aspects of subjects' practice. But the study of any practice, in this case of
Subjectivity and Social Practice

psychotherapy, requires that we are able to understand how a participant combines experiences and actions. It also requires that we can understand how the experiences and actions of all participants are interrelated, and that we can combine them into an integrated understanding of the whole practice. If we are unable to understand how participants’ perspectives combine, we are left with two or more competing perspectives which we cannot but choose from according to our sympathies, allegiances, and tasks. It follows from all of this that user perspectives can be discounted in accounts of "what is really the case".

The second approach conceives user perspectives to be lay cultural beliefs about illness in contrast to professional, scientific knowledge about disease (Kleinman, 1988). Strictly speaking, such common sense cultural beliefs can then be discounted in the treatment of disease. Cultural beliefs surely play a part in user perspectives - as they do in professional perspectives. The problem is rather: what happens if we reduce user perspectives along those lines? One consequence might be that all members of a given culture, or even of our ‘Western civilization’, are understood to have essentially the same perspective. Such a distinction is too abstract and uniform to account for the different reactions to a treatment and the different treatment effects across users. We need to study users and their relationship to treatment in more concrete and specific ways. This brings us to the next approach.

The third approach considers user perspectives to be dynamic and changing. Indeed, it is the task of psychotherapy to enable particular changes in its clients' practices. So we should study not primarily states, but the dynamics of change processes. From the very beginning and all the way through, users participate in psychotherapy as experiencing and acting subjects, who hopefully change their experiences and actions. To study psychotherapy in accordance with its task, we must therefore study how the participating subjects bring these changes about. This calls for studies of client change processes during ongoing treatment. Once more we face a striking paradox: There are almost no such studies! That is, if by "such studies" we mean something else and more than what psychotherapists have always done when they interpret their clients during psychotherapy. Indeed, many psychotherapists claim that studies of client change processes from client perspectives during ongoing psychotherapy would inevitably disturb the psychotherapy and, thus, run counter to
promoting the patient's good (McLeod 1990a). So, with very few exceptions, we find only retrospective studies of user perspectives after termination of treatment.

One exception is the study by Eliasson and Nygren (1983). In separate interviews with clients and psychotherapists, recordings of the immediately preceding sessions were presented to them. Many interesting phenomena surface in such a study of changing psychotherapist and client perspectives on sessions during the course of ongoing psychotherapy. At the same time, the limitations of this study point to a key feature of the design and results of my study: we can not study how psychotherapy works by focusing only on events within sessions. Many conditions and events outside of them - in the institution of psychotherapy and in the clients' everyday life - play an important part in the dynamics and results of psychotherapy. Moreover, it is the task of psychotherapy to contribute to bringing about changes in clients' everyday practices outside of the sessions. Sessions are precisely a means to that end, and their effects are primarily to make themselves felt beyond the boundaries of the session, in other times and places. User perspectives and clients' actual uses of psychotherapy should be researched and documented accordingly. We need to decenter our study of the practice of psychotherapy (Dreier 1991, 1993). As far as its effects on clients are concerned, we need to turn 180 degrees and study it from their locations in the contexts of their everyday lives. Those contexts are the primary ones in bringing about the problems for which they seek treatment and in preventing or enabling the clients to overcome them. By comparison, the context of the session remains secondary with a limited and particular influence on their practices in these everyday contexts. Such a decentering is, indeed, necessary, but neglected in studies of most institutionalized practices. Instead they are studied off-hand from the professional practitioner's perspective, or from the researcher's normative version of how that practice should be conducted. Of course, practitioners come to know and try to influence client problems from their position within the session, extending their understanding and influence from there into the clients' everyday contexts. But this location easily makes the practitioners slip into shortcutting their account of the significance and effects of their work for their clients and overstate the role they and the session play to be the central and primary one. Then the practitioners appear to be the only or decisive
maker of change in their clients, as, indeed, most outcome studies presuppose by their very design. This confuses the location and socio-spatial structure of the practitioners’ own actions and perspectives with those of their clients, and the consequences of their efforts must appear complexly blurred. It becomes impossible to understand why some clients comply with the practitioners’ advice while others do not. The practitioners become blind to the ways in which different treatment effects arise from differences in client contexts and their arrangements and in the clients’ handling of their problems in their everyday forms of life. Indeed, we must consider the psychotherapeutic task of contributing to change in clients’ problems and develop their potentialities to handle and overcome them in a cross-contextual perspective. It is primarily a task of change and development to be pursued and realized outside of the sessions. Here client possibilities and potentialities to address, handle, and overcome problems are to be identified, utilized, and supported, among other things by means of the sessions. The task of psychotherapy is to help identify possibilities and support the development of capacities to extend and develop problematic relations and scopes in clients' everyday contexts. It is directed towards the realization and extension of the scopes of action in clients' everyday contexts which are relevant to the problems at hand. Sessions are a means to that end, for psychotherapist and client alike.

The lack of studies of the connections between sessions and clients' everyday contexts indicates that institutions may close themselves off to everyday social influences to maintain control over their own affairs (Lewis et. al. 1991). At the same time, it obscures the professionals’ orientation towards achieving significant impacts on clients' everyday life and makes them vulnerable to clients' displacements of problem-handling processes from those everyday contexts onto this other separate or ‘uninterfering’ context. In fact, sessions must utilize and create connections between these contexts so that clients may then use sessions to deal with their everyday problems, and the clients must come to recognize such relevant connections in order to begin to make use of their sessions. Clients’ discovery and use of such connections is guided by the possibilities and interests they perceive to have at stake in participating in the sessions and in using them to deal with problems in their everyday contexts. Their use of sessions goes through several transformations in get-
Client Perspectives and Uses of Psychotherapy

ting beyond initial problematic notions and practices. At present, however, there is great conceptual and procedural uncertainty among practitioners and researchers about this dimension of the practice of psychotherapy. But in spite of that uncertainty, clients remain the primary agents to launch and utilize these connections. And so they should be. That should, in fact, be an important part of the psychotherapist's goals.

One may argue that health care services need to be restructured and redirected in accordance with this comprehensive approach to user perspectives on ongoing treatment in a decentered "bottom-up" approach to service systems (Dreier 1996; Strauss and Corbin 1988). We may claim that it is necessary in order to uncover and secure the practical relevances of psychotherapy for users' everyday life, problems, and interests. The more we study clients' use of psychotherapy in their everyday contexts, the more our findings underline this requirement. But there is one more issue to raise about user perspectives:

The fourth approach regards client perspectives to be problematic. We can not take them on face value as a new final judgment about what the problem is and what is to be done about it. At least, and maybe especially, in the area of psychotherapy, it is not enough to decenter the perspective beyond the location of the professionals. User perspectives are grounded in those conflicts in their everyday contexts for which they seek psychotherapy. Inter- and intrapersonal conflicts are constitutive of client problems or at least decisive for which possibilities there exist or can be created to treat and overcome them (Dreier 1991; 2000). Clients' interpretations, attributions, and accounts of their problems are a part of their dealing with these conflicts. The nature of client problems is subject to conflict, disputed, and contested. That clients' current interpretations are problematic, is shown, among other things, in the fact that they get stuck and are unable to overcome their problems when they adhere to those interpretations. So user perspectives play a part in reproducing the current problems and must change in order to overcome them. They must be included in the psychotherapeutic task of change.

In this sense psychotherapy turns into a particular process of enablement: it seeks to enable clients to articulate and pursue their needs and interests in ways that are adequate to handle and overcome their problems in their everyday contexts. It must support the development of client capacities to do so in relation to others doing so in their common
contexts. Psychotherapy must focus on processes of conflict interpretation and action among various parties to the conflict as it unfolds over time. It must consider the interaction between a given conflict and the current procedures by which it is interpreted and reproduced in order to get at other ways in which it could be resolved. It must influence ongoing conflicts in such a way that they can be transformed and resolved. Finally, while doing all this, psychotherapy must take into account the fact that its efforts take place in a different context than those in which the clients’ everyday conflicts occur. If practitioners were working within an understanding of psychotherapy as a segregated province of professionalism, it would foster restricted misunderstandings of how psychotherapy works and of their competencies, and they would be susceptible to clients' displacements of conflict-handling processes.

2. Design

In order to throw new light on the workings of psychotherapy and on the dynamics of change as clients see it and act on it, I undertook a study of how user perspectives are implicated in the process of ongoing treatment, understood in the broad cross-contextual sense outlined above. I wanted to create a more comprehensive and tenable understanding of client problems and treatment that could be used to improve and develop current practice. It is the first of several studies I carried out since the second half of the 1980s in order to re-search different dimensions of the practice of psychotherapy (Dreier 1993). It focused on relations between clients' everyday life and participation in psychotherapy during the course of a small number of family therapies in an out-patient child psychiatric unit in Copenhagen. Later, other studies of a similar kind and of similar issues were carried out by researchers with whom I collaborate. I shall present the design and a preliminary analysis of part of the data from my study.

All psychotherapy sessions in the cases studied - with me as a cos-psychotherapist - were audiotaped and transcribed. A research assistant also interviewed the client families with a planned interval of three to four psychotherapy sessions during the whole course of ongoing psychotherapy and until about half a year after its termination. The interviewer knew the preceding session transcripts, and the details of each
Client Perspectives and Uses of Psychotherapy

interview were planned and adapted to the present case in meetings between interviewer and psychotherapists. These interviews were also audiotaped and transcribed. The design takes advantage of the fact that participants configure phenomena differently and reflect on them differently in different social contexts which have different practical functionalities for them. Since I concentrate on interview data in this paper, it is not about the practice of sessions, but about relations between users' everyday lives and ongoing psychotherapy as seen from their perspective.

In the written information sheet and oral presentation of the project after the first psychotherapy session clients were told we wanted to interview them periodically at home in the aim of finding out whether we could improve our work. They were assured that they would get the same treatment offer if they chose not to participate, and that they could withdraw from the project at any time without consequences for future treatment. They were also told that their psychotherapists would see the interview transcripts, and that they, as well as we, were free to bring up or pursue any topic from the interviews in the psychotherapy sessions. Our request was only turned down by the father in one family: a case of child custody going before the courts.

In the interviews topics were introduced via broad, open questions and then followed up in probing, differentiating, exemplifying and concretizing ways. This was done to allow participants to select and accentuate what they considered relevant and which connections they saw between various aspects, events, feelings, etc.. It is a crucial feature of human subjectivity that subjects focus selectively on particular phenomena, taken to be especially (positively or negatively) relevant, and that, in so doing, they consider and act on particular interrelationships. We wanted to capture this aspect of client subjectivity.

The interviews were construed and conducted in accordance with the overall task of psychotherapy: to support change. Each interview was conducted with the same constellation of clients who participated in the preceding psychotherapy sessions, and all interviews had a common threefold topical structure. In the first part clients were asked about conditions and events in their everyday contexts. If particular events and changes had occurred, they were asked how they came about, what role they played in them, and what they meant to them. They were asked whether they now act in different ways compared to earlier, how and
why such changes had come about, whether they think that other members of the family act differently now, and if so, how and why they do so and what that means to them. Only then were they asked whether these (courses of) events, and their actions had any connections with their psychotherapy sessions. The topics were addressed in this succession as an antidote against clients crediting too much onto the psychotherapy and their psychotherapists in order to please them, in return or gratitude for their help, or for other reasons. The second part of each interview then concerned the clients’ relations to the previous sessions. The third part finally dealt with how they now saw their situation and problems, and what they now considered necessary to change them.

I shall briefly comment on our experiences from working with these interviews: There were, of course, topical overlaps between interviews and sessions, but even then their contents were surprisingly different. This is first of all because the two contexts have a distinctly different meaning to the clients: clients have different stakes, hopes and dependencies in the two contexts. Certain things stated blankly in the interviews were not said, and, to my best judgment, would and could normally not have been said directly to our face in the sessions. After all, certain controversial ends are pursued most effectively in disguised and concealed ways. The difference between the contents of sessions and interviews also has to do with the clients’ recognition of these interviews as an extra chance to reflect on and reevaluate the sessions and their problems in a different way. Contrary to what many psychotherapists would expect, the clients perceived the interviews to be clearly different from their sessions, and declared they had no difficulty distinguishing between them. To them the interviews were first of all an extra chance to articulate their own point of view. Because of this they felt the clinic took them seriously and that their voices counted in a special way. They also reported that the extra chance to reconsider and reevaluate increased their influence on their psychotherapy and their use of it. The psychotherapists and researchers registered no example of disturbing influences from the interviews upon their treatment. When asked about it, clients were of the same opinion. Still some of the cases included pretty controversial material, and some clients had had extremely bad prior experiences with psychotherapists. To minimalize where possible the clients’ monopolisation of the interviews or their setting-up the interviewer as a go-between, the
interviewer was instructed to ask: have you considered to do something about this? What and why, or why not? Have you thought about taking it up with your psychotherapist? Why (not)? The interviewer was then to proceed to other interview questions.

It lies in the nature of interviews that one can only register what the participants can articulate, stimulated by the questions. Obscurity and confusion is manifested in their statements, but is also of immense interest: During the course of psychotherapy the interviews reflect changes in clarity, confusion, point of view, and evaluation of their practice and the role of psychotherapy in it. Since we pose the same questions in repeated interviews, we can register when some clarity or confusion arises over which specific issue. In this way, we approach processes of change in subjective perspectives, assumptions and evaluations, together with possible relations between these changes and sessions.

As our experiences with these interviews grew, we placed increasing emphasis on topics about the state of affairs and events of everyday life. As we discovered how much uncovered terrain we entered, our decen- tering of the study of psychotherapeutic practice expanded, and we added interviews with third parties such as school teachers. The study took a course which reflects a movement away from a fixating on the immediate session towards an increased decentering. The more encompassing forms of psychotherapeutic practice and views of that practice which have emerged in the later part of this century do, indeed, call for developing a more comprehensive theoretical approach and for the study of other possible sources of change in relation to those inside the psychotherapy session. Our experiences with the interviews from this study was taken up in later projects, conceived in collaboration with my interviewer and me. To sum up, we may say that the interview data in the present study emphasized the unknown degree to which clients are the main agents of their change processes. They are the main agents of whether and for what which aspects of psychotherapy are put to use. It is an illusion to believe that their psychotherapist can control or predict this alone.
3. Results

I shall now present some general findings about client perspectives and uses of psychotherapy which I shall list in five points. Exploratory studies are typically used to develop frames of analysis about their field, of study. This study is no exception, and some of its results were already incorporated in the arguments for the approach in the first section of this paper. The findings I shall now present are all about clients seen as subjects, and they are about aspects which hold throughout the course of psychotherapy while their particular configuration and phenomena change. Still these findings do not tell us what it is that brings about these developments during case work even though they resulted from a study of an action research type. Such a design includes client subjectivity, i.e. agency and experience, in an unusual way and to an unusual degree, and an analysis of those aspects of client subjectivity which surfaced in the study led us to posit these findings. But these findings are not of the particular kind which an action research design is meant to produce. Action research is normally an integrated part in bringing about particular change processes, and the analysis of its data aims at uncovering and generalizing what brings these changes about. In later publications I shall present other findings from this study, especially concerning what brings about psychotherapeutically relevant changes in clients’ everyday life and how sessions and psychotherapeutic expertise can be reconceptualized in light of the analysis of client perspectives and use of psychotherapy.

1. Clients use psychotherapy sessions in highly selective ways.

Compared to the multitude of topics in clients’ everyday practice in other places, the sessions cover a very limited range of topics. This is not merely due to the limited duration of sessions, but is a more or less deliberate result of the concentration on particular problems within psychotherapy. Nevertheless, in between sessions and afterwards the clients do not relate in an active way to all of what took place in the sessions, but pick up particular, sometimes apparently not very prominent, minor, parts or aspects of it. In so doing they act like human subjects in general who can not realize all possibilities at hand in a particular situation, but must act in a selective and, thus, partial way. This selective and partial
nature of clients’ use of sessions highlights that clients are subjects in their own right, and it characterizes their particular subjectivity. In other words, the widespread professional assumption that clients directly take over (aspects of) sessions does not hold. Indeed, clients often pick up other aspects of sessions than those their psychotherapists expect them to and believe that they have done, but the psychotherapists often do not catch on to (very many of) these differences. This is probably due to the complexity and opacity of many sessions which give psychotherapist reinterpretations of their clients, centered around the psychotherapists’ own perspectives, professional tasks, and assumptions, an easy play. Besides, psychotherapists have only limited access to clients’ everyday practice outside of sessions and, thus, limited and mainly indirect access to many premises of client actions and interpretations.

2. Clients continue somehow at other times and places to process those topics from the sessions which they select and bring to bear on their everyday life. In so doing they modify, change, and reinterpret these topics and events of the sessions in many ways that their psychotherapists normally never come to know about.

If we want to understand in practical terms how those aspects of sessions which the clients use make an impact on their lives, we must acknowledge that the events, interpretations, evaluations, suggestions, insights or whatever, as they occurred within sessions, are incomplete. We cannot take precisely the version of them that occurred inside the session to be the basis on which the clients later act outside of it. The session is not a finished, neatly wrapped up package which clients simply carry along with them and put to identical use. Their learning and changing are not limited to, nor do they essentially only take place within the session as many psychotherapists implicitly assume in their analysis, interpretation, and accounts of case work. If this were so, it would, indeed, be quite a restriction of the workings of psychotherapy. On the contrary, psychotherapists and clients alike should intend that clients continue in some way to process their understanding and handling of their problems outside the sessions. The great extent and significance of outside processing compared to that which takes place inside sessions already follows from the simple fact that sessions only take up, say, one hour a week of the clients’ everyday lives and, furthermore, take place in a
context that is different from the one in which their problems are primarily located and must be resolved. Yet, to the psychotherapists, the learning and changing that take place outside of the psychotherapeutic sessions are largely unknown, not taken seriously, or downplayed as relatively insignificant for the psychotherapeutically guided change processes as compared with what went on within sessions. What is more, clients mostly do not tell their psychotherapists that they reinterpret and use sessions differently outside of them, nor how and why they do so.

3. Client interpretations and uses of psychotherapy sessions differ widely, not only from their psychotherapist’s, but already among the clients in the same case. Psychotherapy is no unequivocal affair.

