Beyond Developmentalism?

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Abstract. Developmental psychology is understood in this paper as one of the ‘grand metanarratives of science’ through which modernity has been characterized. The objects ‘the child’ and ‘development’ are held up for question, examining the way in which these are discursively constructed and produced within specific conditions of possibility which locate them in the government of the social and the production of the historically specific form of the subject, the individual. Although it has been argued that postmodernism’s critique of modernity evacuates ‘the real’, it is argued here that developmental psychology universalizes the masculine and European, such that peripheral subjects are rendered pathological and abnormal. Postmodernism’s peripheral challenge to the centre allows the possibility of the production of thinking in historically and geographically specific practices and does not fetishize western rationality as the universal pinnacle of development. In such work, an understanding of discourse, practice, semiotic systems and fantasy is taken to be central.

Introduction

It has become commonplace to turn to theories of the postmodern to argue that life has become a media event, a series of images, in which ‘the real’ is ever elusive, like the hyper-real images which exist only in their computer generation. However, all those images of computer-targeted missiles fired in the Gulf War, looking like nothing so much as a child’s arcade game, set us up to see a sanitized world of surgical strikes, not the charred bodies on the Basra Road.

In the world of developmental psychology it has seemed since its inception that there was no problem with the real. That children were children and develop has appeared so common-sense a notion that the arguments that have raged have been about models of development not about the existence of those objects called ‘the child’ and ‘development’. But in the 1980s, ‘post’ theorizing, and especially poststructuralism, began to question those very things, by questioning the ‘claims to truth’ (Foucault, 1979), the epistemology upon which such objects were constructed (e.g. Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984).

Embedded within all of that ‘post’ theorizing remained and remains the
difficult question about 'the real'. In this paper, I want to examine some of the postmodern arguments and to look at the place of the real in developmental theory. I want to place developmental psychology in terms of what postmodernists have called 'grand metanarratives of science', large, universal stories whose central character is 'the child' and in which key aspects of the plot involve development, reasoning, cognition and so forth.

By claiming that developmental psychology is a kind of story, I am not doing anything particularly new (work in the sociology of science has been doing so for some time). What is important here is the kind of story which developmental psychology claims to be: a grand, totalizing story, the story of children's development, a scientific story testable, within limits, in relation to the methodological guarantees given about the treatment of scientific data, science's claims to truth. But this is no mere debate about true scientific stories versus false pseudo-scientific or ideological ones. Rather, it is about the place of developmental psychological stories not in telling a biased or distorted story, and so obscuring a true and proper story about children, but in actually producing, fashioning 'the child' and 'development'. The claim is that these objects are not simply well or badly represented but actually produced within signifying relations themselves.

Here I draw particularly on the work of Michel Foucault on the microphysics of power (Foucault, 1979, 1984). Foucault understands psychology as one of the sciences of the social which is implicated in the production of modern forms of government. In this analysis, psychology's claims to truth are not guaranteed by a timeless epistemology, but have to be understood in terms of the historical circumstances in which the knowledge was generated. Foucault's thesis locates the sciences of the social as emerging at a distinct historical period in Western Europe when new forms of government were needed to manage the growing populations of towns and cities, an industrialized workforce and a move away from the country. He seeks to demonstrate that such sciences have to be understood in terms of the necessity to produce new techniques for the managing of the subject, the mind, or, as Nikolas Rose (1990) puts it, the soul. There is no sure and disinterested march of science in this analysis, but nothing less than the production of the individual as a specific form of the subject.

The Production of the Developing Child

I have written at length about the emergence of developmental psychology, especially in relation to cognitive development (Walkerdine, 1984), and I will not rehearse that argument here, but it is necessary to spell out a few issues in relation to the emergence of developmental psychology's subject.
When Charles Darwin made a study of his infant son, he sanctioned the application of evolutionary theory to children. Child Study subsequently became very fashionable and Child Study societies were set up all over Europe and the United States. These societies used the idea of a stage-wise progression, charting the different characteristics of children of different ages, their likes, dislikes, imaginings and so forth. But the evolutionary model used by these new exponents of infant observation was not Darwinian (Bradley, in press). It was based on the theories of the German embryologist Haeckel. The new students of childhood argued that ontogeny recapitulates, and was therefore caused by, phylogeny. They saw the individual's mental development as a step-wise progression, just as Haeckel thought the evolution of species to be. Hence, when Piaget came to argue for a more Lamarckian evolutionary model of development, and for a stage-wise progression towards cognitive maturity, the idea of stages was already well established.

