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Is there a place for individual subjectivity within a social constructionist epistemology?

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The epistemological turn towards social constructionism has become well established within the field of family systemic therapy. Social constructionism has provided therapists with a theoretical rationale for the concentration upon the social context within which individuals and families live their lives. This is a philosophical position that pushes to the margins the positivist premise that individuals have fixed and measurable personalities in favour of a discourse which proposes that the person is encountered differently within different social contexts. Prompted by the growing interest in systemic practice with individuals and by the rediscovery of the psychoanalytic canon within family therapy literature, the adequacy of this position is examined and an attempt is made to open up a space within social constructionist discourse for a theory of individual subjectivity. Findings from a research project are the starting point for this venture. These findings are understood through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, with particular reference to the work of Jacques Lacan.

Keywords: *individual subjectivity*; *constructionism*; *epistemology*; *systemic consultation*.

Introduction

The location of theoretical accounts of systemic therapy within the terms of social constructionist discourse has become well established over the past decade. McNamee and Gergen's (1992) edited volume gathered together the work of key writers to describe their practice within the tenets of a social constructionist epistemology. Social constructionism invites us to eschew notions of a fixed individual

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identity, a personality that may be assessed and subjected to objective scrutiny by social scientists and clinicians alike. We are discouraged from imagining that individuals have characteristics that are observer independent, unmediated by language and which can be decontextualized from social and cultural referents. As systemic therapists who situate our work within the tenets of social constructionist discourse we distance ourselves from a construction of therapy as a scientific activity steeped in Popperian objectivity. We instead reinvent ourselves as master conversationalists with a keen literary ear for the many shifting narratives offered by individuals and the place that these stories occupy within a time and a place.

Family therapists have aligned themselves with postmodernist writers such as Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, in supporting the theoretical turn towards social constructionism (Hoffman, 1993). In doing so a version of subjectivity is proposed which eschews modernist notions of a fixed, stable self in favour of a relational or narrative self (Gergen, 1991; Anderson, 1997). As Gergen (1991, p. 140) puts it, this allows for the 'reconstruction of self as relationship'. The individual subject is, therefore, created and re-created, variously within each interaction, and neither the person herself, nor others, has any privileged access to a 'real' or a 'true' self that transcends these narrated versions. This relational self is a discursive construction, conversationally created.

A corollary of this postmodernizing of subjectivity is that the gaze of clinicians and researchers alike moves from the individual to the interactions, the talk, between individuals. In doing so, one can, with some justification, propose that systemic writers and clinicians might develop our understanding of the relational self through a research method designed to study the self in interaction. Discourse analysis, a research method which is itself located within a social constructionist epistemology, has been used as a vehicle for examining the constructions of the self that take place within family therapy sessions (Stancombe and White, 1997; Roy-Chowdhury, 2006; Pakes and Roy-Chowdhury, 2007).

There are, however, writers who resist this particular postmodernist narrative. Seager (2007) feels the need to put up a 'defense of the individual' from theories that corrode the integrity of the individual. Frosh (1997) queries whether postmodern narratives might be 'muddles in the mind' and tellingly enquires, 'What is outside discourse?' (Frosh, 1999). Flaskas (2002) argues that the social constructionist narrative self cannot take account of the lived experiences

of individuals and, like Frosh (1997), proposes that a subjectivity which is wholly constructed within discourse is insufficient to explain the complexities of a person's passage through their life. These and other dissatisfactions with the postmodernist turn in systemic therapy have led Larner (1995) to look for a way to move beyond the distinctions available between modernism and postmodernism and to propose a 'paramodern' position for family therapy. Elliot (2004, p. 33) elegantly poses this problem with postmodernism thus:

> Self-experience as integral and continuous is displaced in favour of schizoid desire and random libidinal intensities; hence the cynical erasure of subjectivity in certain currents of post-structuralist and postmodern social theory, an erasure which involves a wholesale transmutation of the subject into a subjectless world of images and surfaces, abstract signifiers and disembodied communications.