Individual clients emphasize different events within sessions as significant for them and evaluate the same events in different ways. They use different aspects of them and for different purposes. Even when they apparently end up with the same interpretation or evaluation of their problems, they may have arrived at it along very different roads. Psychotherapists (and individual clients) often imagine that if others arrive at similar stances, they took the same road to get there, and it dawned upon them at the same time and as a result of the same steps. But the road that psychotherapists imagine clients to have taken is heavily influenced by the way the psychotherapists came to understand and work through the case and by the way they perceive and pursue their professional task and imagine the impacts of their interventions.

4. Psychotherapy has different individual meanings even to clients in the same case not only because they are involved in the problems that their psychotherapy deals with in different ways on their different positions vis-à-vis each other, and because they are involved in different individual trajectories of development, but especially because psychotherapy deals with deeply conflicted matters.

The clients’ processes of development remain of a conflicting nature, contested and disputed, and a total consensus is never installed between them. The prevailing ideology that ‘good psychotherapy’ produces a consensus, makes many psychotherapists blind to the fact that, on the contrary, it works precisely because discords and conflicts persist. This is indicated by the amount of difference in the clients’ and psychothera-
Client Perspectives and Uses of Psychotherapy

pists’ perspectives throughout. The dynamics of change rather lie in the articulation of discords and the change of conflicts. Hence the relations of strength in their conflicts and their constellation of conflicts do change. Some conflicts are overcome while others stand in the way of development and have to be modified or transformed for development to occur. This means that while some client uses of therapy are driven by their discovery and creation of possibilities and capabilities to overcome current conflicts, clients also use psychotherapy in other ways to influence their everyday conflicts on the premise that these conflicts cannot be overcome, and that their only option is to influence the balance of power within them. When clients act on the latter kind of premises, the struggles between them take on new forms and may even intensify. Such struggles also directly include their psychotherapy and their psychotherapists. The clients may even use the psychotherapy and their psychotherapists’ various actions, statements, and expressions against each other - much to their psychotherapists’ discomfort. But the psychotherapists do not witness most of this. It takes place at home and elsewhere, lest the psychotherapists might object to it if they knew.

During the course of psychotherapy the clients come to articulate and negotiate troublesome and conflictual subject matters in new ways in sessions as well as at home. Let me mention two general features of these changes: First, at the beginning the clients do so only with difficulty and in restricted ways because of the risk to end up reproducing or aggravating their conflicts, while later problems, disagreements and conflicts become more OK to have because they can be approached and dealt with. They are not so scary, risky and disastrous, and the clients can acknowledge that there need to be a place for them in everyday life developments. Second, at the beginning the clients are more easily sidetracked and obstructed when dealing with conflicts, while later they become better able to address them in sustained ways that reach across wider spans of times and places. One may say that the category of possibility achieves a more significant, concrete, experiential and existential meaning. Conditions do not just impinge upon them; they are not just constraints to be obeyed. The clients are not so much on their heels any more, overthrown by uncontrolled and unforeseen events that tumble in upon them. They react in less ad hoc ways and begin to establish connections, make priorities and choices, reassess directions and interests -
in the anticipating perspective of my future and our future. They pursue interests and concerns across a wider span of time and place, making their personal and shared practice less disjointed.

5 The role of psychotherapy in overcoming clients’ everyday problems is enabled by clients creating, and changing particular connections between events and experiences in sessions and in other contexts of their lives. Through these connections clients transform what they use from sessions and include it in other contexts as a particular part thereof and with a particular meaning that differs from its place and meaning in sessions.

In fact, most clients must first find out and learn how to use a psychotherapy session and what they use from it. Initially they often feel disoriented in this respect. And they are even concerned to keep up a distance or a total disconnection between sessions and their everyday life. They work to keep it up, in sessions as well as at home. They fear an interference they cannot control or do not agree with and which is not connected with any possibilities they can believe in to change or overcome their problems and improve the qualities of their everyday life, subjective states, symptoms, etc. There are also various forms of conflict over which connections should be established and what they should be used for. Let me just mention one difference between the way they deal with their conflicts in sessions and at home which highlights the work of transformation involved in the clients’ use of psychotherapy: clients do not talk much about their treatment and about what to do about their conflicts at home. That comes as a striking paradox to most psychotherapists’ expectations about how ‘the talking cure’ works. A main reason for this is that clients do not think they can succeed in talking through their mutual conflicts on their own. There is no expert present to help the process along. It doesn’t go very well, and not all members feel satisfied about such talks. They complain that other members get cross, interrupt them, do not listen or take them seriously. It is also very unusual to set aside a predefined time slot for concerted ‘problem talk’. At the same time, talk is still used at home as a weapon in conflicts of interpretation about what is the problem and who is to change. After all, talk is a discursive means of power in conflicts. So they may still disagree over the use of talk and fight over it at home.
Client Perspectives and Uses of Psychotherapy

To sum up the analysis of clients’ perspectives on the changes in their lives during the course of psychotherapy, emphasizes that these changes are not merely an effect exerted by the psychotherapy sessions or by their psychotherapists’ intervention. This stands in stark contrast to the way effects of psychotherapy are normally researched and accounted for in the literature. In the present study psychotherapists and sessions, on the contrary, appear as parts of the clients’ much more comprehensive personal social practice, and the clients appear as the primary agents of change as they take part in their comprehensive personal social practice.

References


Subjectivity and Social Practice


Client Perspectives and Uses of Psychotherapy


3. Subjectivity and the Practice of Psychotherapy

Summary: Charles Tolman noted that basic theoretical stances in psychology are dominated by notions about an isolated subject whose psychic processes reside within the skull. Prevailing notions about the client subject in psychotherapy are of the same kind - client problems and their change reside within the skull, and psychotherapy is an outside influence on what goes on in there. Seldom do basic theoretical stances in psychology emphasize or even approach psychic phenomena from the point of view of interaction, communication or conversation. If theoretical stances in psychology at all recognize the basic importance of society for psychic processes, they mostly do so in some grand abstraction about the relationship between the individual and the society as if individuals confront the society one at a time and in the same way. I want to illustrate how I attempt to address and re-conceptualize the practice of psychotherapy in a way that I consider relevant for many other fields as well, namely as a complex social practice composed of relations between many subjects an across multiple social contexts.

The ideological hold of individualism and subjectivism constricts what many assume "a science of the subject" in "the first person perspective" can mean. Complex societal practice is organized in and extends over multiple social contexts. The contexts are connected or separated, can be influenced or controlled, accessed or closed off in particular ways, often to particular subjects or groups of subjects. Thus, subjects may become included or excluded from participating in them in various ways. Basically, then, we must conceive of individual subjects as participants in the structures of ongoing social practice which mostly includes many participating subjects in different positions with different stakes in the practice of the context at hand and with different reasons to pursue them. Each subject can have but a partial grasp of what takes place in the contexts and but a partial impact upon them.

A concrete "science of the subject" is needed to conceptualize the ways in which subjects take part in the structures of social practice and
move across them, participating in varying ways and for various reasons in diverse social contexts. So subjects, their activities, and psychic processes are situated, but not immobile. They are on the move from situation to situation in a way which basically remains situated. These basic features of every subject's participation in complex social practice have fundamental implications for our notions of the person, of personal psychic processes, and of personal perspectives and stances (Dreier, 1993b). Also they have profound implications for our notions of individual development and life-history (cf. Wolfgang Maiers, this volume). Whether we regard it as determined from below (development), from outside (socialization), or from above (upbringing), or whether we regard it to be self-transformational or the unfolding of a story, life-history does not merely stretch across time. It stretches across times and places. If we separate the two and omit the latter, we cannot relate life-histories to social structures in any robust way. There are elaborate societal arrangements and prestructurations for subjects' trajectories, and these involve guidances and misguidances, and collaborations and conflicts. In relation to these, subjects unfold, direct and compose their concrete life-trajectories. The challenge is to expand our theoretical notions to include all this without loosing our hold on subjects' local first person perspectives and stances. We need to understand how subjects come to grips with their complex, changing participations in multiple, changing contexts and, to do so, develop more or less comprehensive stances concerning them (Dreier, 1994). Predominant notions in psychology about unitary subjects and their properties are usually too simplistic to serve as guidelines for people to conduct their lives in complex social practices.

Where does all this take us in regard to the practice of psychotherapy? The analytic approach to psychotherapy that I sketch here fits other areas of complex societal practice as well and thus stands in opposition to widespread beliefs that psychotherapy is a special practice quite different from other social practices. I have developed this conception through my empirical, participatory studies of psychotherapy, through research collaboration organized to study professional psychological practice among Critical Psychologists and others in various places in Germany and Denmark, and through my practice as a therapist, supervisor, and trainer. In brief, psychotherapy, by my analysis, has the following attributes:
Carried Out in One Place, But Used in Another. Professional psychotherapeutic practice is one of many societal practices which are carried out in one particular place with a particular set of participants, but primarily deals with issues from other times and places, and - so one hopes - is primarily aimed at being of use in other times and places. Its tasks originate elsewhere, and its effects are to make a difference elsewhere. Other examples include schools, universities, health care institutions, social services, trade unions, ministeries, and churches.

Connections Across Contexts. To comprehend practices of this kind, we need an analytic framework which emphasizes cross-contextual connections. This is necessary in order to study, carry on, and develop the practice of psychotherapy adequately.

Decentered Analysis. Client problems and their resolution are primarily located in the contexts of their everyday lives. So we cannot center our understanding of the workings of therapy on the immediate encounter and its processes. On the contrary, we must decenter our view of the problems it deals with and the effects it may achieve, i.e. of the very significance and conduct of sessions (Dreier, 1991).

Particular Concerns Are Pursued in Particular Ways. In sessions, clients more or less deliberately pursue particular concerns which more or less differ from concerns they pursue elsewhere. The concerns they pursue in sessions and the ways they pursue them here also change as therapy advances into more anticipated impacts elsewhere, between sessions, and on the ways in which they include session topics, impulses, insights, and suggestions elsewhere and later.

Sessions and Everyday Practice Are Disconnected. Clients not only seek to connect sessions and everyday practices but they also keep a distance between sessions and their everyday practices in particular in unwanted or anxiety-provoking situations. They actively strive to disconnect sessions and everyday practice in ways they believe may prevent therapists from achieving aims that are contrary to their perceived inter-
est, e.g. until they find out "what sort of baboons they are", "what they might be up to", "with whom they side".2

**Peculiar Features of Sessions Make Them Work.** In various contexts clients participate and deal with their problems in diverse ways. In sessions they deal with them in peculiar ways. They point to these peculiarities as being the main reason why therapy works: "It makes us pull ourselves together", "There is someone there to ensure that 'dangerous' topics can be addressed", "I am protected from others", "It is assured that others listen and take seriously what I say", "I am introduced to new perspectives and angles on problems that stimulate my reflections and reevaluations".

**Perspectives, Reasons, and Concerns Are Mediated.** Within sessions clients' perspectives, reasons for participating in particular ways and the concerns they pursue do not stem exclusively from the sessions. They are mediated and primarily originate elsewhere, in the contexts of their everyday lives and their relations to the institution of therapy and its inter-institutional relationships. Likewise, therapists' perspectives, reasons and concerns in sessions primarily originate in their professional working contexts and are mediated through them. So relations between therapists and clients in sessions are not just of an immediate nature, but mediated.

**Therapist and Client Mediations Are Opposed.** The two parties take part in the sessions with perspectives, reasons and concerns which are mediated from opposite directions: the professional institutional contexts versus the contexts of clients' everyday lives. This gives rise to a variety of crossed purposes, interpretations, evaluations, and misunderstandings between them.

**Sessions Are of Secondary Importance.** Therapy sessions remain of secondary importance to clients, compared to the primary contexts of their everyday existence. Sessions remain secondary events, and their

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2 These and later quotations are taken from my study of families attending therapy in a child psychiatric unit (Dreier, in press; in prep.). These families were interviewed at regular intervals about their perspectives on the interrelations between their everyday practice and ongoing therapy.
links with clients everyday lives are obscure and problematic. Therapy is not the all encompassing experience many envision it to be, but a time-limited preoccupation. After all, clients are only in session at the most for one hour a week in a limited period of their lives. Most of what matters and what counts as client problems and their resolution really lies outside.

**Most Is Done Elsewhere.** And most of what can be and is done about their problems occurs outside, in-between and afterwards. Therapeutic sessions must be re-conceptualized as a particular, limited medium in a much more comprehensive and complex practice.

**Direct Transfer Is an Exception.** As clients move across contexts in the conduct of their everyday lives, their scope of action, concerns, problems and their significance, as well as their reasons for doing something about them vary. This means that elsewhere, in between and afterwards it might not be possible or even the best thing to do what one did in the session or what was suggested or came to mind within therapy. When we look at the ways clients act in their everyday contexts, they do not simply follow their therapists' normative prescriptions - or even the ideas they themselves got during sessions. A direct transfer from sessions or compliance with therapeutic regimens are an exception and a peculiar case rather than the rule many presume it to be and place their bets on for therapy to work. And, indeed, for good reasons. Even the direct influence from within sessions upon how they are used outside is restricted and secondary to other influences. And it had better be restricted, lest we believe therapists should control their clients' lives - in their best interest, of course.

**Clients Connect and Include Sessions in Their Everyday Lives.** Sessions do not work exclusively or even primarily because of what takes place within them, but precisely because of their connections with clients' everyday lives - as clients realize these connections and bring them to bear upon their daily lives. Events and relations in sessions are mediated, but they are also meant to stretch beyond the session. The conduct of sessions should foster this.
Subjectivity and Social Practice

Sessions Are Used Selectively. Compared to how much therapists expect clients to benefit, clients use sessions in much more limited and selective ways. Much is neglected and left aside, and outcomes are often used at other occasions, times and places than their therapists believe. Clients often select aspects of sessions for use outside sessions that are different from therapists’ expectations and beliefs.

Uses of Therapy Become an Object of Conflict. Clients enter therapy because they are caught up in personal and interpersonal conflicts. These conflicts then also turn into conflicts over why and for what therapy is to be used. Client interpretations and uses of sessions and of their therapists' actions and motives are part of their conflicts. In therapies with more than one client participating, say family therapies, each selects and brackets, connects and disconnects influences differently and in conflict with others. Given the conflicts that therapy is meant to treat, casework takes on different meanings and courses of development for individual participants. They even fight over it outside the sessions. In practice, "good therapy" is not a consensus of "mutual understanding". It works precisely because the dynamics and patterns of conflict develop. That psychotherapy is a conflictual affair, is a major feature of its effectiveness.

Topics Are Modified, Reinterpreted, and Used for Other Purposes. After sessions clients continue in some way or other to process the session topics they select and apply to their everyday lives. In so doing they modify, change, and reinterpret them in ways more comprehensively and profoundly than professionals commonly suspect. This is partly due to differences in practical contextual meanings which make clients relocate and recombine influences on their everyday actions. But clients even turn events, insights and impulses from sessions around and direct them against what they were intended for, e.g. against each other. All this happens elsewhere, in between and later, when their therapists are not present usually never come to learn about it. Again, these phenomena emphasize the particular and secondary influence of therapy. It warns us against taking the contents and workings of therapy to be identical with that which therapists experience and witness within sessions when, indeed, this is being further transformed outside and in between sessions.
Professional Performance Versus Client Use. This picture of the practice of psychotherapy is far from the predominant notions in research of an aggregate (Danziger, 1990) practice of diagnosis and matching techniques having (more or less) standard effects and followed by a transfer of these effects in identical shapes from sessions into everyday practice.³ It calls us to distinguish carefully between professional performance and client use - in this as in many other areas, e.g. teaching and learning. The problem is that we know far too little about the uses of therapy in clients' everyday practices! This is a deep paradox, considering that therapeutic practice intends to achieve impact precisely outside its own immediate boundaries. As a corrective, we need to pay greater attention to the neglected perspectives and practices of clients as users. Client use is often considered to be identical with and even determined by the professional performance and provision of service. The issue is rather to conceive of sessions and conduct them in such a way that clients actually can and do have good reasons to use them in their everyday lives so that they make the best possible difference out there.

Clients Are Subjects, Not Consumers or Victims. My analysis highlights that clients are subjects in their own right and on their own terms to a much larger degree and much more profoundly than usually assumed. They should be studied in this way too. They are no passive consumers of therapist services or even victims of their treatment, but sustain particular perspectives and stances and often make surprising use of psychotherapy. Indeed, it should be the aim of psychotherapy to support client subjects in doing so. To accomplish this, we must reconceptualize therapeutic practice, increase client influence upon it, redefine its professionality and the structures of its practice in a much broader and more cooperative way. We should, finally, recognize in theory what all of us know how to do in practice: to act, think and feel in a particular way in one context out of consideration for its relations with other contexts and even trying to achieve certain ends in other contexts by means of acting in that particular way here and now. We always act, think and feel in a location, but also often beyond it. Human agency and subjectivity can be

³ There is a strong parallel between the aggregates of academic, experimental psychology and the diagnostic groups and therapeutic techniques in fields of “applied” psychology.
Subjectivity and Social Practice

encompassing and not out of context at the same time, just as it can be in
context in an apparently out-of-context way.

**Perspectives Are Confused, Practice De-subjectified.** Contrary to
these demands, current therapeutic practice and theory are marked by a
widespread and profound confusion of participants' subjective stand-
points and perspectives (Dreier, 1993a). In textbooks, theories, training,
case files and report, this multiparty, conflictual, cross-contextual social
practice is presented out of context as an account about one person's, the
client's, problematic, personal properties. The actions of the other, the
therapist, are presumably derived entirely from the client's assumed
needs for treatment. The client does not appear in his or her own per-
spective from his or her own position, but, implicitly, from the therapist's
perspective and position. Nor does the therapist appear as an acting and
experiencing subject from the perspective of his or her own position, but
from the interpreted perspective of his or her client as if the reasons for
what the therapist does lie in the pockets of his or her client. In this way,
neither of the two appear as subjects in their own right from their own
positions and perspectives and through the stances they developed in re-
lation to them. The practice is virtually de-subjectified and de-contextu-
alized (Dreier, 1993a). The therapist virtually exerts a monopoly of in-
terpretation, but does not acknowledge it as coming from his or her own
position and perspective. Upon closer inspection, we realize this is due to
social interests of control over this practice which foster an individuali-
ization of responsibility and accountability onto the professional subject
(Dreier, 1988). From there it spreads into the ways therapists handle and
interpret the immediate relations in the session, stimulated by its internal
conflicts. Predominant notions about mental illness, diagnosis and psy-
chotherapeutic techniques are couched in this way, implicitly from the
standpoint and perspective of professionals and their institutions on and
about the clients they meet and treat there, but not - as well as - from the
standpoint and perspective of clients on and about themselves and the
place of their problems in the conduct of their lives in social practice
(Dreier, 1990).