Ariès (1973) and other historians argue convincingly that the category of 'childhood' as separate from adulthood did not emerge until the beginning of compulsory schooling and was quite class-specific. Ariès draws upon evidence from paintings to demonstrate this and also points to lack of differentiation in terms of both work and play between people of different ages. We might also point to the ban of 'child labour' in factories. Why then should there be a sudden interest in child development, why the burgeoning of societies to study this phenomenon at this time?

Application of the Foucauldian argument points to the place of the emergence of compulsory schooling in the regulation and government of the population. The threats of both criminality and pauperism (Jones & Williamson, 1979) were sufficient cause to propose schooling as an attempt to produce a pliant and docile workforce, a workforce which would have been inculcated with the habits of industriousness and so forth. In order to produce an effective pedagogy it was necessary to construct a knowledge of the population to be governed, in this case children. The argument that such knowledge sought to find out the 'real' of childhood is marred by the fact that childhood as a specific category had not existed in any systematic sense before this moment, according to many, including Foucault (1979), N. Rose (1985), J. Rose (1985) and Ariès (1973). Thus, it was not a case of representation so much as the discursive production of 'child development' and of 'the developing child' itself as an object of study and intervention. The mapping of stages, the quantification and production of characterizations themselves produced a new object, one that had not existed in that form before: the developing child.

What I am at pains to point out therefore is that developmental psychology is premised upon the construction of an object of study, 'the developing child', and that very object is not real, not timeless but produced for particular purposes within very specific historical, social and
political conditions. The argument is not about whether change and transformation happen throughout the life of a human subject, but how that change is understood and the effectivity of its discursive constitution. Foucault suggests not only that discourse can be productive of truth, but that in that it has 'real effects': something real is produced out of a fiction. So we need to look at developmental psychology's claims to truth not just in terms of their specificity, their emergence, the way they cut up and shape reality, but also in terms of the real effects they produce. Indeed, this is precisely where the postmodern critique of grand metanarratives comes in.

What does Foucault mean when he says that psychology is not just a matter of 'different versions of reality', but that, by psychological means, objects are discursively constructed within power/knowledge relations? How does 'the child' of psychology enter into regimes of power and knowledge through their place in technologies of the social? In Walkerdine (1984) I gave the example of a nursery record card which described types of developmental accomplishment in terms such as 'is his play isolated, parallel, associative, cooperative or group?' I argued that such a question assumed that play was a pedagogic device, that it could be classified and that a teacher had been trained to recognize these types. This meant that the school could become the site in which 'the developing child' was produced as an object in the very taken-for-granted minutiae of the pedagogic practices themselves. The teacher's gaze was a calculating and classificatory gaze which, both in the provision of play and its classification, produced the very object it claimed to describe.

Foucault would understand this as an aspect of technologies of the social, which through their management of daily life constitute the points of production and inscription of the subject. In this case, then, 'the developing child' is not a description of a real entity, but a discursive construction, albeit a very powerful one, which actually defines what is understood and how. As Keith Hoskin (1985) remarked, the practices of production are so powerful that we would swear that this textual 'child' exists. However, it is a 'fiction which functions in truth'.

The liberalizing of pedagogy in the 1960s and 1970s so as to allow the freest and most natural of possible developments provides us with a larger example of the way in which regulation within a bourgeois democratic order becomes self-regulation. 'The child', apparently freer than at any moment in history, free to be true to 'his' nature, is in fact more managed and regulated than at any previous moment (N. Rose, 1985). This is because every tiniest detail has now become the object of a scientific scrutiny. No longer are simple accomplishments like addition and subtraction to be noted, but the child's very demeanour, attitude, action is monitored, the object of a benign yet surveillant gaze. This freed child has every action calibrated so as to assure that development will be normal and
natural, go according to plan, because abnormal and pathological development has to be noted, classified, corrected.

I want to argue that the very idea of development is not natural and universal, but extremely specific and, in its specificity, occludes other marginalized stories, subsumed as they are within the bigger story. The big story is a European patriarchal story, a story from the centre which describes the periphery in terms of the abnormal, difference as deficiency. I want to explore how this is accomplished and examine how it might be challenged.