These writers have signalled disquiet with a social constructionist epistemological turn as they fear that in the refusal to accept that individual subjectivity is fixed and static insufficient space has been left to accommodate an ontology of the individual. They ask the question: Is the proposal that the relational self, contextually specific, constructed and reconstructed within each encounter, a sufficiently robust premise upon which to rest the complexities of individual subjectivity? Unsurprisingly, given the shared epistemological location within social constructionism, some discourse analytic writers have been asking the same question (Parker, 1997). The recent interest in the psychoanalytic project to be found within some systemic circles (*Journal of Family Therapy*, 1997; Pocock, 2006) might beckon one towards a consideration of whether a theory of systemic practice founded upon social constructionism can accommodate the interest in the individual subject, which is, one might say, the *raison d'être* of the psychoanalytic endeavour. At a more abstract level a legitimate question might be: Can a sufficiently robust ontology of subjectivity be inserted into a social constructionist epistemology?

This question is my central preoccupation in this article. As discussed, discourse analysts have grappled with very similar questions of how to construct a meaningful account of the speaking, relating subject, which is more than the words used including the social and cultural discourses evoked within each relationship and each encounter. Hence, rather unusually for a paper submitted to a family therapy journal, I use the findings of a research study where family therapy sessions are examined using a discourse analysis

(Roy-Chowdhury, 2001) to shed some light upon the person revealed in the discussion. Perhaps paradoxically, in order to address the question posed above by Frosh (1999), I look within the talk of participants in order to attend to what stands outside it. This method of addressing this question has within it inherent limitations. I will only have space to illustrate my arguments with snippets of the analysis, and hence will ask the reader to take on trust the summaries of sections of the analysis that I provide. I consider versions of psychoanalysis that may be more or less in tune with the social constructionist turn taken within systemic therapy, and which might allow us to construct a theory of the subject which is both complex and relational. Let us begin this journey in search of the individual subject through a consideration of discourse analysis, the research method, *par excellence*, for examining the narrative self in interaction.

Relativism, realism and discourse analysis

For some discourse analysts the question that I put at the heart of this article is meaningless and epistemologically spurious. For these writers (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1998) the site for scrutiny is the talk of participants which is occasioned and socially situated. Speakers reveal the repertoires available to them within a specific social, cultural and historical context through this social exchange which has its own logic of accountability and positioning. The talk leads the analyst towards an interesting exposition of the social world, the discretionary freedoms available to speakers to create and negotiate meaning, truth and identity from their positions within structures of relative power and privilege. It is the context within the talk that is of interest rather than the personality or motivation of the individual. Agency is always occasioned and provisional rather than real in any material sense. These writers, in common with their systemic counterparts, are critical of the cultural phenomenon of the 'psy-complex' which posits an individual psychic apparatus, that has held generations of psychologists and psychotherapists in its thrall.

Others (e.g. Parker, 1992, 1997; Willig, 1998) distance themselves from an approach to discourse that removes personal choice and agency. Both writers welcome the critical turn away from positivist claims to have discovered a fixed and decontextualized individual psychology and towards the social space as a site of enquiry. However, they see conservative as well as progressive prescriptions that

flow from the relativizing away of the human subject, which make principled objections to abuses of power harder to sustain. Burr (1998, p. 21) summarizes this position:

> While this re-location of the center of gravity away from the individual and into the inter-personal realm is to be welcomed, the absence of 'the person' in any form makes it difficult to see how we might harness such analytic work for the purpose of personal or social change.

Similarly, Parker (1997) points to the insufficiency of a retreat from a complex subjectivity towards a blank subjectivity favoured by some discourse analysts. The person, once decentred from the talk, can be easily dehumanized. A social constructionist relativism can serve to obscure the complex rhetorical work undertaken by individuals in their choice of positioning within available social and cultural discourses. For Willig (1998), these shortcomings of a social constructionist approach to discourse analysis lead her in the direction of critical realism. Critical realism allows for an ontological materialism (i.e. that there are real objects), but that this reality can only be encountered through an epistemic relativism, where knowledge is always socially and historically situated and its study is mediated through the subjectivity of the observer.