**A complex, Situated Practice with Many Participants.** Therapy is a
complex, situated practice which reaches across several contexts and in-
cludes many participants. Its workings are a compositional effect of everybody's doings, now and later, here and there. It is not an outside effect upon what goes on in the skull. Nor can we, contrary to predominant research in psychotherapy, locate the effectiveness of therapy in some more or less hidden details of the immediate events in the session.

**Restructure and Develop the Practice of Therapy.** In this paper I focused my analysis on one of its parties - the one for whose sake everything is presumably done but whose perspectives and stances are frighteningly marginal. But my analysis also has profound implications for our notions about professional practice and expertise and about what produces changes in psychotherapy (cf. Dreier, 1998). Put in more general terms, my analysis is a pledge to restructure and develop psychotherapy as a social practice. My approach recontextualizes it in a way we may use to redirect, develop and re-qualify it - so that we may become more confident that it makes the best possible difference in improving peoples' lives.

**Democratize Practice and Negotiate Relations between Participant Standards.** During the last 10 years I and others around me have been involved in several projects dealing with these issues in various areas of health care and social services in Denmark (Højholt, 1993; Nissen, 1994; Rasmussen, 1994). As an alternative to the introduction of a market model of public services, we aimed at democratizing services, first of all, by increasing user influence upon them to secure and develop their quality. In addition, we reopened discussions and negotiations on the relations between the various parties' diverse standards for good practice in order to get a more comprehensive and appropriate basis for reevaluating, securing and developing the qualities of practice.

**Practice Research of Complex Practices with Many Parties.** These studies are part of fostering new conceptions of participatory practice research (Dreier, 1993b; in prep.; Fahl & Markard, 1993; Markard & Holzkamp, 1989) which study complex practice, not just by looking at what goes on in one situation, but across interrelated contexts and from the positions and perspectives of several, interrelated participating subjects. Previously, research has been designed so that each study only looks at one situation and from the perspective of one party. That makes
Subjectivity and Social Practice

prior research ill-suited to study complex practices and to deal with issues of participant power and influence in more democratic ways.

References


Subjectivity and the Practice of Psychotherapy


4. Psychotherapy in Clients’ Trajectories across Contexts

The work I shall present is based on my previous attempts at a comprehensive theorizing of people’s lives as participation in social practice (Dreier, 1993, 1994, 1996). Though I cannot go into the theory in any detail in this chapter, I hope that the links to the materials I shall include come across as I unfold my argument. First I shall sketch some central contentions on how to theorize about subjects in social practice, emphasizing that people live their lives participating in multiple social contexts and moving across them. Then I present a study of psychotherapy that illustrates the place of sessions in clients’ practice across social contexts. In the next section I elaborate some general points about my understanding of psychotherapy and of personal life trajectories in subjects’ social practice. And in the final section I relate my analysis to some general features of a narrative understanding which many find fruitful in the study of psychotherapy and which has much in common with my approach. My analysis in particular raises questions concerning the place of narrative in personal action and experience when one takes into account that persons configure their actions and experiences as they participate in diverse social contexts and move across them. I shall be warning against limitations and distortions if one focuses too closely on narrative and loses sight of its performative significance and place in people’s ongoing personal practice across social contexts.

Subjects in Social Practice.

My work is inspired primarily by the theoretical tradition of critical psychology (e.g., Holzkamp 1983; Tolman 1994; Tolman and Maiers 1991). This cultural-historical, Marxist approach reconceptualizes psychological theory from the point of view of the individual subject in her immediate local situation in the social world. To the individual subject, the meaning of any local situation is the concrete scope of possibilities for action which it affords and which is mediated by the overall social
structure. The personal potentiality for action that enables the subject to live by means of such possibilities for action is, therefore, the widest and most crucial characteristic of individual subjectivity. The development and restriction of personal action potentiality plays the key role in the study of individual subjectivity. The theoretical analysis of particular situations and episodes focuses on understanding how the individual subject arrives at grounds for a particular course of action and attempts to realize it. Individual action, it is argued, is not caused, but subjectively grounded. The subject grounds her actions by relating her perceived needs and interests to the concrete possibilities for action in the situation at hand. Her immediate mental state reflects the degree to which she anticipates being able to have relevant possibilities at her disposal or to be dependent and exposed. Subjective experiences are, thus, not seen as free-floating views from anywhere and nowhere in particular but as located experiential perspectives from a particular situation. In general terms the subject may adopt one or the other of two basic modes of action. She may either (1) attempt to expand her present scope and increase her disposal over relevant possibilities or (2) act within the existing limits of the situation. A matching distinction is made between two basic forms of action potentiality. The subject may adopt (1) an expanding action potentiality of developing new possibilities and potentialities and increasing its disposal over these possibilities or (2) a restricted action potentiality of keeping within pregiven limits. The choice of one or the other basic mode of action is not a characteristic of a particular individual “personality” but of what a subject may find grounds to do in relation to the present scope of possibilities and her perceived needs and interests. For instance, she may turn her back on the alternative of expanding the present scope because she anticipates that this would lead to conflicts that might make matters worse and threaten her present degree of disposal.

Lave’s work on situated learning through participation in communities of practice (e.g., Lave and Wenger 1991) encouraged me to place greater emphasis on the contextual and participatory nature of individual subjectivity in the development of my framework. It led me to highlight the notion in critical psychology that any local individual situation really is part of a local social context of action in which individual subjects participate. These social contexts of action have particular structures of
social positions that offer individual participants different scopes of possibilities, and individual participants’ degrees of dependency or disposal vary accordingly. But as soon as one starts to conceptualize individual subjects through their participation in relation to other participants and their context as a whole, some further characteristics of individual subjectivity come to the fore. Any individual participant realizes a selective, partial, and particular set of possibilities compared with the possibilities other participants realize and with the possibilities for action which the context affords. Consequently, individual subjectivity assumes a partial and particular configuration. This is equally true of participants’ action potentialities, their grounds for action, the significance of their actions for everybody involved, their dependency and disposal, their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. The partiality and diversity of individual subjectivity must also be taken into account in understanding the dynamics of the relationships among participants.

Moving situated participation to the center of my theorizing about subjects in social practice, however, only made the next necessary conceptual expansion more obvious. Once we stop considering subjects as free-floating agents and study their local participation, we must also recognize that subjects do not stay in one place and participate in only one context of action. On the contrary, subjects move across social contexts and participate in several contexts on different locations. This has consequences for our understanding both of social practice and of individual subjectivity. As for our understanding of social practice, it leads us to recognize that social practice is structured in a multitude of social contexts. These contexts are connected and disconnected in a variety of ways. They are accessible and inaccessible in particular ways for a variety of groups and persons. And many social contexts are arranged as settings for particular kinds of social purposes and tasks and for people to pursue particular kinds of personal activities, concerns, and obligations in them and through them.

And as for our understanding of individual subjectivity, it means that in a social practice with such a complex structure, each subject must conduct his life by participating in multiple social contexts and moving across them in pursuit of his concerns and obligations. In so doing, the subject’s personal mode of participation varies from one context to another and is, at the same time, affected by the contextual complexity of
Subjectivity and Social Practice

ts its conduct of life. Let me briefly point out some important features of this variability and complexity of individual subjectivity. First of all, subjects’ modes of participation vary from one context to another because different contexts offer different scopes of possibilities for action and because subjects have different personal concerns at stake in these different contexts. Each subject, then, has good reasons to participate in different ways in different contexts, and the subject’s personal action potentialities and psychological processes assume a contextual multifac- ity. Still, the subject’s grounds for a particular mode of participation do not stem only from the context he is presently located in. Since the subject also participates in other contexts, the interrelationships between these contexts matter to him. So a person’s participation in a context is also influenced by its significance in relation to that person’s participation in other contexts. As a consequence, a subject’s local mode of participation assumes a particular, mediated, cross-contextual complexity. This cross-contextual complexity is further strengthened by the fact that subjects often pursue particular concerns across several contexts, varying the way they do so as they move from one context into another, depending upon the nature and significance of the context they are presently located in. When a subject’s local modes of participation are complexly grounded and motivated, the same, of course, holds for his experiences. The subject’s experiential perspective is grounded in his immediate location and follows the embodied subject as he moves around in his complex social practice. The subject’s experiences are located in his diverse participations in disparate contexts and, at the same time, involved in directing his pursuits across them. The subject configures his experiences as part of its trajectory across times and places.

In order to manage to live a life in and across diverse contexts of social practice, the subject must create and sustain an everyday personal conduct of life (Holzkamp 1995). The subject must contrast and balance off the demands and concerns associated with her diverse social contexts and integrate them into a particular ordering and configuring of her everyday activities. By establishing an everyday conduct of life, this complexity becomes manageable in practical terms. However, the contextual complexity is not only a matter of everyday life. It is characteristic of the whole life course. At any given time during the life course, the individual subject lives her life by taking part in a particular configuration of
several, diverse social contexts. Which social contexts the individual subject participates in may, of course, change during the life course, as may their personal significance. Still, throughout her life, the subject lives not only by directing herself ahead, but also across. I suggest using the term **life trajectory** to capture this complexity of the life course (Dreier 1994). I shall illustrate this notion later and conclude the introduction to my general framework of analysis at this point.

The development of the framework I have introduced was in fact heavily influenced by challenges raised in my study of psychotherapeutic practice. Some unresolved problems in our usual understanding of psychotherapy pushed me in the direction of this kind of theorizing. The framework is geared to allow us to reconceptualize subjects in social practices such as psychotherapy. When clients attend psychotherapy, this adds, for a period of time, another context, the therapy session, to the structure of their everyday practice. Therapy works precisely because clients pursue their concerns across as well as in the contexts of the session, their home, school, workplace, and so forth. Treatment does not progress as an effect therapists make on their clients. It progresses primarily because of the clients’ changing pattern of interrelating different modes of experiencing and dealing with their problems in their diverse social contexts. It is not the therapists but the clients, who are the primary agents of therapy, those whose practice will hopefully change and for whose sake the practice of therapy takes place. Contrary to widespread notions, treatment is promoted not by the transfer of an identical mode of experiencing and dealing with problems but by particular, significant differences in the ways clients experience and deal with their problems in their different social contexts. In fact, since treatment is carried out for the sake of resolving problems that occur in clients' everyday lives, clients’ everyday concerns and perspectives do and should play the main role compared with those of the therapy session.

These propositions lead to a different understanding of therapeutic practice. This understanding emphasizes that participants are involved in different activities and experiences in therapy sessions than, say, at home and that they experience and deal with their problems in different ways in these places. Talk has a different role, and different aspects of talking matter in the two places. The practice and experience of therapeutic change is deeply conflictual and not based on a consensus, which many
Subjectivity and Social Practice

assume that “good understanding” should all be about. Clients’ circumstances and possibilities outside of sessions are more important for the realization, range, and direction of changes than is the practice within sessions. As therapy gets underway, participants forge stakes and stances to pursue across the different times and places of their everyday practice. In this way they come to pursue dealing with conflicts in particular ways within sessions and by means of them.

This new understanding of psychotherapy requires a different way of conducting research. Accounts of therapy in the research literature and among practitioners normally only focus on what happens within sessions or even on what the therapist does to the clients in sessions. But this gives us no good understanding of why and how therapy works. We need a kind of research that fits the complexity of the social practice we study. In short, we need to study it from the perspective of its multiple participants and as a particular part of their life trajectories across multiple social contexts. This insight was substantiated further by discovering that in this respect the practice of psychotherapy is no different from a range of other social practices that show similar complexities and would need similar frames of analysis and modes of conducting research to advance our understanding of them (Dreier 1996; Lave 1997).

A Study of Psychotherapy.

To illustrate my framework, I shall draw upon materials from my study of change processes during family therapy. My materials consist of transcripts of the therapy sessions and of interviews with a small number of families about their everyday lives, especially in relation to their ongoing therapy. I was a co-therapist in these cases. The interviews took place in the clients’ homes. They were conducted by an interviewer hired especially for that purpose, with all family members present and at regular intervals throughout their 1½ to 2 years of therapy until about half a year after treatment termination. It was such a dual set of materials that allowed me to develop a new analysis of therapeutic practice that focuses on relations between therapy sessions and everyday family life from the clients’ point of view. I cannot cover the range of topics from these materials here, but I am in the midst of writing a fuller account in book form (Dreier, in prep.), and Other aspects of the design and materials are

76
presented in Dreier (1998). I also must to omit the therapists’ participation in multiple contexts altogether.

In this chapter I shall focus on aspects of interview materials gathered outside and in between the therapy sessions to illustrate how clients reflect on the meaning of sessions as part of their ongoing everyday life. When talking about the therapy sessions, clients show how the sessions become a part in their everyday pursuit of concerns across contexts. I shall illustrate some of these key points with materials from the first two interviews, carried out approximately 1½ month apart in the beginning of one case as family conflicts gradually came to the fore. It is a working-class family of four: a mother and father, a fifteen-year-old daughter, and a thirteen-year-old daughter. The family was referred to an outpatient child psychiatry unit in Copenhagen because of the younger daughter’s anxiety symptoms, which heavily constricted her life.

I shall focus on what is conventionally assumed to be three main features of therapeutic practice as seen from the clients’ points of view: the role of talk, the therapist, and client conflicts. To this I add a fourth feature, the reinterpretation of sessions in other times and places. I hope to show how clients’ multiple relations with talk, therapists and conflict in multiple settings create different processes of participation and different meaning especially to participating in therapy.

Sessions as Part of Clients’ Social Practice.

a. Session Talk.

A main feature of the practice of sessions is talk. But in the first of the two interviews, the family states they “cannot quite understand how talk may work on anxiety symptoms,” as the mother puts it. In other words, they have no clear notion about the relation between the nature of their daughter’s symptoms (anxiety), and the main activity of sessions (talk). In fact, they state that at home they don’t talk much about these problems. The diverse ways of dealing with problems is further highlighted when the family tells the interviewer that two years ago, when the older daughter was in individual therapy for about a year, they never talked about her therapy at home. They state that a main reason they do not talk about the present problems at home is that if they do try to talk about them, they cannot resolve them. Instead, the situation soon explodes into
Subjectivity and Social Practice

open conflicts they cannot handle. Everybody starts to yell, slam doors, leave, and so on. Another important reason, they say, is that they virtually never set aside a time slot for everybody to talk something over. They aren’t even all gathered at many other times than during meals. Most talk is therefore done more in passing and with different constellations of mostly two members, the mother being the most common figure. Let us for a moment compare with interview materials from the whole course of their therapy. We then find that the "concerted problem talk", which is typical of sessions and which takes place here regularly over a period of time, remains a peculiarity of sessions and makes them stand out as a special experience in contrast to other kinds of talk and other activities at home and in other places. Session talk plays a significant role by being different in particular ways. To them it is a significant experience that has an impact on their everyday practice at home, not by being transferred into it but by virtue of being different and being transformed in their everyday practices.

b. Intimate Strangers.

The second topic concerns therapists: Clients give meaning to their therapists as a part of their everyday lives by emphasizing that taking part in therapy sessions in many ways differs from taking part in their family life. In therapy sessions “there are strangers present,” everybody says. Their therapists remain “strangers” to them in the sense that they “never really come to know them,” even though “they [come to] know all about us,” says the father. In addition to this asymmetry, the clients emphasize a difficulty: “It must be difficult for them to understand our problems,” the mother holds, and “to place themselves in our situation,” the father adds. They state two reasons for this difficulty. One is that they find it hard to explain what goes on in problem situations at home. The other is that the therapists do not know their everyday situation at home. Both these reasons arise because of the gaps between practices in different places: the session where clients and therapists meet and other contexts of the clients’ lives in which their therapists do not take part. On the other hand, the gaps between the contexts and their different constellations of participants are also a relief. “It would be difficult if they weren’t strangers,” the mother contends. If they talk to people they know
about their problems, “they would use it against us,” the older daughter says, “tell it to others,” the younger daughter adds, “believe we were crazy,” the mother says. Therapists are strangers whom the clients believe have not already taken sides in their conflicts, or at least the clients do not yet know where the therapists stand. So first the clients must find out “what sort of baboons they are,” as the father in another case puts it, “what they might be up to”, as the father in this case says, and whether the therapists might come to side more with one member of the family than with others - or even in some respects against others. But the clients also say that they can - and in a sense must - all join in the hope for some sort of more balanced mediation in the session with their therapists, which will allow them to enter a new dialogue with each other. What is more, being “strangers” means that therapists may introduce “new angles” on their problems, which they themselves or the people they know have not already brought up and thought about, as first the mother, then everybody else, emphasizes. They all repeatedly stress that the introduction of these new angles sets them reconsidering and reevaluating their problems, their relations, and their ways of dealing with them in many situations during their everyday lives. In fact, this is a major feature of the transformation - rather than the transfer - involved in the impact of sessions.

c. Client Conflicts in Sessions and Elsewhere.