The Production of Subjects

A critique of 'the child' and 'development' as part of grand metanarratives of science could be understood as part of a deconstructive trend in psychology (cf. Morss, 1992; Parker & Shotter, 1991; Squire, 1989; for example). However, taking apart the premises upon which psychology is based, while it is clearly a central step, it is only a step. What I am setting out to do here is what Morss (1992) describes:

If Foucault is taken to have destroyed the notion of continuity in development, and if what we have taken as a continuous thread is to be seen as the juxtaposition of located discourses, then individual development will need to be conceptualized and described in very different ways. (p. 456)

But I would go farther than Morss. I do not think it is enough to rethink some entity called 'development', if this is precisely an object produced within the aegis of grand European metanarratives. I argue that 'development' as an object is not coterminous with the understanding of change, growth, transformation, etc. No new model of development will help us to rethink these underlying issues. In fact, despite his insistence on 'development', Morss himself makes the problem clear:

Words like 'development' and the closely related 'evolution' . . . appear to have been commonly understood in the 19th century as the gradual revelation or unrolling of something already in existence. Development might be glossed as 'emerging out of an envelope'—as becoming gradually less disguised, or as having a cover gradually slid away. (p. 461)

This problem cannot just be solved by a change in terminology. Development as progressive evolution is not an object but a central trope in modern narratives of the individual. Development is presented as towards a goal, indeed a goal that not all reach, but which is surely the logocentric pinnacle of advanced, reactional abstract thought. It is this goal which is understood as the most civilized, in the move from the animal, savage, primitive and childlike towards the adult and civilized. To understand this one has to
examine the conditions of its emergence and the place of rationality within Enlightenment thinking, and the great stress on western-style rationality in all forms of scientific thought. The goal is a rationally ordered social order, one in which democracy can function on the basis of a citizenry who obey the moral and political order of their own free will because of their advanced stage of development.

I argue that the postmodern move disrupts this notion of civilization and of science as rationality and advancement. They are shown up to be historically specific practices produced in the history of the domination over Others. A postmodern move then leads us to examine more than words. It must explore the production of subjects within a world which does not assume such a trajectory of development as given. Stories about change and transformation in a postmodern world will have to take account of the production of subjectivity in different times and places. In my view this means the questioning of a central developmental assumption, that of progress towards a particular kind of abstract reasoning as an advanced goal as well as the idea of fixed pathways and necessary endpoints which such a goal implies. This is not reducible to relativism, but is about power. Other stories which have been the object of domination through their incorporation into schemes of pathologization cannot be spoken within a developmental framework.

What would it mean then to think the production of subjectivity as it is constituted within specifically located practices? I think that it would signal the end of developmental psychology as we know it. We would have to understand what ‘childhood’ means and the means and ends of a developmental process in completely different ways. Rationality forms the bedrock of the modern view of a developmental process. It cannot be equated with thinking because everybody thinks after a fashion. It means a particular kind of logic, of reasoning, which has become equated with thinking. It is this rationality which has become naturalized and understood as the pinnacle of western civilization. By producing this rationality as the endpoint of a quasi-evolutionary process, it has been understood as part and parcel of ensuring a rational and democratic government. The rational and autonomous individual was to be produced and regulated precisely through the construction of psycho-pedagogic practices designed to produce a citizen who would reason and be reasonable. Modern child-rearing practices stress reasoning, which is usually opposed to authoritarian practices (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Thus the idea of reasoning as a gradual abstraction has been inscribed in the very heart of modern government. It was opposed strongly to the idea of the animal, primitive and savage, which remained as the threat represented by the masses, the hordes who had to be led towards reason. Otherness in this model could only be understood as something at a lower developmental level, further from reason and civilization and intensely threatening because of that.
How then to read the relation between the periphery and the centre if it is not in these terms? It is necessary to question whether the argument to be put forward should be the modern one. I would argue that it is precisely the postmodern predicament that the centre is collapsing and intensely threatened by the periphery. In addressing whether those Others can reason too it is necessary to examine whether the argument to be put forward is a modern one: of bias and marginalization. In other words, in modern terms, blacks, women, etc., can reason just as well as white men: the problem lies in the biased, sexist and racist approaches of the psychologists. But in postmodern terms, the problem lies elsewhere and no amount of empirical work to demonstrate reasoning powers will solve it. I explore this using two examples—the first concerned with women and girls, the second with children from non-western countries.

**Girls and Mathematics**

In earlier work (Walkerdine, 1989) I examined some of the problems surrounding the debates about girls’ and women’s mathematical performance. While it was commonly asserted that girls’ mathematical performance was inferior to that of boys’, this was not the case in any simple sense. Even where girls’ performance was good, researchers often went to considerable lengths to demonstrate that what girls were good at was lower level and conceptually inferior to boys’ strengths. I argued that it was not a simple matter of demonstrating empirically that girls were good or even as good, because what came into play were explanations about the cause of their performance.