A research study

Let us now make an explicit link between discourse analysis and family-systemic therapy by turning to the findings of a study that examined the practice of family therapy through a discourse analysis of session transcripts of the work of three family therapists. In doing so, my intention is not to set out the analysis in any great detail. The full analysis is available elsewhere for the interested reader (Roy-Chowdhury, 2001) or in more truncated forms (Roy-Chowdhury, 2003, 2006). These accounts of the research will also allow the reader to locate the authorial voice and understand a little more about where I am coming from, as it were. Rather, I would like to examine fragments of the analysis itself for clues towards the construction of an individual subjectivity within the talk of participants.

Before examining the findings of this study, I will briefly describe discourse analysis as a research method. As we have seen already in the different views regarding an appropriate epistemological position for the researcher, discourse analysis does not command a definitional unanimity. The most common distinction made by writers is between

a 'micro'-level analysis that is orientated closely to the positions taken by speakers as demonstrated in the talk itself, as opposed to 'macro'-level analyses which seek to situate the talk within social and institutional structures. The approach taken in this study is that advocated by writers such as Wetherell (1998) which resists the micro–macro distinction and uses the talk and the perspectives taken by speakers to examine the positioning of individuals both in relation to each other and in relation to the resources available to them within social, institutional and historical contexts. Talk is seen as performative and the analyst is less interested in the truth or falsity of accounts than in the accounts themselves and what is done with the talk in presenting versions of reality, negotiating meaning and so on. I would direct the reader who wishes to know more about the method to more detailed accounts by Harper (2006) and Heritage (1997).

In offering generalizations from the therapy sessions analysed in the larger study, I remark that:

> The multiple contradictory discourses that create and are created by each individual subject mean that for the therapist to act therapeutically she must hold these paradoxes in mind and be prepared to analyse the meanings that are signified which might be quite other than those which correspond in a simplistic fashion to the words used.
>
> (Roy-Chowdhury, 2003, p. 81)

The following extract provides an illustration of the complexity to be found in each speech act. It is taken from my earlier paper (Roy-Chowdhury, 2003, p. 76) where it is subjected to a discursive analysis. Vikram, a man of Indian origin, is the father of a young man who has been diagnosed as having a mental health problem. Louise is his wife and mother of David. Jean is the therapist:

1. *Vikram*: [Yeah (.) I wanted a very established, very supportive family
2. structure (.) once they come into educational environment and they do
3. get themselves into a certain fashion (.) they'll go outside into the world
4. they'll take a degree or whatever professional qualification and nobody
5. thinks of race or your colour or (.) whatever can throw you out (.) but
6. that's that's what (.) I mean (.) I've heard Western philosophers and

7. people like that and their children they didn't care less of them you know
8. (.) they look after their own and their happiness rather than the happiness
9. of you know the second generation or third generation
10. *Jean*: [Did Louisa have a similar idea do you think?

This brief extract from a session transcript is analysed in terms of cultural referents, the importance of family, education and collectivism, contrasted with a construction of Western individualism. A strong family structure and educational attainment is posited as a defence against discrimination and prejudice and racist discourses of the forced expulsion of migrants. Vikram alludes obliquely to his own experience of discrimination and bolsters the credibility of his own views by contrasting them against the selfishness of 'Western philosophers and people'. A question asked in the analysis is: What is it that Vikram is trying to do with his talk at this point of the session, a session that has been marked by his attempts to elicit advice from Jean and her refusal to give it? Although Jean does not take the talk in this direction, one could imagine another psychotherapist wondering whether Vikram feels it is important to defend his way of bringing up his children, or fears that his views may be rejected by a Western professional, or indeed whether he is questioning the basis of Jean's status as an expert on bringing up children. Is he wondering whether or not Jean herself has children (Roy-Chowdhury, 2003, pp. 76–80)?

It is a consistent finding within the analysis of sessions that it is important for the therapist to be tuned into the multiplicity of meaning to be found within each interaction (see Roy-Chowdhury (2006) for a fuller examination of this finding and its relevance to an understanding of the therapeutic relationship). The theoretical account of the interaction that takes place in family therapy sessions which emerges from the full analysis (Roy-Chowdhury, 2001) is one where there is no easy correspondence between what is said and what is signified by what is said. The dominant realist view in the psychology of language as standing in a straightforward relationship to real objects and real events described by a unitary rational subject is shown to be inadequate (see Hollway, 1989). The words that are used, and the way in which they are used by all parties, has significant effects upon the course of the therapy and cannot be dismissed as insignificant: the therapy is the talk. This talk can only be adequately understood if it is historicized within the unique lives of individuals

and the specificity of their immersion within numerous discourses. Subjectivity is constructed from this multiplicity of influences, and not experienced and enacted by individuals as being unitary and decontextualized but as contingently performed and managed.