I now turn to the third topic: How do the clients see the ways they deal with conflicts in therapy sessions as part of their ongoing everyday lives? The mother says about the older daughter’s earlier therapy: “There it is again. It was a stranger who told her. And the psychologist sort of turned her thoughts in the direction that the solution for her simply was to move to another school. And then she told herself that now she wanted to move to another school. We had talked about it for years. But the psychologist could turn it so that now she decided that she had had enough.” So therapists may introduce “new angles,” and they may even bring up old ones. But since they are strangers, clients will “listen” to them, which they would not do if a family member said the same. They “listen more to strangers,” and they “listen more to each other when strangers are there”, they all say. The father in another case says about his wife: “She
listens more to me.” And his wife continues: “He doesn’t just shout at me.” They are better able to unfold a conversation about problems without it ending in explosions or some other sort of communication breakdown. They emphasize that “we sort of pull ourselves together a little,” as the older daughter puts it. She adds: “In sessions we sort of turn things in our heads before we say something. At home we say it point blank.” The others confirm this. She continues: “I believe we have never talked so nicely to our mother and father as when the therapists are present.” Her mother confirms and contradicts her at one and the same time: ”You never become agitated, furious, and crazy” [in sessions]. They all work to make talks in therapy sessions proceed more calmly. The younger daughter says: “... then we all talk, and then it goes better.” While, “when the therapists aren’t there, they keep interrupting me.” In this way conflicts may gradually become articulated, and other members’ perspectives on them and grounds to do what they do may become more apparent. The older daughter adds: “We are more daring about saying something.” The therapists “may defend us a little when the others say something.” Here the family gives us their perspective on how they pursue their everyday conflicts with each other in and through therapy sessions. Conflicts they have at home are gradually introduced and pursued in other ways in the therapy setting. The older daughter says about the younger daughter’s ways of being within sessions compared with at home: “She is totally different when others are present.” And the mother adds that the difference is that “...the children stay quite calm and relaxed.” Note that in both these instances differences are emphasized - or maybe noticed - only in others: the older daughter sees them in the younger, the mother in the children, the children in the parents, and so forth. This fits with everybody’s belief that in order to resolve their problems in the way they each see them and imagine their resolution, it is the others who will have to change. Thus the mother states that she hopes the therapists “can make the children do things which they wouldn’t do if I corrected them.”

d. Reinterpretations of Sessions Elsewhere.

So conflicts do arise in sessions and are pursued in a variety of ways. For instance, in sessions clients attempt to turn the therapists as persons and
their interventions into instruments of their family struggles. But conflicts over sessions, therapists, and interventions are also pursued in between sessions and afterward, at home and in other places where the therapists are not present. Clients do not stop processing session topics when the therapy session is over. A therapy session is no well-bounded thing that a therapist can know all about. At other times and places, clients reinterpret session topics and put them to other kinds of uses than the therapists imagine or ever come to know. Since part of this is conflictual and may end up utilizing therapist suggestions to serve quite opposite ends from those the therapists stand for, clients deal with these differences discreetly and even secretly. Instances of this slip through in glimpses in the interview materials, as we shall see later. There are also many instances of other kinds of continued processes and reinterpretations of therapy session topics in other settings afterward. In fact, our analysis has led us to a fourth topic besides the role of talk, the therapists, and client conflicts, namely, the reinterpretations of, struggles over, and diverse uses of sessions in other times and places outside of sessions. One instance of the reinterpretation and struggle over therapy sessions is closely related to the episode we just described. In the therapy session prior to the latter of the two interviews I quoted from, therapists and clients worked with the younger daughter’s passivity in dealing with her own affairs. The therapists were trying to make it clear that there is a striking pattern by which her mother takes over on her behalf out of care and consideration for her sensitive child and the risks of her daughter’s various impending states of anxiety. In this way the daughter is relieved of any responsibility, and, especially if things do not turn out the way she wants, she sullenly reproaches her mother. In addition, her parents disagree about what would be a suitable degree of co-responsibility for the daughter. At the end of the session, one of the therapists remarks in passing that the daughter seems to be quite sullen.

How did the clients reinterpret this session issue of “responsibility” afterward? That is documented in the interview which took place only a few days later. At this time the family members’ participation in therapy sessions has itself turned into a matter of mutual conflict among them, so that they do not consider the same topic to be the most important one. In the interview the older daughter states what she considers to be the most important topic in the prior therapy session: “I know. It was being cross.
... We couldn’t stand any more that mum and dad were cross. Especially dad.” The mother responds: “It is not funny to be accused of something one is not.” Then she fires back at the children: “If the therapists were not there, the children would get cross if we talked about something problematic. ... As soon as you say a word they do not like, then we are cross.” The older daughter wavers: “What else should one call it?” And the mother continues: “We have to put up with whatever you say and do with a smile. We are not allowed to make any demands on you.” Now the very same person who out of consideration and care would do on her daughter’s behalf what she feared her daughter might not like to do herself starts marking out a polarity: the parents as a “we” against the children as a “you.” She continues to criticize the children for “turning around everything we say.” The older daughter retaliates by critiquing her for shouting and being cross. The mother shouts back: “I am not cross!” Asked whether she has taken any ideas from the session for her future behavior, the mother responds: “... that I too am to intervene more: ‘I won’t talk to you like this any more. Come back when you have calmed down.’ We have always paid too much attention to the children. So maybe it’s time to pay attention to ourselves.” The father sides with her. Here we see that after the session both parents have turned 180 degrees compared with their prior attitude of being considerate and so forth. The older daughter then says that she learned from the previous therapy session “that one should never say that mum is cross.” The younger daughter retreats into saying, “I don’t think we got anything out of the session about being cross. I think we should talk about it once more so that we could get more out of it.” Here it is clear that what each member pays attention to as “getting something out of it” and what they all focus on in their experience of therapy sessions differ according to the stakes they each believe they have and pursue in and through therapy sessions. And, of course, these are in part relations between stakes here and in other settings of their lives.

Now all members of the family in a way agree on a common problem - which, by the way, is not the “anxiety symptoms” for which the daughter was referred to the therapy in the first place – namely, “being cross” as a widespread burden of family life. But they all locate it differently, attributing it to others while holding themselves to be innocent victims of these others. And they do not agree on which means to use to
resolve the problem, nor does their therapy have the same meaning for them. On the contrary, now there is open conflict over the therapy, too. Or, to be more precise, sessions have become a peculiar part in the unfolding of their everyday conflicts. Therapy is a conflictual matter also in the ways in which its meanings and impacts are negotiated and change. Furthermore, they share views that are only a small step away from the mother’s notion about what therapy should be used for: “to teach the others that one can talk about things,” which she considers to be the most important topic in the previous therapy session because “the others could really need that a lot.” She draws the connection between talking about things and the omnipresent “being cross”: “But that is because you won’t discuss.” Now the conflict has been taken to the very level of talk, the main vehicle by which therapy sessions are carried out. The older daughter says sarcastically: “You say all problems can be solved just because the therapists are here, or...” The mother interrupts: “Problems are there to be solved. And I think one does that best by talking about them.” The older daughter responds defensively: “Everything cannot be sheer delight. ... One doesn’t always feel like discussing it, does one.” Her mother retaliates: “I know, but I do.” The daughter again: “Yes, you do. But I won’t.” “No” is the mothers only response; her assured tone of voice implies that she sticks to her commitment to pressure her daughter into participating in talks about their problems. Insisting on talk can certainly be a means of power in mutual conflicts.

**Therapy in Subjects’ Social Practice.**

Let us step back from the details of ongoing interviews and sessions. In this chapter I have focused on the ways in which clients deal with therapy sessions. By doing so, I wanted to show that we need a new understanding of therapy that emphasizes the relationship between sessions and clients’ everyday lives in other places. I argued that clients compose their participation in sessions as a part of their complex social practice in and across contexts. Their experience of therapy, its meaning for them, and the reasons and motives for their participation in it are also a composed part of their complex social practice. In fact, their therapy evolves in a complexly composed way, and it works precisely because it becomes a particular and changing part in clients’ complex social practice.
Subjectivity and Social Practice

cross times and places. Put in more general terms, in developing a new understanding of therapy, we need to focus on the following.

First, it is the changes which family members realize outside therapy sessions that really matter. Here are the primary locations of their problems and their change. These changes which family members realize outside of therapy sessions in the various contexts of their everyday lives are not brought about primarily by means of talk. They primarily rest upon their attending to other aspects of their everyday situations than before, discovering opportunities they had not realized were there, evaluating and utilizing existing opportunities in different ways, bringing about new possibilities and arrangements, and in so doing forging new relations with each other, supporting each other in new ways, launching new activities, some of them in new contexts, and so forth. For some time they may be preoccupied with issues addressed in sessions, but so they are because they consider them relevant for the concerns and problems of the conduct of their lives outside of sessions. In interviews the clients emphasize that new angles introduced in sessions make them reconsider and reevaluate important parts of their everyday lives, but these reconsiderations are occasioned by situations and events of their everyday lives in other contexts. And it does precisely take some reconsiderations to become able to put the new angles to use in the contexts of their everyday lives. In order to make use of them, they first have to find out which other place and meaning the new angles may have in the particular constellation of their present context, and they need to find out how to approach and exert influence upon the occurring everyday situations in reconsidered ways. In so doing, they modify and further transform these new angles. Therefore, the range of changes that are brought about during the course of therapy primarily depend on the nature of their social situations outside of the therapy sessions and on their changing the ways they deal with them. Here new events and opportunities of everyday practice, new scopes of possibilities, new qualities to their mutual relations, new arrangements and new things to talk about may be brought about. In other words, the workings of therapy primarily depend on circumstances and client activities that lie beyond the immediate reach of sessions and therapists.

Second, therapy does not eliminate conflicts among clients and over the ongoing changes. Some conflicts are resolved, some are transformed,
while other new conflicts arise. Indeed, the changing constellation of conflicts alters the agendas and dynamics of therapeutic change. In the case described earlier, the loosening of symptoms and the gradual resolution of some conflicts increasingly make the two daughters engage more and differently outside of the family. They become involved in new activities with new friends, jobs, and new relationships with each other in these contexts. This creates a new conflict for the parents who are left behind to reevaluate and redirect their future perspectives and their life as a couple. It interacts with the parents’ preoccupation with the issue of the reasons they came to pursue a form of care for their children in which they, as they now realize, tied each other down out of love. Both parents call this discovery “terrible.” They are deeply shaken by it, and it sets them reevaluating major dimensions of their past, present, and future family life as parents, husband and wife, and individual subjects.

Third, it would be a mistake to consider only the clients’ practice at home and in sessions. Outside of sessions their practice is also composed of diverse participations in diverse contexts. In fact, their family life has a different weight and meaning in the different complex practices of its individual members. As briefly indicated, the meaning and weight of their family life change for the mother in this case. At first she unquestionably considers it to be the main context in her life and herself to be the person who holds the main responsibility for the qualities of well-being and care in the family; if the family members disagree among themselves, she is the one to decide what is right. Later she realizes that this practice ties her and her children down at home. She begins to search for ways to better combine activities and involvements within and outside home, for herself and others, together and separately, and she thrives on possibilities this new approach opens for her. Her changing modes of participation at work and in the new contexts of her leisure time change the composition of her personal social practice and the subjective meaning of its parts for her. By contrast, the younger daughter triggers their referral to family therapy, but it does not mean much to her, and she cannot really see why. She spends most of her time after school at home in a sullenly passive manner, but it is emerging relations and activities outside of the family (new hobbies and relations in her leisure time and an upcoming one-week trip with her school class) that urge her to change her symptom-ridden life. For her the primary meaning of en-
gaging in these changes is to be able to participate in these other activities with friends of her age, and not to be excluded or ridiculed by them. The family therapy is first of all a means of support to that end. Against this background, it should come as no surprise that not only their family life but also their family therapy has a different meaning and weight to the individual members of the family.

Fourth, their family life plays a different part in their different individual life trajectories. This may already have become clear from what was just mentioned about the mother and the younger daughter. In general terms, the subjects’ individual life trajectories frame the different individual meanings and implications of the current family problems and changes. They frame the different stakes individuals have and stances they adopt on whether their family is to change and, if so, in which directions. Their personal bonds with the family and their feelings of belonging to it differ depending on the position they have reached and the futures they anticipate in their individual life trajectories. Their current family problems and changes, on the other hand, make them face different challenges to reevaluate and change their personal participation in the family life and the composition of their own personal conduct of life and life trajectory. Let me use the two remaining members of the family to illustrate this. The older daughter is caught up in a complex problem situation in a transition period of her life trajectory at the point of leaving public school, starting vocational training, and striking up other kinds of relationships with people of her age. She had been relentlessly harassed and isolated for years and has great trouble presenting and sticking to what she stands for in ways that other young people will recognize. This difficulty spills into her family life when her friends wreck the family's apartment at weekend parties, and the family is threatened by expulsion from their home. The conflict with and between her relations in these two contexts makes her withdraw into isolation in her room at home. She feels let down by her friends, and she feels guilt, but also resentment, toward her parents because they do not recognize her as the “big” person she now considers herself to be; they still regard her as a “small” person who cannot be trusted to handle such things. The problem of being recognized as a “grown-up” is her main concern in relation to the rest of the family. The father wrestles to build a closer relationship with his two daughters with room to unfold mutual recognition and support in spite of
acute trouble. At the same time, he renegotiates the relationship with his wife and their anticipated future when their two daughters will soon leave home. Finally, he attempts to change into stating his mind at work at a time when layoffs loom in the horizon.

Fifth, their individual life trajectories, with different individual stakes in the common family life, also frame their different individual stakes in family therapy and its different meaning to them. Against this background, the family therapy sessions are marked by a particular constellation of participation, a particular dynamic of changes, and particular constellations of problems and possibilities. Phenomena such as these lead to the question: In relation to whom or to what mix of members’ concerns are family therapy interventions primarily grounded and directed and their effects evaluated?

Sixth, as mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter, my analysis calls for a therapy research that differs from what is usually done. I consider the present study a preliminary example. We need further studies of the composition of personal participation in complex social practice across times and places. As a corrective, we especially need to study everyday practice and trajectories outside of sessions and to comprehend the role of therapy sessions as seen from there. By contrast, the dominant tradition of research analyzes therapy viewed within the context of sessions and from the position and standpoint of therapists and researchers. The clients’ own perspectives are neglected, massively reinterpreted, or abstracted from the contexts of their complex everyday social practice, including the place of therapy in it. While therapy is supposedly conducted for the clients’ sake, it is primarily accounted for and researched from the positions and standpoints of the professionals who are hired to conduct and research it. When, in some studies, clients’ perspectives do appear, it is their perspectives on their mental states, their sessions, and their therapists. But they rarely appear as experiencing agents outside of their sessions in and across the various contexts of their everyday lives. When a particular study obtains various sorts of data, it mostly only varies its methods of data gathering, but not the position and standpoint of analysis. And when different sources of data are included, they are mostly about the same issue: What goes on in sessions, and what are their alleged impacts on clients’ subjective state and personal properties? In addition, the professionals combine the data when they
Subjectivity and Social Practice

analyze them. In so doing, analysts may easily come to neglect the connections between that which the data stand for which the clients themselves established in order to conduct their personal social practice in and across its various contexts.

To sum up, therapy is a particular social arrangement. It is a place to go to talk over problems in a peculiar way with an intimate stranger, in a strange kind of intimacy. Which features of sessions stand out as particularly meaningful and significant vary across participants and over time. But they have to do with those things clients find themselves unable to do on their own accord outside sessions, and so point to the decisive role their everyday social situation plays in determining the meaning of attending therapy and the range and significance of therapeutic change. And they depend on the place of their family and of their therapy in their ongoing life trajectories. Clients configure the meaning of therapy within the structure of their ongoing social practice. Clients’ experiences and actions are part of their ongoing complex practice and reach across contexts. This is especially important to notice in a social practice such as therapy, which is directed at promoting change in practice elsewhere and later. In studying client experiences and actions, we must therefore focus on what they can tell us about how changes are brought about or how people may avoid them, as they participate in the interconnected settings of their lives.

Personal Social Practice and Narratives.

In this final section I shall put forward some general analytic comments on a narrative understanding, especially warning against dimensions that may be bypassed or distorted if one focuses too closely on narrative as it is now commonly understood. There are different narrative positions with which my position overlaps and contrasts in various ways. So to keep this discussion from becoming too complicated and technical, I shall focus on what I hold to be common assumptions. Conceptions of narrative characteristically focus on experience and meaning, which they consider in a dimension of time directed toward a future, ordered from an (imagined) end point and in a way that creates coherence. In some positions all experience has a narrative shape while in others narrative is a specific practice of storytelling with particular qualities of accounting
and cultural and aesthetic dimensions. I do not intend to argue in any detail about these assumptions, which are close to my position and have broadened our understanding of illness and healing. Nor do I claim that one may find no narratives in my materials. I primarily argue that we need a conception that covers a wider range of phenomena and dimensions than a narrative position as now commonly understood. The approach I advocate has not settled the question of the place of narrative in a theory of subjects in social practice - just as there is no consensus among narrative theorists over whether narrative is a specific concept that can be integrated in (other) conceptual frameworks or in and of itself a key concept designating a whole approach.

The concept of narrative orders experiences only in a time dimension and downplays the significance of the dimension of space. However, a spatial dimension to the configuration of experience and meaning is necessary in order to be able to anchor experiences in a robust way in social structure. Experiences in the immediate here-and-now are not only related to the past and future. They are always already located in structures of social practice, and their configuration draws upon this embeddedness as a relevant resource. There is more to relate, order, and create direction, robustness, and generality in our actions and experiences than time, cognitive ordering, symbolic structures, and so on. The structure of times and places of ongoing personal social practice constrains and enables the subjective structuration of actions and experiences. It prevents them, so to speak, from falling apart. In order to work, the subjective "plotting" of ongoing personal practice must rely on these structures. Even the shaping of experiences in "therapeutic time" reaches beyond the present space of time into the subject’s life in other places. And what counts as an experience, as well as the meaning of that experience, depend on the particular context in which the subject is presently located.

That everyday life does not take place in one homogenous location but as participation in and through a structure of diverse social contexts underlines the importance of space. It calls us to highlight the diversity of contextual practices along with the social arrangement of these diverse practices. In order to conduct their lives and pursue their concerns in and across these places in a personally sensible way, subjects must develop personal stances that reach across them. The structuration of
personal actions and stances takes place in subjects’ participation in and across the structure of their social practice, and subjective meaning is configured as part of this structuration of personal social practice. Concepts of narrative abstract too much from the concrete diversity of social practice and its contradictions. We need to understand concrete, particular situations in their practical, contextual interrelationships and not subsume them too readily in a narrative. Lived experiences are not interrelated only by means of narratives. They are already interrelated in practical terms in the flow and structuring of participation in and across contexts. There is more to the structuration of meaning than the shaping of a coherent narrative.