A graphic example makes this clear. A teacher said of one 10-year-old boy in her class that his performance was generally poor, with him being just about able to write his own name, but she went on to add that this was not because he was not bright or able but because he could not sit still. What is important about this remark was that it was of a type which was fairly commonly made about boys but never about girls. Poor performance is not taken to be an indicator of necessary lack of ability in the case of boys. Rather, they are active (just can’t sit still).

By comparison, it was common for girls who were doing extremely well to be described as not bright. ‘Her hard work gets her to her standards’ was a typical remark. In order to understand the phenomenon of girls’ performance, I argued that it was not enough simply to demonstrate that empirical research was biased in favour of boys. What counted was that the cause of girls’ and boys’ performance was taken to be different, with girls representing a lack (of concepts, brightness, reason) replaced only with hard work and diligence. This is not a simple matter of bias, but one point in a complex and gendered history both in relation to Reason (the Ratio)
and the work/play dichotomy in which reason was inscribed in modern psycho-educational discourse. For example, while women and girls have been understood as lacking in reason but at the same time holding emotion and irrationality, it is not simply the case that all will be well if they appear to display those reasoning characteristics associated with bourgeois masculinity. Rather, female and male characteristics are developed discursively as inevitably in opposition. As Victorian physiologists argued (cf. Le Doeuff, 1979), it was thought that if middle- and upper-class women were to do intellectual work, it would damage their reproductive capacities, capacities necessary to ensure the future of an Imperial Race, and to further ensure that Britain would not be overrun with degenerate proletarian stock. Considerable scientific efforts went into demonstrating women’s unfitness for reasoning, and this continues in many forms.

During the 20th century, the naturalization of childhood meant that evolutionary and ethological models began to be used in which it was asserted that, as with animals, play was the natural medium of expression for children. Such a concern became manifest in the taken-for-granted assumptions that came to underpin modern primary education. If play was understood as a natural means of expression it also became the method of learning and cognitive development par excellence (see Walkerdine, 1988, for a review). It followed that the ‘natural’ and therefore normal route to rationality was play and not work. Work became outlawed, recalling not only child labour but authoritarianism leading to fascism (Riley, 1983; Walkerdine, 1984).

Boys who seem playful and naughty, who ‘just can’t sit still’, fit the bill in terms of the natural activities that will lead to proper conceptual development. Indeed the British Government Plowden Report on primary education (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) admitted as much on its first page when it said that play was the natural medium in the education of young children and attributed playfulness mostly to boys. For boys, therefore, even those who are not doing well, the cause is clearly natural. Girls, on the other hand, if they display hard work, are caught in a double bind. Their good performance does not have the right cause. Their mathematical prowess signals danger (not proper children, child labour, fascism, etc.). But at the same time it displays precisely those characteristics thought necessary to ensure the reproduction of them as future mothers (not too much taxing intellectual work). I argued therefore (Walkerdine, 1991) that women’s reasoning represented a threat to the Ratio.

My point is that there is a will to truth about Reason which feeds upon the deep threat presented by reasoning women and a related and equally deep desire for women to be present as mothers who ensure the future of a naturally produced democracy (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). The foundation for such work can be demonstrated to be anything but natural and
inevitable, but rather caught in the major fictions and fantasies which are inscribed in the Logos and Ratio which are central to the maintenance of western patriarchal government and culture.

**Childhood in the ‘Under-developed’ World**

When it comes to Other childhoods, the dominant way to deal with difference has been to understand that difference as some lower level on a naturalized developmental scale. If modern ideas about childhood were inaugurated in relation to a bourgeois project which naturalized the practices of the aristocracy (play rather than work) and outlawed child labour, then how are we to understand the millions of children all over the world who work for money? Apart from the very wealthy, who have a western-style childhood, for most of the children outside the West, childhood is a very blurred category. Most do not go to school and out of necessity engage in work when and where possible like the adults. If we go back to the point raised earlier in relation to Ariès’s work, childhood was not a clear-cut category in Europe until the emergence of compulsory schooling. While it is common to assert that non-western children are lacking because their exploitation means that they cannot develop naturally and cannot have a proper childhood, in fact it could be argued that these children demonstrate the very specificity of the concepts upon which childhood and development are founded. The answer therefore would not lie in the application of a universalist paradigm of development to them but to recognize the very historical and geographical specificity of the idea of development.