How central, then, is narrative to the practice of psychotherapy, and what do we gain by adopting it as a key term? Many believe narrative to be central to psychotherapy, especially in light of the crucial role of talk. Still, in a narrow sense of the term, "storied accounts" are not prominent features in the sessions and interviews in the study of family therapy I referred to. These sessions and interviews are mostly structured in question-and-answer sequences. Some would argue that such sequences are part of narratives under construction, which, of course, they might be. Still, in general terms, I doubt that. Sessions may be used to tell and construct stories, but that is not the most important aspect of what takes place in them. And when stories occur, other things frame and drive them than the construal and telling of a story. Indeed, their performative significance is often, say, the situating of a problem or the arguing against an opponent. In this sense, stories rather seem to be means to an end - for example, the pursuit of interests in conflicting relationships - than an end in themselves. In these conflicting relationships other people already are necessary parts in the negotiation of stories, because they are characters in the stories. Yet, not only in individual therapies, these "others" include absent others who are not present in the session but are encountered in other times and places. Again we see that narratives reach beyond the present space of time into the structures of personal social practices. And the intersubjective dimension to narrating reminds us that the subjects involved may never reach a consensus on "the story." In my materials there seems to be no end to the divergences of their perspectives. It is, rather, their conflicting stances that fuel the process of therapy and the change of personal perspectives. Particular differences
change, but differences remain. What is more, these changes seem not so much to be driven by trying to reach a common story as by challenging the conflicts, ambiguities, and indeterminacies of present points of view, by moving along the lines of the problematic, confused, and contested toward an uncovering of alternative possibilities of handling problematic aspects of personal social practices. The belief that we arrive at "a story" may rather result from the therapists’ and researchers’ need to interpret what the clients tell them and mistaking their interpretation for "the client’s story."

If we did analyze the practice of psychotherapy with the concept of narrative as now commonly understood, what might we risk loosing sight of? Of course, some topics might be included in our analysis just because we find certain phenomena interesting, without their having anything to do with using a concept of narrative. So to be a little more precise, the question I raise here concerns which topics the concept of narrative does or does not point us toward? Like any other theoretical concept, the role of the concept of narrative is primarily to direct our analytic attention toward some particular features and relations rather than other features and relations. The features and relations of therapeutic practice I shall now briefly mention seem relevant for an analysis of subjective experience and action in relation to psychotherapy, but they seem to be external to the common understanding of narrating.

First, the concept of narrative seems strangely free-floating. It would not make us ask what particular social arrangement for "narrating" psychotherapy really is, and which particular “culture” of narrating might have developed in this arrangement. Psychotherapy would be analyzed just like any other case of narrating. It would not be of theoretical significance for the analysis of psychotherapeutic narratives that psychotherapy is conducted in a particular place with a particular kind of intimate strangers and confidentiality. The concept of narrative does not itself consider the practice of narrating to be a situated practice with particular situated concerns, pursuits, and stakes for the narrator(s). That would, instead, have to be introduced as something external to the very practice of narrating. Even though narrative theory may emphasize the question of the perspective of the narrator, that perspective seems strangely unlocated. The same holds for the question: What particular situated, more or less clearly delimited public does the narrating create,
or what particular public constitutes the frame within which people find reasons to narrate in one way rather than another? There certainly might be quite substantial differences between the narratives produced in different kinds of publics with different meanings for the narrating persons.

The strangely unsituated character of the conception of narrative would easily make us overlook the fact that, as I stated earlier, clients have multiple relations with talk in multiple settings, that is, a quite peculiar one in sessions. In fact, the clients I quoted emphasized that they never before talked to each other the way they did in the sessions, and they do not do so in other places. They have quite different grounds for talking and pursue talk and their concerns in quite different ways. What I called "concerted problem talk" remains a peculiarity of their sessions. Even if they were to talk at length and intimately to somebody else about (the problems of) their lives, it seems doubtful to me whether, say, a friend or a lover would hear the same story. Only a concept of situated practice, including situated talking, would make us aware of the relevance of posing the analytic question of how talk or narrating here is related to talk and narrating in other settings.

We would, therefore, also easily lose sight of the fact that psychotherapy works precisely by virtue of being something different from what normally happens at home, in school, at work, and so forth. It stands out as a particular experience because it is different and hence may contribute something different. Clients even do something different with these peculiar experiences from sessions when they get home and in other optional future situations.

This leads us to ask how one can understand the practice of narrating across contexts? How does situated narrating relate practices across places. How do subjects relate their local practices of narrating and acting? What kind of interrelationships do they establish between them? How do subjects configure their narratives so that they may be of help in the pursuit of their concerns from other places in the sessions and, at the same time, in their pursuit of future concerns in other places by means of the narrating in the sessions? And how do professionals find a way to be helpful in all these pursuits across contexts of which they take part in only one?

All boils down to coming to understand the place and role of narrating in personal life trajectories in complex social practices. In fact, the
concept of life trajectory is itself an attempt to reconceptualize our common concepts of personality, self, identity, and life history in a way that differs from a narrative approach and builds on the recognition of the social structure of practice and of the social arrangement of people’s personal conduct of life in and across a set of diverse social contexts. It takes up the challenge to reflect in theoretical terms the sociohistorical changes and challenges to being a person in complex structures of social practice.

References


Dreier, Ole. In prep. Trajectories of participation in social practice: Subjects in psychotherapy and beyond.


Subjectivity and Social Practice


5. Personal Trajectories of Participation across Contexts of Social Practice

Summary: In discussions about basic theoretical approaches in a non-Cartesian psychology several candidates for a key concept were proposed, such as action, activity, relation, dialogue and discourse. None of these concepts, however, sufficiently ground psychological theories of individual subjectivity in social practice. To accomplish this we need to conceptualize subjects as participants in structures of ongoing social practice. In this paper I argue why and address issues of subjectivity as encountered by persons in their participation in complex structures of social practice. I introduce the concepts of personal conduct of life and life-trajectory as elaborations of my theory. And I discuss this theoretical approach and show what is at stake in developing it by comparing it to similar approaches in the current literature on the person, self, and identity.

1. Personal participation in structures of social practice

This paper has a dual background in my prior work. On the one hand, my prior theoretical work on the concepts of “subject” and “personality” led me to argue that theories of individual subjectivity must be developed on the basis of a conception of persons as participants in social practice (Dreier, 1993, 1994). On the other hand, concrete studies of participants in social practice - such as of clients’ lives in and across the contexts of their family, work, school, psychotherapy sessions, etc. - made me realize how significant it is to ground a theory of the person on a conception of personal participation in structures of social practice (Dreier, 1996, 1998, in press). The primary aim of the present paper is to elaborate such a theory of the person. ⁴ I shall begin by summarizing four crucial arguments why we should adopt “participation” as a key concept.

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1. This is an extended version of a paper delivered at the biannual conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology in Berlin 1997 as part of a Danish session (Dreier, 1999b; Forchhammer 1999; Højholt, 1999, Nissen, 1999). Frustration over the restrictions on
Subjectivity and Social Practice

First, to adopt “participation” as a key concept in a theory of the person means to conceptualize subjects as always already involved in social practice. If we acknowledge that individual subjectivity is based on the potentiality to realize action possibilities (Holzkamp, 1983), we must also admit that subjects encounter and realize these possibilities as aspects of social contexts of action in which they take part albeit perhaps in restricted, problematic and indirect ways. In fact, most human activity is only meaningful because it presupposes a common social practice of which it is a part and of which we have a more or less common understanding (Taylor, 1995a). This participatory dimension of subjects’ activities is crucial to the quality of their relationships, their understandings, orientations, feelings and thoughts, and it is crucial for subjects to recognize and pursue this communality. In order to direct their activities subjects must, therefore, think beyond themselves from where they stand into the structures of social practice of which they are a part. And in order to understand subjects’ actions, thoughts, and emotions we must study the ways in which they take part in social practice.

Second, the concept of participation theorizes individual subjects as always situated in local contexts of social practice and involved from there in primarily practical relations with social structures of practice. It urges us to consider subjects as particular parts of a social practice and to come to understand them by asking what it is they are a part of and how they take part in it rather than to theorize them as free-floating agents located nowhere in particular or above ongoing social practice in some ideational mediation with the community, the culture, or the society. This is the main difference between adopting participation as a key concept in a theory of the person instead of even closely related concepts such as action, activity, relation, dialogue, or discourse. It is not a crucial feature of these concepts to understand of which particular local social practice the persons are a part. The concrete location of individual subjects in social practice remains strangely implicit or ambiguous. While human action, activity, relation, dialogue, and discourse really are part of a particular local social practice, these concepts do not ground our comprehension of subjects in the social context in which they obviously are

presenting elaborate theoretical arguments even at a congress for theoretical psychology made me write it.
located and theorize them from there. Taken by themselves these concepts rather grasp the local practice they actually study as a free-floating interchange between people or with an environment.

Third, all individual participation is a partial and particular aspect of a social practice. To adopt the concept of participation as a key concept in a theory of the person means to comprehend individual action and psychological processes as partial phenomena in relation to a social practice. Individual participants have but a partial grip and influence on a social practice and a particular ability and knowledge about it. No individual subject is an omnipotent agent or covers it all. Individual subjectivity is a partial personal aspect of a social practice. But individual participants also play different parts in a social practice, often from different positions and with different scopes of possibilities, concerns, and obligations. So individual participants are also particular ones, i.e. diverse and not uniform members. They configure their participation in social practice in a particular and partial personal way. Individual subjects orient themselves and develop their particular abilities and qualities by being particular parts of social practices.

Fourth, the fundamental human duality between acting within the existing limits of a social practice and extending its scope of possibilities (Holzkamp, 1983) is grounded in a similar duality of modes of participation, i.e. of participating in the reproduction of the current state of affairs or of contributing to change it so that participants may extend their degree of disposal over the social practice. By the same token being critical of a social practice, at least implicitly, involves an appeal to coparticipants to ally in changing it according to the critique or leave it to join or found other practices. A critic does not stand outside all social practice, but participates in a particular way. Even an isolated critic fighting alone is not located outside social practice, but in particular relations of isolation and powerlessness in a given social practice.

When we comprehend subjects through their participation in social practice, we neither consider them to be well-bounded, autonomous units nor diffuse them into relations (Gergen, 1995, 1996) or dialogue “between people” (Shotter, 1996, p. 5) or positions in discourses. While we maintain that relations and dialogues are grounded both in their participating subjects and in the social practice in which they take place, we also see individual subjectivity and social practice as related by grasping
Subjectivity and Social Practice

the variety of psychological phenomena as personal aspects of the structures of social practice of which these persons are a part. Like the concepts of action, activity, relation, dialogue, and discourse this conception proposes what Harré (1998), using a Wittgensteinian terminology, calls a grammar of active powers as opposed to a grammar of (inert) substances and their qualities. But unlike most psychological theories which conceptualize human action by means of purely or primarily individual properties, it argues that human actions and their psychological aspects must be grasped as particular parts of social practices (cf. Schatzki, 1997).

2. Social structures of practice

One reason why theories about the person did not conceptualize subjects as participants in local contexts of action is that by and large social theory also played down the concrete locatedness of social practice and favored other approaches to the structure of social practice.

Especially under the influence of nationalist ideas (social theorists) developed notions of societies as singular, bounded, and internally integrated, and as realms in which people were more or less the same. On this basis, a great deal of modern social theory came to incorporate prereflectively the notion that human beings naturally inhabit only a single world or culture at a time. (Calhoun, 1995, p. 44)

If this really were so, society would be some sort of container that holds and influences all members in the same way, the relationship between individuals and social structure would be uniform, all members would be basically uniform individuals, and the social structure or the culture would be uniformly present everywhere in individuals’ lives.

But social practice is not homogenous. It consists of diverse, located contextual practices which are linked in a social structure. To capture this, we need a theory about the social structure of practice as a set of interrelated and diverse, local social contexts of action.
To consider the spatialization of life is to fill out the context(s) of social formation - our daily and institutional practices, in all their situatedness. (Liggett & Perry, 1995, p. 3)

My main purpose in this paper is not to elaborate a theory about the structure of social practice with its diverse and interrelated social contexts, but to unfold a theory about the person. Therefore, I shall only point to some crucial features which we will need to unfold a theory of the person. Obviously, particular local contexts - homes, workplaces, etc. - may be institutionalized in various ways, and they are often structured for particular primary purposes and concerns and marked by particular power relations of unequal scopes of personal participation. In relation to a particular social context we may focus on the practical interrelatedness of participants’ actions in some particular constellation of actions which reproduces or changes the common context in a particular way. And we may consider how some constellations of action reach beyond the present social context and obtain influence on the practice of other social contexts as well.

Since social contexts are particular parts of the structure of social practice, no context can be understood by itself though contextual practices are mostly studied in this way: one at a time, in isolation, as if the context were an island. A social context can only be understood through its interrelationships - connections as well as separations - with other contexts in the structure of social practice. Social contexts depend on each other in particular ways for their reproduction and change. And they refer to each other, sometimes in problematic ways. Educational contexts, for instance, refer to other social contexts for which they supposedly educate particular modes of participation, and they give directives about what should count as a qualified mode of participation in those other places.

For a social practice to be reproduced or changed it must be so arranged that subjects realize some of these interrelationships and come to be able to use them. And when individual subjects configure their participation in these contexts and and direct their trajectories across them, they must take the structuring of social practice into particular contexts into account. They must also rely on the existence of intercontextual structures to achieve many of the ends they pursue. The concrete mean-
Subjectivity and Social Practice

ing of a particular context for them in many ways depends on its interrelationships with other contexts in the structure of social practice and in the structure of their own personal social practice.

A theory about structurally interrelated social contexts makes us consider in which particular ways particular contexts are involved in the structure of social practice and in which particular ways subjects encounter and address particular aspects of this structure through their participation in particular contexts. It makes us focus on the structuring of social conditions as contextual arrangements for participants’ social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Social contexts are arranged for particular social practices and particular modes of participation. Particular groups of participants have access to them or are excluded from them in particular ways. And social contexts may be arranged for particular trajectories of participation in them and through them, e.g. by virtue of an internal structure of divisions and stations or an array of social contexts for the unfolding of personal life-trajectories with transitions and changing constellations of personal social practice and configurations of personal significance.

Compared to earlier historical times, present social practices are less confined to particular places and limited areas. Places and practices are more interlinked. People - not only information - move around in them and through them. This historical shift is mostly celebrated as an abstraction from place and interpreted as the negation of being bound to a place (e.g. Giddens, 1991). But what we actually see are interlinked local contextual practices partaking in more comprehensive practices and people moving around in them and across them creating direct and indirect links between these practices for themselves and others. To think about this as a uniform relationship between local practice and the overall structure is not accurate. Local practices are related to the overall structure in varying ways depending on which comprehensive influences make a difference in them and on the particular comprehensive reach from them.

Numerous social theorists go along with the abstraction from place which Giddens holds to be characteristic of modernity (1991, p. 146). They confuse being situated with being situation-bound and argue for the rise of a “disembedding” from place which they conceptualize like the well-known notion of abstraction as a detachment from any particular
place into an ideational nowhere. In so doing they lose sight of the fact that individual subjects always act in a situated, embodied way from definite time-space locations as participants in local social contexts - even when their actions reach across translocal or global, definite or indefinite time-space distances. Whatever we may think of the process of globalization which overwhelms many of these authors, and regardless of how much some subjects travel around the globe, it does not follow that subjects’ personal social practice really is global. On the contrary, it keeps on being situated in and across particular locations, i.e. translocal, no matter how scattered the particular locations are in which subjects take part.

On the whole social theorists do not conceptualize boundaries and diversities in the structure of social practice in primarily practical terms. They see them as primarily functional distinctions, based on the division of labor, institutions, etc.. When they analyze the personal significance of participating in a particular context, they, therefore, subsume it to the societal function which they presume that the particular context fulfills. Even a theorist of social practice such as Bourdieu categorizes and defines social fields (art, economy, power, etc.) according to the different functions they are assumed to serve as units in a division of labor (e.g. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Thereby he subsumes the significance of the socio-spatial arrangement of social practice and of members’ participation in it to a secondary and derivative status. Some theorists try to get away from a kind of social theory which is dominated by a notion about an overall socio-structural determination. One example is Strauss (1993) who tries to achieve this by introducing a concept of social world. Yet he does not define social worlds as an interrelated set of places for participating in the structure of social practice, but merely as groups of people with shared commitments to certain activities, shared resources and ideologies. Social worlds have no places in the world, it seems. It doesn’t matter where these social worlds of groups and their interactions are located and which particular relations they have to the structure of social practice. Other theorists conceptualize social practice as a duality between an overall system and an everyday lifeworld (e.g. Habermas, 1987; Holzkamp, 1983) with matching bipolar modes of practice and understanding (Kleinman, 1995). But “the everyday” is certainly no longer, if it ever was, one homogenous world in which immovable per-
Subjectivity and Social Practice

sons are located. Such an abstraction prevents us from unfolding a differentiated theory about the structures of personal social practices in and across diverse social contexts.