The fragility of the line between adult and child is particularly clear-cut when it comes to girls both in the West and outside it. Girls (and in this country especially black and white working-class girls) are taken to present more of a problem in relation to childhood, not only because of their work, but because they are said to display sexuality, a sexuality which threatens the idea of a natural childhood innocence (Walkerdine, 1992a, 1992b). They are often described by teachers as precocious and too sexual for their age and they appeal more to images of ‘little women’ drawn from popular culture, rather than those of ‘children’. Moral panics about the overt displays of what is taken to be adult sexuality in young girls, especially in relation to popular music, can be found in the so-called quality press. Of course, one approach to this is to attempt to demonstrate that ‘childhood’ is a ‘real’ category and that girls are being denied it and that their pathology in relation to the categories of childhood further demonstrates the effects of a patriarchal oppression that affects or stunts development. However, such an approach places Others as pathological, leaving a norm of development intact. I am suggesting that it is the idea of development
itself that is specific and at best describes a small section of the world’s population, rather than being a universal concept that demonstrates the psychological concomitants of oppression and exploitation.

Although it is often said that the turn to the postmodern, especially in some of its formulations, appears to reduce everything to discourse, therefore disavowing materiality and oppression, I think that it is possible to see within postmodern approaches the possibility of a story which, conversely, does not reduce oppression to pathology.

There is no reason why the critique of modernity that I have begun to outline should evacuate ‘the real’. Indeed, quite the reverse may be the case.

Take the example of calculation, to which I alluded earlier with respect to the work of Lave (1988); of the calculations made by children who are engaged in selling goods on the streets of many of the world’s cities. Such children are taken to be very astute in their powers of calculation (see, e.g., the work of Nunes-Carraher and her colleagues in Brazil, e.g. Carraher, Carraher, & Schliemann, 1982). However, such children calculate for survival. The money they earn often keeps the family away from starvation. The practices of calculation here in which the children’s subjectivity is inscribed are extremely complex and may mean the difference between eating or going hungry for their family, for example. This means that complex emotional relations and meanings are woven into the practices of thinking. Any approach to this which fails to take account of the fantasy, fear, pain, desire, as well as the economic necessity, of how these practices feed into others and enter a complex web of relationships falls into the modern trap of seeing calculation simply as calculation, a transferable skill which can be separated from the practices of its production. In this analysis the subject does not possess a skill, but rather the subject is created, produced, inscribed in the very practices themselves. There is no prior subject who possesses a skill.

Or take the model of calculation provided by the father reported in the Guardian who had to put a lock on the kitchen door to stop his children getting in and taking food. If they did not go hungry, they would not be able to last on their welfare payments. Such a means of regulating domestic consumption inscribes a subject who is different from the father sitting in the cafe of a London park playing a game of calculation with his son. The father gives the son a calculation to work out, which is about how much cakes and tea would cost. There is no question of lack of money to buy, but there is a strong sense that the playfulness can be afforded and the calculation entered into because there is no danger of there not being enough money to buy the food.

In this instance I suggest that the playful child, the playful aristocrat, the universal child, cover over the possibility of a working child, a working adult, figures who disrupt the cosy certainty of a paradigm in which the
difference is simply deficiency. Hence Tizard and Hughes (1984) refer to 'the power of the puzzling mind of the four year old'. They are referring to specific girls in their sample. By constituting the puzzling mind as a generic possession of 4-year-olds they constitute it as a universal and natural category. Of course their problem comes when they find a 4-year-old does not puzzle. It is worth noting the object of puzzlement and its absence. Tizard and Hughes cite a 4-year-old middle-class white girl who does not understand and hence 'puzzles' why the window cleaner cleaning the windows of her house should be paid for his labours. They contrast this with a more lacking working-class girl who does not puzzle in this way over money. In the latter instance her mother refers to what things cost, that money is earned through labour and that money is scarce all the time. There are no grounds for puzzlement. But Tizard and Hughes, by universalizing the puzzlement, commit modernity's mistake and ignore the particular relations of power and oppression inscribed inside the practices they take to be universal (see Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989, for a fuller discussion).

Such examples show the inherent contestability of the concepts upon which childhood and development rest. I want to see them as at best shaky fictions, but, following Foucault, as fictions that are extremely powerful because they function in truth, and, in so doing, present us with ways to read and understand any difference from the normal and natural. I think that the threat posed by the periphery to the centre is the biggest challenge which modernity faces. That peripheral subjects are not willing to be defined and regulated according to the pathologizing models accorded to them is what most threatens the power of developmental orthodoxy. It is feminist and black work, for example, that has been most vociferous in attempting both to demonstrate the problems in modern developmental psychology and to put forward other possibilities.

Thinking in Practices

I am not proposing a shoring up of modernity by tacking difference onto a developmental model. I think that ship is holed below the water-line. It is sinking and cannot be saved. No, the way forward is far more challenging. It is to account for the production of subjectivity within historically and geographically specific practices, with no clear developmental sequence at all. How is this to be done?

Critical of 'central processor' models of cognition are not new. Indeed, Michael Cole and his colleagues at the Laboratory for Comparative Human Cognition have been researching the issue for some time. Although most of this work has not been applied to development, they have stressed the importance of understanding the production of thinking
as activity generated within specific practices themselves, arguing against a model of transfer of learning from one context to another (e.g. Cole & Scribner, 1974; Laboratory for Comparative Human Cognition, 1981). Cole's early work roundly criticized cross-cultural assumptions of deficiency, pointing to the specificity of both western and Other thinking practices. In their work in the 1970s, Cole, Hood and McDermott (1978) demonstrated that this criticism could be applied to learning by children inside and outside school settings. In one example, they show how Archie, a child designated as learning disabled, is produced as disabled in the classroom and so demonstrate that the thinking is produced as, and in, a specific practice. This has been further theorized by Newman and Holzman (1993) using the work of Vygotsky. Lave (1988) has also developed this framework to examine the specificity of the calculations used in supermarkets and other locations. Lave has an account of activity in practices, but to theorize this relies heavily on structuralism and on Giddens’s account of structuration. This work has become known as situated cognition or situated learning (see, e.g. Kirshner, 1992; Lave, 1988). On one level such work is extremely important for postmodernity, but it still remains rather cognitivist, and subjectivity is poorly theorized (Walker-dine, 1992c). I want to point towards some of the ways it might be possible to take the insights gained from this work on board, but to take them further.

The Subject and Subjectivity

If the central plank of developmental psychology is a modern conception of the individual, any critique of that individual has to see it as a specific form of the subject. Poststructuralist work has stressed the relationship between subjectification (the making of the subject) and subjectivity (the condition of being a subject) (cf. Henriques et al., 1984). The Cartesian Cogito is for Lacan nothing more than a fantasy, one held together by the symbolic processes through which the Social is constituted. Pêcheux (1982) writes of the way in which the modern ‘I’ is created in discourse, so as to forget the constructed nature of consciousness. This ‘forgetting’ covers over exploitation and oppression, just as wealth, poverty, race and gender inequalities are understood within developmentalism as producing a lack, a backwardness. If subjects are produced in practices which are at once material and discursive, the kind of analysis that I am advocating must take into account precisely those aspects outside the frame of a developmental account, aspects which previously would have been considered ‘not psychology’.

I want to show how we might produce accounts which are at once historical, specific, local and yet not relativist. Accounts which are not reductionist or essentialist, which tell the stories suppressed by modernity.
In such accounts there can be no absolute truth, but specific concrete and local analyses. After all, if it is the case that subjects are produced in specific locations, then there is nothing essential about those subjects. In this sense the subject is a textual relation, not coterminous with the person at all. For example, ‘the developing child’ is a subject-position created within psycho-educational discourses. This fiction which functions in truth comes to define actual young persons when incorporated into pedagogic practices. These discursive practices are created at specific historical conjunctures producing a particular nexus of power/knowledge/subject (Henriques et al., 1984).

In order to explore how subjects are created and positioned within discursive practices, it is necessary to examine the relations of signification through which practices are regulated. If discursive practices are both material and discursive, they are created through the relation of signifier and signified. Saussure formulated this as the relation of concept to sound image, a relation which is arbitrary but which allows the possibility of producing an account which is not simply reductionist to materiality, nor which ignores the material. This is not an account of representation and that is extremely important. Representation implies an object represented by language, whereas here we are talking about something created inside a practice which is at once material and discursive (Sinha, 1988). I think that this allows us to take further the analyses of thinking in practices put forward by Cole, Lave and colleagues, by examining how both subject and subjectivity are discursively and semiotically created.

I want to explain what I mean by examining the production of certain kinds of semantic relations within domestic practices. I refer to an account given in more detail in Walkerdine (1988) in which I examine the production and comprehension of the pair ‘more/less’. While these terms are classically understood as being acquired in a particular sequence which relates to their semantic complexity, where ‘more’ is the unmarked term taken to be acquired before the marked term ‘less’, this global and modern account does not acknowledge the way in which the terms are not simply acquired in a fixed sequence. Rather, their usage depends upon the practices in which they are inscribed.