In and around psychology notions about context are becoming more widespread. But they are not clearly directed at conceptualizing the structure of social practice and subjects’ situated participation in it. Instead the concept of context functions as a placeholder for the lack of a systematic grasp on the relationship between persons and structures of social practice. For instance Markus & Herzog characterize “the relation between the individual and the social world” by stating:

Each person is embedded within a variety of sociocultural contexts or cultures (e.g., country or region of origin, ethnicity, religion, gender, family, birth cohort, profession). (Markus & Herzog, 1995, p. 39)

They simply list a number of diverse phenomena which are not integrated into a systematic theoretical understanding of social practice. The list rather continues the tradition of homogenizing all sorts of social diversities which we recognize from the way role theorists shuffle all sorts of differences into roles or the psychology of variables mounts all sorts of arbitrary variables. Another example is Burkitt who criticizes social constructionists of the Wittgensteinian branch (of whom he mentions Harré and Shotter) because

... their theories tend to stop short of a study of the contexts of linguistic practice and remain firmly within the bonds of conversation. ... (T)hey have not yet been able adequately to theorize the practical contexts in which language and conversation may be enveloped and developed. In contrast, what I am suggesting here is that because there is something beyond the text, a social context in which language and texts play their part, then these are equally important in the way that selves are formed and also conceptualized (Mead, 1934). People are located not just in texts but also in social relations and practices: the elemental forms of ‘context’. (Burkitt, 1994, p. 15)

Burkitt ends up abstracting social context from its local materiality and dissolving it into social relations instead of taking the study of language into local social practices as Hanks (1990, 1996) does.
3. A complex subjectivity in a complex social practice

In the first section we argued why we must conceptualize individual subjects as participants in a local social context with particular positions, social relationships, scopes of possibilities and personal concerns for them. The second section shows why we need to complement this notion in one important respect: In the social structures of modern societies subjects take part in more than one social context of action. They participate for longer or shorter stretches of time, on a regular or one-time basis and for various reasons in a diverse set of social contexts. In the conduct of their lives they move across these contexts. Personal social practice is translocal. Hence we must recombine categories of psychology and social theory so as to conceptualize subjects as participants in structures of social practice. A theory about subjects in social practice must conceptualize how subjects become able to manage to take part in heterogeneous social contexts. It must include subjects’ changing personal modes of participation and diverse potentialities. It must replace notions about an abstract, individual agency with a contextual understanding of their personal modes of participation and potentialities. And it must consider a complex and varied personal social practice to be enriching and not only a burden, in contrast to traditional theories of the subject which, if they do at all acknowledge multiple personal participations, implicitly assume that it is a burden for subjects not to live a simple life in one homogeneous world (Dreier, 1993).

As subjects move across contexts their modes of participation vary because these diverse contexts embody particular positions, social relationships, scopes of possibilities, and personal concerns for them. Hence they must act, think, and feel in flexible ways. Their conduct can be no mere execution of schemata, procedures and rules. Subjects rather need to interpret and locate standards and rules in order to include them in concrete situated action (Taylor, 1995b), and a subject’s behavior often gets its meaning by intentionally differing from such standards. This presupposes that subjects are basically able to relate to their social circumstances and discourses in various ways, to exert influence upon them, to be critical of them, to contribute to their change, etc. (Holzkamp, 1983). And it calls on us to theorize subjects’ changing modes of participation and diverse potentialities. Theories of personality mostly operate with
notions about a fixed internal structure of traits, goals, life plans, needs, or the like while we need to conceptualize complexly changing subjective structures in structures of social practice. Most personality theorists also insist that individual integration or coherence is the basic hallmark and achievement of personality, selfhood, and identity. But they do not convincingly ground the practical necessity, possibility and reasons for this basic need and achievement (Dreier, 1993). They rather stipulate it. Certainly subjects need to relate their various practices and concerns for primarily practical personal reasons, but that does not necessarily entail that they reach a complete personal integration or coherence. Such a stipulation underestimates the complexity of personal social practice and the robustness of those social diversities which give subjects good reasons to participate in diverse ways and lead multidimensional lives. It can, therefore, come as no surprise that such a state seems easier to imagine in others whom we admire, blame, or don’t know too well and harder to recognize in ourselves.

In their present context subjects participate in a particular way compared to their modes of participation in other contexts. This is because that of which they are now a part and their position and personal scope of participation are different. Their concerns also often differ from the ones they direct at other contexts. In fact, some concerns they usually pursue in particular places and not (at all or in the same way) in other places. To participate fully in the present context also presupposes suitable abilities for its particular social practice and knowledge about its organization into social positions, modes of access and exclusion, distribution of authority and tasks, arrangement of normal procedures, as well as about concerns of other participants to be taken into account.

But the particular way subjects configure their participation in the present context does not depend on that context alone. Since social contexts are interrelated in the structure of social practice and since subjects conduct their lives by taking part in several contexts, these interrelations and subjects’ concerns in other contexts matter to them. Their reasons to participate in a particular way in the present context are also related in various ways to their concerns in other parts of their lives in other contexts. Their local modes of participation are thus not only grounded in the immediate context. Subjects may even do what they do in the present context in order to achieve certain ends or changes in another context.
Often subjects have something on their mind in the present context which they need to pursue and want to pursue across contexts. Many concerns can only be realized by being pursued across contexts, utilizing possibilities which cut across and bridge contextual boundaries of time and place. Still, while subjects pursue these concerns across contexts, their modes of pursuing them change because their contextual scopes of participation change and/or because other features of these concerns matter more to them in other contexts.

When subjects address comprehensive concerns and issues from a particular context, their involvement is not complete and all-covering. It is a particular and partial one. After all, comprehensive issues do not have the same impact in diverse contexts, and these contexts are not implicated in the comprehensive issues in the same way. In locating and configuring their involvement in comprehensive issues subjects, therefore, need to consider the particular reach of their involvement if they address the issue from the present context as compared to from other optional contexts, and they need to consider that others may be addressing similar concerns and issues from other contexts, in common, different or contrary ways.

When subjects move from one context into another, their structure of personal relevance changes. Which particular structure of social conditions matters for them depends on their present location. Strauss (1993, p. 42) suggests that we construct a conditional matrix to depict the whole structure of social conditions for, say, a particular person from the narrower, more directly impacting conditions to the broader, more indirect ones. But, I would argue, that structure only remains the same as long as the subject stays on a fixed location. As soon as the subject moves into other contexts, the matrix would have to be redrawn. The idea of a fixed matrix of structural conditions presupposes an immovable subject or an homogenous world. Likewise, which social relations would be direct and which indirect ones (Calhoun, 1995) shifts as the subject moves into other places. Social relations can only be direct in relation to a particular place, and they can only be indirect because they cut across places from a particular place.

Comprehensive social diversities, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity, are encountered in different ways and have different meanings in different contexts. Their features appear and are addressed in varying
constellations alongside varying other dimensions of meaning in different contexts. Co-variations of these features challenge and guide subjects to grasp how they are interrelated in complex configurations of racial, class, gender, and ethnic issues. It is relevant for subjects to grasp this complexity in finding out how to address these complex issues in particular contexts and how to achieve impacts on them in other times and places.

A contextual practice includes several participants on diverse positions with diverse perspectives on it. Their personal perspectives also differ because this context is a different part in their overall personal social practices, and because they pursue different concerns in it. Participation in social practice, of course, involves processes of understanding, orientation and coordination between co-participants in a particular social context and between co-travelers across them. The understanding between participants and the interpersonal dimension of personal understandings draw upon the basic possibility of understanding others by putting oneself in somebody else’s place, that is, by transposing one’s perspective onto their location and position. What is more, contextual practices and particular participants’ positions in them become contested because they are riveted by various social conflicts and contradictions. The diverse perspectives and conflicts may both complicate understandings and propel a better and richer personal understanding of the context and of individual participants’ part in them.

All this in no way eliminates the need for the personal “dialogues with oneself” which we call reflection. In fact, dialogues between people in many ways feed personal dialogues and vice versa. For a variety of reasons the complexity of personal social practice calls for varied, complex and multidimensional personal reflections. Persons’ multiple participations and concerns call on them to address the interrelationships between them. They must relate, weigh, balance off, and contrast their diverse participations and concerns in their complex personal social practice. And they must reconsider and reconfigure them as they move from one context into another. Because their participations and concerns are interrelated, this involves complex probings of realities and self-understandings.

Such personal reflections unfold by relating diverse experiences from diverse participations in diverse times and places. Our personal ex-
Psychotherapy in Clients’ Trajectories across Contexts

periences and our reflections upon them are part of a multifaceted personal social practice. Indeed, the very multiplicity of participations in diverse contexts allows us to reflect on their commonalties and contrasts, and these reflections on commonalties and contrasts enable us to reach broader and richer understandings of the complex interrelationships in social practice and in our personal social practice. In other words, it is not primarily experiences from within one context, but particularly the varied and diverse experiences from diverse contexts that fuel our personal reflections. Being a full participant in one context, in fact, easily makes us overgeneralize our understanding from that context onto other contexts. After all, contextual practices are diverse, they rest on diverse premises, and we pursue diverse concerns in them. Being a full member of one particular practice makes us understand that practice, our own concerns, and other practices from our position in that context. We then easily forget what it involves and what it feels like to take part in other contexts of a different kind. This peculiarity of being a full participant in one particular context in a social structure of heterogeneous practices indicates that it is significant for our understandings and reflections that we take part in several, diverse contexts and that comparisons across these contexts play a significant role in our reflections.

Often there is also a kind of “core blindness” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) associated with (mainly) being a full participant in a particular context so that we easily take for granted and no longer see particular key premises and functionalities of that social practice. We may break with this core blindness by participating in other, contrasting contextual practices and by contrasting and comparing experiences from these diverse positions. In some sense the concept of core blindness plays a similar role in a contextual theory of social practice as the concept of habitus does in Bourdieu’s theory of social practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). One important difference is that in a contextual theory of social practice the cross-contextual diversity of personal social practice allows persons a leeway of reflection and change in relation to their core blindesses which remains ambiguous and doubtful in Bourdieu’s overarching culturalist notion of habitus, and that there are several, distinct and interrelated, core blindesses in the social practice of the same person and in a given society.
Subjectivity and Social Practice

We cannot complete our personal reflection once and for all, nor relegate it to a particular - secluded - place. The heterogeneous, changing, and interrelated qualities of personal social practice makes persons reflect in different times and places triggered by the complexities and variations of their personal social practice. These personal reflections are a part of our personal life-trajectories (see section 4 below). They are intimately and variously related to our orientation and realization of our participations in structures of social practice. In the course of our trajectory of participation we re-flect, i.e. re-consider, re-evaluate, and re-configure our participations and concerns in the changing composition of our personal social practice in and across varying constellations of social contexts. We also re-flect and re-configure our primary concerns in relation to those of others in hitherto un-re-cognized ways. Phenomena and events are re-cognized on the basis of changing premises so that other aspects of meaning and other possibilities and interrelationships are foregrounded.

Dialogues between people and with ourselves may be related in problematic ways, but basically spur each other on. There is a common feature to both of them on which they both rest and thrive: They both work by contrasting and comparing transposed perspectives though this is often not recognized in theories about internal dialogues. In both we see and compare things from different locations in personal social practice(s). In this sense Calhoun points to Bakhtin’s understanding of the modern novel as

... a reflection of a human capacity to carry on an interior dialogue, indeed the constitution of the human being through this dialogicality. (Calhoun, 1995, p. 50; see also Holzkamp, 1995 and Leudar, Thomas, McNally & Glinski, 1997).

Our approach to reflection takes it back into complex personal social practice in life-trajectories and allows us to conceive of personal and interpersonal reflection and dialogue along similar lines. In neither case is reflection a distancing from the world, but seeing things from the perspectives of different locations and positions, be it my own perspectives in other contexts or others’ perspectives in our common or other contexts. In contrast to this understanding of reflection, its classical root metaphor draws on the separation between manual and mental labor, on
thinkers excluding themselves - in barrels if need be. It assumes that ‘gnostic distance’ (Holzkamp, 1983) is the condition of possibility for reflection. In our analysis to be at a distance rather means to be somewhere else, not outside of everything in the privileged nowhere of pure thought – a notion which would blind us to the social qualities of knowledge and its part in social practice. Diversity of practices and perspectives replaces distance as the key condition of possibility for reflection. The interrelatedness of practical diversities allows us a notion of reflection which unfolds on an horizontal axis, so to speak, and not on a vertical metaphor of a higher level lifting itself off the ground of practice. The second order volitions, assumed by a split level theory of the self (Frankfurt, 1971), do not constitute a fixed level in a stable hierarchy, but a complex and shifting constellation of contrasting and comparing which may lead to generalizations based on perspectives from local participations.

I have argued that we need to theorize how subjects compose and structure their complex personal social practices in the structures of their ongoing social practice with its relations to specific others, specific commitments, specific places, specific organizations of rhythms of activity, etc.. In order to accomplish this, subjects must develop and adopt personal stances on what they take part in, do, and want. They must find premises of action which reach across and relate their participations in different times and places. They must make up their minds so as not to trip themselves and each other up in their diverse participations and concerns and, thus, get stuck or prevent the achievement of other important ends. Such stances may, of course, be more or less clarified or confused and more or less ad hoc or long-term. To adopt stances also means to take sides in the conflicts and contradictions of social practice.

The development of the frame of analysis I present in this paper led me to distinguish between personal locations, positions, and stances (Dreier, 1993, 1994). By location I mean the particular place in the world where a subject presently is in a particular context and from where the personal perspective reaches into the world. It marks the concrete situatedness of personal practice. By position I mean the particular social position which a subject occupies in the present social context. Evidently, both location and position change when the subject moves into other contexts. If we only operate with concepts about locations and positions, however, we loose our theoretical grounds to address issues about how
subjectivity and social practice

subjects relate to these locations and positions, weigh and balance them off, make up their minds and take sides in issues concerning them, affirm and critique them, and contribute to reproduce and change them. We are left with an impersonal and deterministic notion of subjects in social practice. To allow us to reflect these personal aspects in theoretical terms we need a third concept of personal stances. By stances I mean the standpoints a subject comes to adopt on its complex personal social practice, on that of which it is a part, and on its participations in it.

This concept of personal stances is not tied to a particular, homogeneous practice out of which a particular set of perspectives are generalized into particular personal standpoints. On the contrary, it is grounded in the complex, heterogeneous, and contradictory character of personal social practice. Stances are elaborated by contrasting and comparing understandings and orientations from diverse local participations and concerns. These understandings and orientations are re-lected, re-considered, and re-combined. In this way particular understandings are generalized which orient the person’s participation in its complex personal social practice in and across diverse social contexts. Stances are grounded in the person’s complex and diverse participations, and directed at orienting the person’s participations in and across - more or less comprehensive reaches of - social contexts. Stances do not (primarily) rest on some - imported - pre-given higher grounds. Making up one’s mind and taking a stance rather occurs by relating and comparing on a shifting set of premises taken from the very same components which are thus related and compared. The generalizing of stances is composed, and the relating and comparing of contrasts play a key role in their identification.

Stances develop and sustain an orientation for subjects in the structures of their complex, ongoing, personal social practice. This concept emphasizes the practical anchoring and consequences of personal reflection. Stances are first of all necessary precisely because of the complexly heterogeneous character of social practice and of persons’ participations in it. They rest on and guide a person’s multiple involvements in multiple practices with crosscutting concerns and issues of an often conflicting and contested nature. The development of personal stances, therefore, draws on the existing interrelationships between social contexts in the structure of social practice. As we pointed out in section 2, particular contexts depend on each other and refer to each other in the structure of
social practice. Subjects need to consider these dependencies and refer-
ences when they configure their personal modes of participation in and
across them and when they unfold their selective personal realizations of
contextual participations. They have to make up their minds on how to
take part in these interrelated social contexts and relate their participa-
tions in them. In so doing they may become critical of particular ways to
relate these practices, and turn into critical members of or withdraw from
some of these contexts. Still it is not possible to integrate all diversities
of social practice and supersede them into a personal standpoint. The di-
versities persist in the structure of social practice, and it may be impor-
tant and necessary for the person to take account of and sustain diverse
qualities in its personal social practice. The person may have to balance
them off in ways that bracket one or the other pole of such diversities.
But often it is, indeed, the very existence of contrasts which gives each
of the poles their particular personal significance and qualities to be sus-
tained.

In diverse social contexts personal stances are pursued by means of
different modes of participation. They too are no generalized schemata to
be executed rigidly in an identical way, but in ways fitted to the contexts
in which the person is presently located, to its relations to other relevant
contexts, and to the modes of participation of other co-participants. Thus,
stances guide persons in their transitions between diverse contexts so
that they may reorient themselves and redirect their activities according
to their concerns in the present context, but also so as to keep on pursu-
ing particular concerns and stances across contexts. Stances guide sub-
jects to act flexibly without turning into chameleons.

Let me round off this section by pointing out that my argument con-
cerning the concept of personal stances or standpoints is similar to Cal-
houn’s critique of Dorothy Smith’s feminist standpoint theory (e.g.
Smith, 1987) when he states:

The core idea of standpoint theory is that a determinate social structural position
will create conditions for learning from experience that will be epistemologi-
cally privileged in producing certain sorts of knowledge. ... On the one hand, the
idea of standpoint is rooted in the notion of concrete experiencing subjects. On
the other hand, the idea of standpoint employs a categorial logic to analyze po-
positions in social structure. (Calhoun, 1995, p. 171)
Subjectivity and Social Practice

Calhoun points out that categories of observation and reasoning are thus abstracted from social structure and women’s experiences essentialized, and he continues by quoting Harding:

Some thinkers have assumed that standpoint theories and other kinds of justifications of feminist knowledge claims must be grounded in women’s experiences. The terms ‘women’s standpoint’ and women’s perspective’ are often used interchangeably, and ‘women’s perspective’ suggests the actual perspective of actual women - what they can in fact see. ... For a position to count as a standpoint, rather than as a claim ... we must insist on an objective location - women’s lives - as the place from which feminist research should begin. (Harding, 1991, p. 123, quoted in Calhoun, 1995, p. 172)

Note that, according to Smith, standpoints are grounded in actual subjects, i.e. in located experiences, and that experiences are recognized to differ according to the socio-structural position which a subject occupies. But experiences seem to turn into standpoints already by virtue of the subject’s occupation of a particular social position. It is as if a standpoint simply follows from occupying that particular socio-structural position and, thus, from being a member of a particular socio-structural category/population. The combination of experience and position seems to determine a standpoint. So Smith does not distinguish sufficiently between position and standpoint. This shows us what is at stake in distinguishing between them. If we do not draw that distinction, all persons who share a particular position, i.e. who are members of a particular social category of persons, are believed to adopt a particular common standpoint on social practice and their participation in it. But certainly diverse standpoints can be drawn from similar positions, among other things because everybody occupy multiple, diverse, interrelated and intersecting positions in the course of their personal social practice in the structures of social practice. The important issue of how persons come to terms with interrelated and intersecting diversities by elaborating particular stances on how to conduct their lives in such social structures of practice is bypassed.
4. The personal conduct of life and life-trajectory

Our arguments so far about complex personal practice in complex structures of social practice have a number of consequences for the elaboration of our theoretical framework. In this section we shall introduce two conceptual elaborations. We have emphasized that a life in diverse social contexts and across them implies a multifaceted, varied, diverse and contrasting personal practice which raises particular personal difficulties, challenges, and conflicts, but also provides practical resources for a rich life. These diversities and complexities cannot easily be balanced off against each other, nor resolved once and for all in an individual synthesis as traditional psychological notions of personal integration and coherence would have it. On the contrary, everybody must develop particular skills to handle a complex life in diverse contexts and across them, and it calls for particular activities and abilities to manage the diverse and interrelated participations and concerns across contexts. The complexity and diversity raises personal conflicts between one’s concerns and participations in various contexts which intersect with the conflicts within specific contexts. These conflicts raise personal issues of critique and change and turn personal stances into dynamic ones, siding for or against change. Contradictions and conflicts play an important role in personal practice and development (Dreier, 1993; Holzkamp, 1983; Osterkamp, 1990) which most personality theories whitewash with their harmonizing notions about individual integration, coherence, a stable structure of goals, needs, life-plans, or whatever.