For example, in a study of 30 mothers and their 4-year-old daughters (Tizard & Hughes, 1984) stratified by social class, there was no usage of ‘less’ during two and a half hours of recording at home. Now, ‘more’ and ‘less’ are usually understood as a contrastive pair describing quantity relations. While quantity relations are discussed by the mothers and daughters these terms are not used in their discussions, though comparisons such as ‘a lot’ and ‘a little’ are. Where ‘more’ is used frequently is in the regulation by mothers of their daughters’ consumption, as in injunctions such as ‘no, you can’t have any more until you’ve finished what’s on your plate’.
In this analysis, it is not the case that a particular relation is being represented by a word so much as the *creation* of a relation of signification, such as ‘more/no more’, which has a central place in the regulation of the practice itself. It is therefore created as a relation specifically within that practice. It is not a contrastive pair which can be described linguistically outside of it. Such regulation is intimately bound up with the positioning of the mother as regulator of the domestic economy and is linked to the wealth of the family. For example, working-class mothers on smaller budgets more frequently used ‘more’ in a negative way, as in the phrase ‘no, you can’t have any more’. ‘More’ therefore takes on prohibitive connotations and strong emotional significance. For example, my mother would often use the phrase ‘much wants more’ to describe my lodgings as an undergraduate, which signalled to her that I had so much more than she could ever have dreamt of but still wanted more (Walkerdine, 1991).

From this admittedly small sample, I hope that it is possible to see how a more complex analysis of practices as relations of signification might be accomplished. Such analyses would have to examine how, as in this case, positions of mother and daughter are constituted and made to signify. Such relations are not simply semiotic, but highly emotionally charged. For the working-class child ‘more’ is more likely to be part of a chain of meaning which links it to prohibition, lack, wanting, desire, pain. The mother may come to be positioned as withholding, bad and so forth. I am therefore calling for an analysis which relates relations of signification within practices to the complex conscious and unconscious fantasies inscribed within them (Hall, 1987; N. Rose, 1990; Walkerdine, 1991). Any analysis of this type would of necessity have to break with modernist cognitivism to explore the fantasy inscribed in the fictions.\(^5\) I want to argue that fantasies are deeply inscribed in the production of subjects and that attempts so far to understand thinking as situated are far too cognitivist. They beg a set of voluntarist questions when there is nothing to analyse but the surface of the discourse, suggesting an opposition simply of free will or determinism.

Bhabha (1984) points to the way in which colonial government operates by producing a knowledge of colonial subjects through which they might be regulated, but that the will to truth about those subjects contains ‘fear, phobia and fetish’. For example, in relation to colonial subjects, ‘the lazy black’ is designated as an object that needs ‘training’ or ‘civilizing’ and as an object of fear and phobia, a truth which must be constituted against a constant threat that he must be made to work to prevent rebellion. Such a figure also carries a heavily sexualized masculinity, one which is the object of both considerable fear and desire. If relations of signification inscribed in practices so position subjects, we cannot afford to examine those designations in an over-realist way. For such ‘truths’ describe not the ‘facts’ of negritude, colonial subjectivity, but rather colonial subjection as it is inscribed in the fears and fantasies of the colonizer. The practices produced
through and by these fantasies can themselves have oppressive and real effects (cf. Fanon, 1986; Said, 1988). It is the fact that practices are replete with fiction and fantasy which marks a postmodern turn away from a psychological naturalism. However, I hope that I have demonstrated that such a turn is not necessarily a turn away from materiality, nor a turn away from exploitation and oppression. Indeed, this turn allows those things to be understood where before they could function only as absences, pathologies to be corrected, even if with increased wealth, etc. Here relations of domination are more complex and deeply cross-cut by fantasy. In this analysis, there are no ‘real’ subjects who are not defined and created through those very fantasies in their complex materiality.

We inhabit a world in which signification piles upon signification. For example, if we take Marx’s classic example of the transformation of gold into a commodity, it becomes clear that this is transformation into information, positive and negative integers on a computer screen, where the relation to actual gold is complex and not simply one of representation. Hoskin (personal communication) relates this shift to the invention of double-entry book-keeping where minus quantities can be shown. What is the real and material in this relation? Money in this instance must be material, discursive and fictional, all at once. It is necessary to examine the complexity of what is ‘material’ and how it is inscribed and created in the fictional rather than the modern view of something underlying being represented.