By presupposing a homogenous and unitary life traditional psychological theories of personality neglect the fundamental personal complexity of composing a personal social practice in diverse social contexts and across them (Dreier, 1993, 1994). Persons, in so doing, must relate their diverse participations in diverse social contexts, but these interrelations necessarily remain problematic since the diversities and conflicts of social practice and the complexity of conducting a personal social practice can not be resolved simply by forming a personal synthesis. The structuration of a complex personal practice remains tied to and can only be accomplished in relation to a complex, heterogenous, and contradictory structure of social practice. Issues related to these complexities call on the person to develop personal stances with which to relate the vari-
ous personal participations and concerns in order not, at one time and place, to act in ways which are blatantly harmful to one’s concerns in other times and places and to one’s overall social existence. But even though it is necessary to elaborate and pursue such stances, they too must be realized in diverse ways depending on the particular concerns and possibilities, positions and constellations of participation in various contexts. We must, therefore, locate the foundation of personality in the structuration of personal participations in the structure of social practice.

We can now see that not only the issue of personal integration and coherence is at stake here. Persons are first of all faced with the practical problems of conducting a complex personal practice in complex structures of social practice. Such a complex personal life does not unfold in any simple and unproblematic way. Its movement does not, so to speak, take care of itself. It must be composed, and subjects must conduct it in various ways and to various degrees. It takes particular efforts to do so which are crucial to what it means to be a person living in a complex social practice. Indeed, we argue that we should ground our theoretical understanding of the formation and development of personality in the necessities and challenges of participating in such a structure of social practice (Dreier, 1993). In this vein Holzkamp (1995) picks up the concept of conduct of life from the work of a group of sociologists in Munich (Jurczyk & Rerrich, 1993) and reinterprets it into a basic concept in our theoretical understanding of personality. It is argued that the complex structure of everyday personal social practice turns the development of a personal conduct of life into a crucial feature of what it takes and means to be a person. In a social practice with complex time-space arrangements and rhythms of activities persons must conduct their everyday lives by relating, ordering, combining, balancing off, coordinating, and contrasting their various activities in various contexts and with various others. How persons unfold their everyday conduct of life, of course, depends on their degree of influence on the social conditions and arrangements they live in and on the way in which they address and realize the challenges and problems of conducting it.

Of course, structures of social practice develop historically. Some sociologists argue that the change from traditional to modern societies involved a “pluralization of lifeworlds” which became “more diverse and segmented” so that “individuals typically move between different mi-
lieus or locales in the course of their everyday life” (Giddens, 1991, p. 83, with a reference to Berger, Berger & Kelner, 1974). In a similar vain, Jurczyk & Rerrich (1993, pp. 26-7) argue that we can observe historically increasing demands at the organization of 1) time, 2) tasks, chores, and contents of activities, and 3) social relationships. This increases the demands which individuals face in their conduct of everyday life and which groups of participants, say the members of a family, face in conducting their life in common along with other parts of their lives apart in other places. Some authors conceptualize these historically changing relations as a matter of more complex demands being raised at individuals, and some conceptualize changing forms of individuality as if they were determined by these changed structures of conditions and demands. But such social changes mean more than that. They evidently imply changes in the forms of personal practice and in the abilities which persons need to develop in order to become full participants in such forms of social practice. So these socio-historical changes call on us to readdress theories of the subject and forms of personhood into an historicized understanding of the particular qualities, abilities, and forms of personhood in historical forms of social practice in which issues concerning the development of a personal conduct of life have gained particular prominence and qualities. They also call on us to address a range of specific historical challenges and problems to being a person.

For instance, in complex forms of social practice it is deeply problematic in specific historical ways to have one’s participation constrained to a small number of social contexts, or to have one’s possibilities to pursue concerns in relation to some contexts so constrained that only one social context holds possibilities to pursue basically meaningful concerns. Often, then, even the participations and concerns of the remaining context(s) may loose their personal meaning because their personal meaning is bound up in a, socio-structurally arranged, composition of personal social practice which reaches across several significant contexts and holds possibilities to pursue important concerns in and across them. Just like contexts are no islands, personal participations and concerns are fueled by being interrelated into a composition of personal participation and concerns across them. The personal meaning of participating in one particular context in important ways matters and stands out precisely because it is linked with and contrasts with the meaning of taking part in
other social contexts with other qualities. Being excluded or constrained in relation to significant aspects of the existing complex contextual structure of social practice means to be personally constrained in crucial ways in relation to those forms of personal social practice which it is historically possible and meaningful to unfold.

However, a concept of the everyday conduct of life is not sufficient to theorize the basic complexity of personal social practice in the structure of social practice and the challenges driving the formation of personality. We also need a concept of personal life-trajectory to theorize how individual life-courses stretch across social time and space. Just as everyday personal social practice stretches across social contexts, so does the personal course of life. The flow of the life-course also has a spatial dimension to it. Across the life-span the person participates in a changing configuration of particular social contexts, and the person composes these changing contextual participations into a personal life-trajectory. In the course of this trajectory the person leaves some contexts behind, replaces them by others, and even the personal significance of those contexts the person takes part in on a long-term basis changes. Holzkamp (1995) characterizes the conduct of everyday life by an internal polarity between a set of cyclical routines for realizing what must be done and “the real life” rising from its routine grounds. But aside from this internal tension in the everyday conduct of life, its structure of contextual participations is not completely static. On the contrary, the everyday conduct of life is broken up and changed, among other things because it is involved in the life-trajectory of the person at a particular “point” in its course. The structure of the everyday conduct of life changes as part of the changing structure of the life-trajectory, and the changing structure of the life-trajectory is brought about, among other things by changing the everyday conduct of life. The life-course, then, is not merely projected into the future, so to speak on an abstract dimension of time, but also across places of present and future participations that do not remain the same. The life-course is both thrown ahead and across. I chose the term trajectory to emphasize the neglected spatial dimension in this duality of projecting and transjecting.

As in the personal conduct of life, there is also a historical dimension to the composition of life-trajectories. Particular historical arrangements, such as the development of intimate, private forms of family life,
Psychotherapy in Clients’ Trajectories across Contexts

influence the configuration of personal life-trajectories, their structure of meaning, and hence the structuration of personhood. In a historical perspective life-trajectories have turned into less predetermined and pre-shaped molds so that the fashioning of trajectories calls for more personal shaping, becomes more individualized, and calls for ‘individual labor’ (Jurczyk & Rerrich, 1993). This gives new weight and new qualities to the issues which surround the personal configuration of a complexly contextualized life-trajectory. Yet, social arrangements for evolving personal life-trajectories still exist, and observing how others unfold their trajectories in particular ways plus advice from others guides or misguides persons in how to realize their own personal trajectory. In other words, the unfolding of a personal trajectory is still arranged for in many, historically specific ways.

For instance, school is a particular institutional context with a particular significance in the students’ composition of a conduct of life across their various contexts which encompasses particular personal relationships and meanings. At the same time, school is arranged for a particular population which is obliged to participate in it for a particular period in their life-trajectory. What is more, school is arranged for particular age- and track-graded trajectories through it. And through the students’ particular modes of participation school polarizes them and the students polarize themselves by adopting and developing particular positions and stances and by staking out particular (pro- and transjected) life-trajectories for themselves in relation to the institutionally prearranged molds of educational trajectories and their presumed place and significance in personal life-trajectories. The students re-appropriate such existing institutional landscapes for personal trajectories to become particular vehicles in their composition and orientation of a personal life-trajectory (cf. Eckert, 1989). In so doing, they also use the arrangement of age- and track-grading to define where they are at in their trajectory.

In institutional arrangements for trajectories transitions in life-trajectories with their necessary processes of personal reorientation may also arranged for. These transitions must be accomplished in relation to the existing social structure of practice (cf. Højholt, 1999), and they may also be guided or misguided by observations of others and advice from others.
Some contexts are long-term parts in a person’s trajectory while others are one-off places and still others are part of a person’s trajectory for a particular period and then abandoned or replaced by new contexts. In this way the personal structure of participations across contexts changes during the life-trajectory. What is more, the personal meaning and concerns in relation to particular contexts the person keeps participating in also changes. And so does the way the personal participations and concerns are composed, ordered, distributed, balanced off, and weighed in reconfiguring one’s personal conduct of life across the current constellation of diverse contexts. The dilemmas and stakes of conducting a complex life-trajectory change along with it. If we look at the significance of a particular context and at the mode of participation in it, it too changes and is reconfigured through the life-trajectory. So particular contexts differ in their arranged scopes and relevances, in which concerns and stances persons want to pursue in them and across them, and all this furthermore depends on a particular context’s place in that person’s conduct of life and life-trajectory.

There are class, gender, and ethnic differences concerning which social contexts are accessible and used and concerning the spread or restriction on the constellation of social contexts in a personal conduct of life and life-trajectory (cf. Eckert, 1989). There are also class, gender, and ethnic differences in the ways in which persons combine or disconnect contexts in their configuration of social relationships and concerns. For instance, experiences with public institutions and authorities contribute to particular modes of disconnecting and linking contexts.

It should have become apparent by now that comprehensive processes of learning are involved in the unfolding and change of a personal conduct of life and life-trajectory. This learning is in principle unending and calls for many forms of reconsideration and re-learning, but we can not go into the topic of learning in this paper (cf. Dreier, 1999a; Lave, 1997). Instead we shall round off this section by pointing out that when persons project their trajectories from any given point in them, it is composed of a particular structure of participations and concerns. The sense of direction to a trajectory, therefore, has a particular cross-contextual complexity and composition to it. What persons mean by finding a direction to their lives, normally not only means what they aspire to be part of in one context, but a particular “throwout” for a future composition of
their conduct of life with attached modes of participation and concerns. When a person misses something or aspires to a change in his or her life, mostly what is involved is not only a change in one context. Directly or indirectly it is a change in the overall composition of personal practice with its interrelationships between participations in various contexts, their relative weights and personal meanings. Likewise, what people mean by ‘getting into a new situation’ or by their ‘life situation’ encompasses the whole configuration of personal social practices and not just a particular context. The quality of feeling collected and focused as opposed to dissipated and confused is a crucial feature of such a form of life, and it is related to the personal configuration of a conduct of life and trajectory. We may, indeed, feel collected and focused in a complex personal social practice where many other things matter to us than the ones around which we feel collected. The spread and variation of participations and concerns may, of course, make us loose our grip on feeling collected. On the other hand, it may also be a precondition for feeling collected that there are a variety of participations and concerns in the background to make the ones we focus on stand out and be significant by virtue of there being others in the background. In between other pursuits the primary concerns which we feels collected around, are then returned to, picked up again, time is cleared and opportunities searched to keep at them, advance them further, etc..

5. The Life-trajectory, structure of personality, and identity

In the previous sections we introduced the concepts of conduct of life and life-trajectory. They pointed us towards a wide range of personally important phenomena and issues which have to do with the personal configuration of participations and concerns and their relative personal significance. And they indicate that it is crucial to recognize the contextual complexity of personal social practice in elaborating a concrete theory about the person. Subjects relate to their participations in different contexts in particular ways. Their engagement may be more or less long-term, crucial to them or merely instrumental, related to clearly limited or wide-ranging concerns, and include various bonds to particular others. Persons may be (formal) members of a context or come to see them-
Subjectivity and Social Practice

selves as belonging there because of the nature and reach of their involvements. In other words, through the history of their participations persons unfold a particular subjective composition to the significance of their participations in particular contexts and with particular others. By relating their various participations, concerns, and stances persons gradually configure a particular subjective composition to the way they feel located in the world. It seems to me that this is what is meant by the term identity. The feeling of belonging to particular practices and with particular persons and places develops on the background of being part in them, of reflecting on one’s personal relationship to being part in them, of configuring those reflections into personal stances and of config- uiring those stances into a mapping of what one stands for and where one belongs which is what we mean by identity.

In this section we shall compare our approach to a theory of the person through personal participation in structures of social practice, everyday conduct of life and personal life-trajectory with prevalent modes of theorizing the person, identity, and the self in the current literature. Theories of the person in psychology and beyond are traditionally dominated by basic assumptions about personality as an integrated and coherent unity. And most theorists construe this image of the structure of human personality by disregarding the structure of the social world and social practice. They seem to consider it irrelevant for understanding the basic structure of human personality. Indeed, the preeminent function which psychological theories ascribe to our personality, identity, and self is the subjective construction of a meaningful individual coherence and not the composition of a personal conduct of life and life-trajectory.

If the social world is considered in theories about the person, most theorists stick to the assumption that human personality, identity, and the self are basically about individual integration and coherence. The practical diversity of a contextually structured social practice is almost totally neglected in notions of personal life-courses, identity, and phases of development. Even in an activity theory such as A. N. Leontjev’s (1973) the theoretically emphasized switch in dominant activity from play to learning during ontogeny just happens to coincide with the age of school entry. The switch in dominant activity is not theoretically grounded in the social arrangement of children’s life-trajectories. This illustrates my
critique in section one that the concept of activity brackets that of which it is a part. Activity and participation do not seem to go hand in hand.

In different strands of theorizing about the person the abstraction from the contextual diversity of social practice may be accomplished by several lines of argument:

One line of argument assumes the existence of only one small, homogenous social world. This is mostly accomplished by reducing the world in which human personality is assumed to be constituted to be solely within the (historically constituted and thus not universalizable) nuclear family. The private shelter or individual retreat into private intimacy which is associated with this contextual form is considered to lift the person above the significance of “outside” social determinants and positions. So even if these theorists are not blind to the world outside of the family, they may consider the significance of private family relations so pervasive that it alone provides for and guarantees an integrated and coherent identity. In this vain also social theorists such as Giddens (1991) write:

... self-identity is negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and the development of intimacy with the other. Such processes help create ‘shared histories’ of a kind potentially more tightly bound than those characteristic of individuals who share experiences by virtue of a common social position. (p. 97).

A second line of argument in the abstraction from the diversity of social practice does acknowledge that the social world is complex, but insists that it is all the same homogenous. Such theorists assume a social and/or cultural coherence to the social world which either impinges upon the person or allows the person to construct a coherent personal standpoint. For instance, in referring to Dilthey’s concept of “life” as an historical and biographical concept, Mos (1996) argues:

Reality from the ‘standpoint of life’, as Dilthey would have it, is always one of vital involvement in the sense that our individual existence compels us to adopt a stance in and towards life thereby bringing meaningful coherence to our experience ... (p. 41)
Subjectivity and Social Practice

Mos points to the

... pressing importance especially in a post-modern era of constructionist discourse that we recover a conception of the individual person not, in Dilthey’s words, as ‘prior to society and history’, but as a ‘point of interaction’, as a participant with others embedded in those meaningful relational coherences of society and culture that from the standpoint of life are primordially lived. (p. 42)

He wants us to recover a

... sense of those societal and cultural coherences whose ‘massive objectivity’ both condition and are conditioned by our individual and collective participation in them. (p. 42)

According to Mos, then, diversities, dilemmas, and contradictions of social practice and of our personal participation in it seem to be of little import for the individual person, or can at least easily be overcome in the construction of an individual personality.

A third way to maintain that personality, identity, and self are all about individual integration and coherence is to emphasize that their structuration is a purely subjective accomplishment. Then the personal social practice and life-trajectory may be diverse and complex, but these diversities are overcome precisely by the individual construction of a personality, identity and self. These theorists thus oversimplify what it means and takes to achieve individual coherence. They consider it a one-sidedly subjective affair and not a basically practical one. Such a one-sided abstraction may be helped along by assuming that personal coherence is a matter of coherent meaning and not of the structures of personal participation in structures of social practices which are then reduced to mere external practicalities of that which really counts. In this way the concrete significance of diversities and contradictions of social practice is downplayed, and the achievement of coherence is attributed to the subject as an eminently subjective concern and accomplishment. The only psychologist in the group from Munich which studies everyday conduct of life is an example of this type of theorizing (Behringer, 1998). She argues that a person achieves individual coherence through the individual construction of a personal identity. Even though she and the rest of the group study individuals facing different demands from dif-
ferent social contexts and refer to the development of a conduct of life as an individual necessity in such forms of divergent social practice, they all maintain that thanks to the accomplishment of a personal conduct of life each individual is able to construct its own coherent identity. There is a noteworthy historical shift at play in their combination of the concept of conduct of life and identity. The concept of conduct of life was taken up by Weber and a group of “reformers” to address a crisis in the forms of life around the previous turn of century (Barlösius, 1996). And, just like the more recent Munich-group, they argued for the accomplishment of personal coherence and integration as a way out of the crisis. But while the Munich-group considers this coherence to be a purely subjective construct, achieved by the more recent notion of identity, Weber (just like later personologists such as Allport, 1961) considered coherence to be accomplished by adopting a philosophy of life of cultural and religious values while the other reformers were looking for a "natural" basis for conducting one’s life in the right way. We see here that the more recently widespread notion of identity goes hand in hand with insisting that identity is an eminently individually subjective affair.

Finally, a fourth way to arrive at a notion of a coherent identity is to consider social space to be insignificant and theorize the personal life-trajectory merely in a dimension of time. In this way theorists downplay or disregard the diversity of social practice and detach the history and development of the person from any robust anchoring in relation to (changing) social structures of practice and the complexly socially situated nature of personal life. Nevertheless, this is the all pervasive approach in theories of individual life history. We even come across it in social theories which emphasize the concept of social action. Thus Giddens (1991) states that

... place itself is undermined by the expansion of disembedding mechanisms...