**Beyond Reason’s Dream**

In an era in which children are inscribed in practices which carry increased virtuality, a realist account of action on objects seems increasingly outdated. Growing up on computer games, television and video provides a world of virtual objects, which do not exist in Euclidean space. This dimension needs urgently to be addressed, for it challenges existing realist models.

I attempted to demonstrate elsewhere (Walkerdine, 1988) the way in which so-called abstract reasoning was itself produced within highly specific pedagogic practices, such that what counted as ‘abstraction’ was a particular discursive form in which all external reference had been removed. This was produced by means of semiotic chains in which one discourse was transformed into another. The very specificity and fictional quality of the discourse belied its generalizability and universality. These characteristics, argued Rotman (1985), are produced only in fantasy, a fantasy that he called Reason’s Dream, a dream that things once proved stay proved forever, a truth operating outside the confines of time and space. It is these characteristics which give the discourse its appearance of
generalizability and universality, yet it is a generalizability produced out of a ‘forgetting’ of the very finite and expendable nature of the world, a point made forcefully in ecological politics. All that was felt to be most solid, most rational, melts into the unconscious. The rational world inscribes an elaborate fantasy, yet a fantasy so powerful that it is veridicality: it becomes a fiction which functions in truth in the regulation and government of the modern world. But it is a ‘truth’ which increasingly falls apart in the postmodern world. Verisimilitude reasserts itself against the real.

On the eve of the new millennium some new dreams are needed, some new imaginings for the future. My imagination has led me towards new objects of study. In such work, developmentalism no longer exists, because it is not synonymous with the study of change and transformation. We need to ask ourselves what part this study can play if modernity has been so caught up with the strategies of regulation, of the production of the modern form of the individual. In my analysis, the production of a universally developing rationality was understood as crucial to the survival of a bourgeois democracy which was based on the figure of the human, civilized, advanced and abstract reasoner. It is my contention that at the end of the millennium modernity is in a critical condition. Any attempt to provide new bases for work must come to terms with the political significance of what is being proposed. I think that a move away from a universal developmentalism must be a move away from a pathologization of Otherness. I have argued that the way to deal with this is to produce new narratives which tell of change and transformation in the very specific conditions in which they are produced.

Situated learning paradigms provide us with the beginnings of work which challenges the Cogito. However, there are problems with the way in which this has been theorized and I have suggested the need to look more closely at the relation between semiosis, fiction and fantasy. What I am proposing is not deconstruction, though taking apart the fictions of the present has an important place in the work that I am outlining. The complexity of the position I am presenting is that existing ‘truths’, narratives of development for example, already define the discursive framework in which specific subjection is accomplished. The telling of new stories therefore has to contain the understanding of the effectivity of the old metanarratives.

I argue that such work is neither relativist nor idealist. It should enable us to begin to understand just how accomplishments are produced in practices and how regimes of truth, of meaning, of practices, are produced within particular material and discursive circumstances. We need also to realize that if computers can produce verisimilitude, then fictions can function in truth and, in so doing, can produce effects which have real, that is, practical significance. I have attempted to sketch out, then, what I think might be an exciting turn to the postmodern in the study of the production
of subjects, one which understands change and transformation as accomplished in the convergence of specific practices, placing those practices in a history where the material is inevitably caught up in a web of fiction and fantasy.

Notes

1. Many children in the United Kingdom still do paid work. It is, of course, largely an issue of class. It is far more common for working-class children to work, even in terms of small amounts of low-paid work like paper rounds and later Saturday jobs, never mind the children working illegally in other ways. Such children are understood as deviant in some way.

2. One example of this is the panic about a television show called Minipops which was transmitted on Channel 4 in 1983. The tabloid press saw the show, which featured little children singing pop songs, as a chance for children to be famous, but the broadsheets uniformly saw it in terms of the imposition of a sexuality which denied childhood. The programme was withdrawn.

3. They still use a model of development, as does Vygotsky, but talk in terms of arrested development in the West and the possibility of it continuing throughout life.

4. The semantic features hypothesis relies upon a concept of Kantian universals, semantic and perceptual, to understand a pattern of the acquisition of semantic features, from the less to the more complex.

5. While Lacan’s work is signalled here more than that of any other analyst, his inversion of the Saussurian couplet of signified/signifier to stress the primacy of the signifier is not totally consistent with the stress I am laying on an understanding of practices as simultaneously material and discursive.

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