(p. 146).

Behind this statement lies his interpretation that to be situated means to be situation-bound, thereby turning to be situated into what Holzkamp (1983) calls to be “immediacy-fixated”. Although Giddens (like Asplund, 1983, ch. 11 & 12) picks up the concept of trajectory from the time geography of Hägerstrand where time-space is a concept for the in-
terconnectedness of time and space, his notion of the abstraction of time and space and of disembedding and globalization makes him end up considering trajectories as merely stretching over the time dimension of an individual past-present-future. In this way Giddens loosens the spatial dimension of the contextual infrastructure of social practice and of the personal conduct of life and life-trajectory in his theoretical grasp of personal life. In reference to a book, entitled “Becoming your own therapist”, around which he grounds his argument, he then writes about the “... dialogue with time - a process of self-questioning about how the individual handles the time of her lifespan” as the cultivation of a reflexive self-identity through self-observation (Giddens, 1991, p. 72). His concept of trajectory has turned into merely being a matter of time:

The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future. (And) The line of development of the self is internally referential: the only significant connecting thread is the life trajectory as such. (pp. 75 & 76).

He defines life plans as the substantial content of a reflexively organized trajectory of the self (p. 85). Life-planning for Giddens is a way to prepare a direction in relation to the biography of the self. But in his understanding of planning the contextual complexity disappeared in his prior analytic maneuvers so that he finally ends up claiming that

... self-identity, as a coherent phenomenon, presumes a narrative. (p. 80).

Coherence is reinstalled, by means of the creation of a narrative. But narratives are a subjective (and/or cultural) imposition of coherence on “unshaped” experience, of a beginning, middle and end to disjointed events in the plotting of a story and the construction of an identity through time. Elsewhere I have argued that theories of narratives conceptualize the personal conduct of life and life-trajectory onesidedly in an abstract dimension of time and loose the relations of time-space in persons’ participation in the structures of social practice (Dreier, in press). Thus, Ricoeur (1992) sees identity as an emerging temporal sameness with a narrative core.

Another theorist of social action, Strauss employs the concept of trajectory as a key concept. According to his conception a trajectory also
only reaches across time while the spatial structure of social practice re-
cedes into insignificance. He defines trajectory merely as

(1) the course of any experienced phenomenon as it evolves over time ... and (2)
the actions and interactions contributing to its evolution (Strauss, 1993, pp. 53-
4).

Again the concept of action goes hand in hand with an abstraction from the contextual structure of personal participation.

Finally, some theorists historicize the concept of identity, but do not explicitly include the diversity in the structure of social practice and personal participations in their conception. Like Burkitt (1994) they focus on the role of the interpersonal relations in the formation of identity. They historicize their notion of interpersonal relations in a more free-floating manner and do not locate them anywhere in particular in the structure of social practice and personal participations. Their focus on intersubjectivity comes close to conversational and relational perspectives in current psychology in that it does not conceptualize how these social relations are located parts of a structured social practice. Let us take Charles Taylor’s work as an example. In the chapter “The Need for Recognition” in his book “The Ethics of Authenticity” (Taylor, 1991) he states that the modern preoccupation with identity and recognition has become inevitable because of two major historical changes. The first major change is the collapse of social hierarchies according to which

... what we would now call a person’s identity was largely fixed by his or her social position. (p. 47)

The emerging ideal of authenticity undermines this arrangement, he argues in the words of Herder:

... it calls on me to discover my own original way of being, ...(It) doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalized, with others. (p. 47)

So even though social dependence was always there, what is new is that this recognition is now no a priori. The subject
Subjectivity and Social Practice

... has to win it through exchange and it can fail. And that is why the need is now acknowledged for the first time. In premodern times people didn’t speak of “identity” and “recognition”, not because people didn’t have (what we call) identities or because these didn’t depend on recognition, but rather because these were then too unproblematic to be thematized as such. (p. 48)

The second major change has taken place on the intimate level:

On the intimate level, we can see how much an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others. ... Love relationships are not important just because of the general emphasis in modern culture on fulfillment of ordinary life. They are also crucial because they are the crucibles of inwardly generated identity. ... On the social plane, the understanding that identities are formed in open dialogue ... has made the politics of equal recognition more central and stressful. It has, in fact, considerably raised its stakes. ... Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are refused it. (p. 49).

This, according to Taylor, is the background on which

Not only contemporary feminism, but also race relations and discussions of multiculturalism are undergirded by the premise that denied recognition can be a form of repression. (p. 50)

And that is why the culture of authenticity has come

... to give precedence to two modes of living together ... (1) on the social level, the crucial principle is that of fairness, which demands equal chances for everyone to develop their own identity which included (...) the recognition of difference, ... and (2) in the intimate sphere, the identity-forming love relationship has a crucial importance. (p. 50)

Taylor’s preoccupation with such common principles, standards, and values, however, makes him overlook the diversities of complex structures of social practice and the challenges which flow from such diversities for the structuration of personal social practice and identity. Actually, it goes unnoticed to Taylor that the two major changes he point to themselves reflect a changing contextual diversity and complexity to personal social practice, even though he seems to be aware that he locates these two changes in different social contexts, probably seen as the
family versus “other places”. He does not address the significance of people conducting their lives in and across these two “spheres” for the formation and dynamics of identity.

A promising place to look for a current theorizing which is preoccupied by issues of the diversity to personal social practice in a complex social practice is in the feminist literature. Here notions about authenticity of the person, self, and identity may be introduced to emphasize complexities inherent in the personal participation in social practice. For example, in her book “Feminisms and the Self. The Web of Identity” Morwenna Griffiths (1995) studies identity by means of autobiographical materials and by drawing on the concept of narrative. She argues against a static and essentialist notion of self and identity:

I have argued that the self is constructed through time. Thus spontaneity, rooted in the present, gives only a snapshot of an authentic self. There can be no unchanging authenticity to be found in this way, since the self is in a process of construction. (p. 175)

Indeed, the complex changes of identity and self make questions of authenticity more acute because authenticity cannot be resolved once and for all, and because it becomes more difficult to decide in which changing self authenticity is to be grounded:

“Is this my real self that experiences, acts, is, feels, thinks, decides to do things for herself?” ”Is it still really me after changes to my feelings and ways of understanding and reacting to them?” “As I change, am I being true to myself?” (p. 173).

(T)he recurrence of questions of authenticity ... show that such questions keep imposing themselves. This is something which needs exploring and explaining. (p. 175)

Here Griffiths arrives at a turning point in her argument.

A further complication is introduced by the view that the self is fragmented. ... If “the self” in question is actually more like “the selves”, the answer to finding something more lasting is not to be found in seeking a coherent, transparent, unity to the self, of the kind Descartes and Hume were looking for. If frag-
Subjectivity and Social Practice

...mented selves want to be true to themselves, then they do not mean they want to be true to some particular one clearly understood and unified self. (p. 175)

She argues that there can be more than one self in the same embodied person.

In ordinary language it is commonplace to talk of sides or streaks in a person: ‘She has an unexpectedly sentimental side to her character’ or “She is kindly, but she has a real streak of malice” or “I didn’t know that I would do that - but I did.” (p. 181)

Yet, one must ask, what sort of unity is it that has all these sides or streaks to it? Griffiths continues:

The self for which I argue ... is characterized by incoherence in its beliefs and actions, is not easily understood by itself. is only partly avowed... (And) ...the self is made up of a number of different, sometimes incompatible, “selves”, all of which, taken together, make up the self as a whole. ... It is not unusual for a self to be surprised by itself, as different “selves” take precedence. (p. 181)

Therefore she maintains that:

It is essential to acknowledge that there exists no unity of the self, no unchanging core of a being. Such a belief is a fancy and will mislead the self into seeking to establish it. Being true to oneself does not mean seeking after such a core. It means undertaking the difficult business of assessment and transformation within a changing context of self. Authenticity requires assessing a changing self, not preserving a sameness. (p. 185).

Griffiths takes these ideas even further arguing that we are all hybrids, picking up a notion of Stuart Hall’s. She speaks of different fragments being at war with each other and of coalitions (rather than consensus) being formed through negotiation (p. 183). And she finishes her book saying:

It is simplicity which has contributed to sameness and oppression. Infinitely preferable is the variety, confusion, color, hotchpotch, kaleidoscope, medley, motley, and harlequin of patchwork selves. (p. 191)
To describe the work of identity in a fragmented subject Griffiths uses the metaphor of “weaving”:

The metaphor of a web is useful in understanding both “becoming” and “agency” (with “web” understood here as tapestry, weaving, crochet and lace, rather than as a spider’s web). At first sight needlewomen seem free to create whatever web they fancy. A longer look shows that this impression is misleading. Webs are always made in a temporal and social context, and they get their meanings from that context. There are only some patterns available. Still, a needlewoman does have room for maneuver. (p. 178)

Her crucial idea is that the fragmented bits and pieces are woven together into a web of identity, and she extends it into a notion of patchwork identity, stating at the conclusion of her book:

I started the book with a metaphor of webs. I end with an extension of that initial metaphor, a metaphor of patchwork. ... (L)ike patchwork, making a self is relatively easy, though it always takes time and attention. However, again like patchwork, making a good one is very hard indeed. Understanding which pieces of old cloth will fit into the whole is a difficult and painstaking matter... (p. 191).

Celebrating diversity, like Griffiths does, is stimulated by insisting on the recognition of crucial differences such as gender differences which we can not sensibly aspire to dissolve in the process of social transformation towards a more just society (Fraser, 1997). Difference must be recognized, also in the process of social transformation. But there are some peculiar features to Griffiths’ argument concerning identity and diversity which I shall point out on the background of my arguments in this paper. Let us first remind ourselves that Griffiths grounds fragmentation in the fact that the same person is a member of diverse communities and faces diverse social demands. She argues that the individual person cannot integrate these memberships and demands into a personal unity of the self and identity. Precisely this is the essential difference between her theory of the self and identity and traditional theories of the self and identity which argue that the self and identity can and should be unitary. Griffiths does not notice, however, that in all other
crucial respects her theory and traditional theories share the same basic premises. In fact, she sticks to the same notion of the function of the self and identity that we see in the traditional conceptions which she is critical of: They all argue that the crucial function of identity and the self is a subjective ordering. Griffiths merely does not believe that this subjective ordering can and should accomplish a complete subjective coherence. Like role theories she highlights the significance of diverse memberships and demands, but while role theories insist that the subjective ordering of these diverse demands and memberships can lead to an integrated identity and selfhood, Griffiths stopped believing it. She claims that the individual can not bridge these diversities in its formation of an identity as a peculiarly subjective accomplishment and synthesis. Instead we find a fragmented subjective order.

However, to conceptualize identity as a subjective accomplishment of ordering - of tying the streaks, sides, or patches together in and for the individual subject - turns the whole idea of what identity is about into a primarily epistemological concern indebted to a dualist philosophy. The question of “Who am I?” basically becomes a matter of representing the world, with its diverse demands and memberships, in a matching subjective construct, while the basic praxeological question of how to conduct a life and relate and balance off one’s diverse participations is not explicitly addressed - or better: assumed simply to follow from their representation in the subjective order of identity.

The patchwork, i.e. the pattern which the subject then construes out of the various pieces of diverse memberships and demands, is a purely subjective pattern of subjective identifications. Strictly speaking, it is neither a reflection of the objective “pattern”, i.e. structure, to the social practice of which these memberships and demands are particular parts, nor a reflection of the “pattern”, i.e. structure, to that subject’s personal social practice in these structures of social practice. This is revealed in some peculiar features of the metaphor of self and identity as a patchwork. As we all know, in the construction of a patchwork a) all pieces are mutually unrelated ingredients, b) all pieces are different, but in and of themselves homogenous, a) all pieces in principle matter equally much or little, and d) they are fitted together by the subject, as a subjective process of construction (with certain added constraints). Therefore, e) all pieces can be fitted as you like, i.e. arbitrarily. There are, in other
words, no robust criteria of fit, only subjective criteria of construction and constructionism. And finally f) there is a constructing agent - an I - at a higher level who does all the fitting of the pieces, all the patchwork, but who is beyond the reach of the theorizing, and thus turned into a God’s eye perspective after all.

Griffiths’ emphasis on fragmentation makes her lose sight of the personal necessity of becoming able to conduct a complex personal social practice and life-trajectory. Her standpoint of analysis is contemplative rather than practical. In practice, to be the kind of fragmented person which Griffiths cherishes, would be a deeply problematic and disoriented state of affairs. If a person were to stick to such a vision, many of its vital concerns and pursuits which need to be located and conducted across social structures of practice, would be thrown off their tracks, and the person would turn into a sort of chameleon. Griffiths neglects that the person must first of all relate the diverse claims and memberships in practical, personal terms into a personal conduct and trajectory of life. This practical personal necessity can not be neglected without serious personal consequences. Actually, Griffiths does not address the ways in which individuals conduct a personal life with such diverse influences and in and across diverse contexts. She only addresses the issue of unity versus fragmentation for individuals facing diverse demands and contemplating these diversities. Contrary to Griffiths, I emphasized that diversities are located in a structure of social contexts in a structure of social practice, and that these diversities primarily have to be dealt with in practical terms by persons as a part of the conduct of their everyday social practice and life-trajectory. Therefore, the theoretical understanding of the processes of personal reflection with which the issues of identity are concerned, must break with an implicit premise of distance (see section 3), and be reconsidered as a process of finding oneself where one really already is located in complex social practice.

What, then, does Griffiths have to say about the structures of the social world which give rise to the subjective construction of fragmented identities? She argues that some fragmentation comes from political structures of oppression which create several divides that touch upon everybody and lists gender, race, class, and sexuality. She then adds other “material conditions and experiences and interests that do not fit readily into categories of oppressor and oppressed”, listing regional dif-
Subjectivity and Social Practice

ferences, migration, parenthood, and affiliations of interests (p. 182). Yet, she does not ground these divisions according to the particular, interrelated ways in which persons encounter and can address them in and across diverse social contexts as a part of their everyday conduct of life and life trajectory. She looses the grounding of diversities and of personal processes of orientation in relation to them in that person’s participation in social practice. If the heterogeneous diversities in social practice which Griffiths lists are to be conceived as pieces to a subjective patchwork, they must hence be construed as a series of internally homogenous, but mutually heterogeneous and disconnected cultures, communities, contexts and free-floating influences. Indeed, when Griffiths speaks about a community she refers to a group or a culture of which a person can construe herself, or is being construed, to be a member. It is not a community of practice. She may, therefore, very well cherish diversity and multiplicity as sources of learning and developing, but what she means is that:

The more we are members of different communities and the more we are each multilingual, the more opportunities we have for change. (p. 187)

Griffiths also mentions “context” on several occasions. But it is a vague, almost free-floating social context, and its practicalities and how to think systematically about structures and variations in these contextual social practicalities are missing. Her notion of context comes closer to her preoccupation with language and social interaction than to structures of social practice.

6. Conclusion

The examples of current research on the person, identity, and self in the previous section show a remarkable neglect of the significance of the fact that persons live their lives by participating in complex structures of a social practice and by conducting trajectories in and across diverse social contexts. They do not understand personality, identity, and self from the standpoint of subjects involved in such a practice and as a means for these subjects to orient themselves in it and reflect on it. This critique of their shortcomings is part of my theoretical argument for why we need to
develop theories about complex personal trajectories of participation in structures of social practice and offer persons such analytic means for an adequate self-understanding.

As we have seen, this critique holds even for theories which recognize that we must grasp the person, identity, and self in a social world. And we have seen that their theoretical shortcomings make them present the person as a relatively free-floating and arbitrary agent and make their theories fit only too well into the fashionable social constructionism of our day. The grounding of people’s lives in social practice becomes so thin and fragile that their lives give the impression of easily falling apart into fragmented bits and pieces, or multiple and fragmented selves as it is mostly called (e.g. Rowan & Cooper, 1999). Most narrative conceptions of the person, identity, and self seem similarly unconstrained and without serious personal stakes in relation to the person’s structuration of a conduct of life and life trajectory. Much current theorizing of the person is, in short, loosing its feet from the ground of social practice, as one may put it in a Marxist paraphrase. It leaves the impression that the grounding in social practice is of only trivial significance for what it means and takes to be and develops as a person. It is, indeed, odd to find that precisely a theory of the person, self, and identity stops short of theorizing the eminently subjective aspects of personal social practice one would expect that concepts of the self and identity in a theory of the subject in social practice primarily were concerned with.

Contrary to this, I argue that if we reduce the full grounding of personal life in structures of social practice, we loose what it is all about: its concrete contents, what it is a part of, involved in and concerned with, the full significance of many of its real possibilities, challenges, dilemmas, problems, and contradictions. And instead of theories about these rich contents of personal life we build theories about abstract structures of personality or representations of oneself. We would, for instance, become able to understand that being a many-sided person is not just having different streaks, sides, or patches to oneself, but a reflection of living a many-sided life in which we pursue diverse concerns by participating in different ways in diverse contexts. But instead of being concerned with theorizing the person as a participant in a complex social practice, most theories seem preoccupied with the question of unity versus fragmentation in the structure of one’s own or others’ representation.
of oneself. What is meant by “self-understanding” would then just be a self-representation, and not coming to an understanding with oneself about how to conduct one’s everyday life and life-trajectory which would take us to another, both more complex and rich level of what self-understanding means (Holzkamp, 1998). Let me briefly point out that to ground a conception of the person in its participation in structures of social practice in no way excludes to recognize the personal significance of values and ideas about the good life. It only means to insist that values and ideas are also encountered and will gain particular personal significances in different personal social contexts, and that we must grasp how they become a particular part in the person’s conduct of life and life-trajectory. And let me also briefly point out that this approach opens the doors to seeing personal learning and development through participation and as participation in structures of social practice. Questions of personal stability and change are then tied to stable and changing structures of personal social practice and to participating within their given boundaries or to taking part in changing them and going beyond them. My aim in this paper was merely to lay some of the most basic groundwork for such a theory of the person. It remains to be elaborated and detailed into a richer and more concrete and lively understanding of the person, paradoxically, not by looking directly “into” the person, but into the world and grasp the person as a participant in that world.

References


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