The reader will have detected in the above description the emergence of social constructionist premises. However, the view of the subject and of the therapeutic task that emerges can be framed within the precepts of psychoanalytic theory. This is an unsurprising finding given that, once we move beyond the person as scientist favoured by cognitive psychologists and the blank subjectivity allowed within behavioural theory, it is psychoanalysis that shapes the versions of a complex subjectivity that are available to us. It has been argued elsewhere (Parker, 1997; Roy-Chowdhury, 2001) that many of the discourses available to us for describing the subjective space have, since Freud, been couched within the language of psychoanalysis. However, it is important to tread carefully on this terrain. The ubiquity of psychoanalytic explanations within popular culture must not blind us to the particularity and diversity of theoretical positions. There are many versions of psychoanalysis, which, as Parker (1997) has warned, can lead us in conservative as well as progressive directions. Our task is to subject the findings of the textual analysis before us to constructions of subjectivity available from particular readings of psychoanalysis that are not incompatible with the epistemic relativism of discourse analysis: to find an accommodation, as it were, between social constructionist and psychoanalytic 'truth' claims.

A theory of the subject

In attending to the person in therapy's speech, the therapist listens as much to what is not explicitly said, as to what is. It is the tone, inflection, the lapses and hesitations that provide clues to what is being signified, and indeed what may be outside or at the margins of discourse (see Frosh, 1999). This view of the subject is one that is not of a rational, unitary individual whose speech bears an orderly correspondence to its intended meaning. Rather, the person is constituted within multiple and often conflicting discourses which are configured and uniquely sequenced in her speech. She will not be conscious of all of the possible meanings that are evoked, any more than any of the participants within the sessions analysed will have been able to give an account of the complexities to be found in each speech act.

Lacan provides us with a psychic mechanism for the creation of subjectivity from an individual's immersion in cultural discourses which are reproduced through the unique subjectivity of principal caretakers (Chodorow, 1995). For Lacan, the infant's entry into the symbolic realm of the signifier is the start of a fundamental alienation from his desire, simultaneous with his Oedipal repression of desire for the mother (Lacan, 1977). In constructing oneself as a subject and taking the grammatical position of I, desire, which connects signifiers and signified, moves along metaphoric and metanymic axes. Metaphor resembles the unconscious process of condensation where many meanings are condensed into a single idea or image. Metanym, like the intrapsychic process of displacement, is where a significant element of an idea is detached and moves along a signifying chain to another word or image. Repression, condensation and displacement, moving meaning along the two axes of signification, are mechanisms of defence that protect the ego from unacceptable ideas and wishes. The constitution of each individual subjectivity, the immersion into the symbolic realm of cultural prescriptions, begins at the time of the initial repression of desire for the mother and continues throughout a person's life. This original desire enters multiple signifiers, transmuted into more acceptable forms through condensation and displacement, and pervades the individual's positioning in all relationships: 'the desire for the other is the desire for the mother' (Lacan, 1977, p. 286).

This Lacanian analysis provides us with a model for conceptualizing the connections between cultural discourses, language and subjectivity. It provides a map to guide us through the mechanisms by which discourses constitute and are constituted by individuals. But is this sufficient to theorize the use of discourses that we have observed in the analysis? There are some important anomalies, which have also been remarked upon by Hollway (1989) in relation to her discursive analysis, and which are of interest in theorizing the findings of the analysis discussed here.

Hollway (1989) makes use of the work of psychoanalytic writers, notably Klein and Lacan, to theorize the positions taken by participants within her textual analysis. Her assertion of the insufficiency of Lacan's account of subjectivity alone in conceptualizing her findings is based upon earlier critiques by Henriques *et al*. (1984) and Frosh (1987). Hollway found in her analysis, as I have found in mine, that there is some consistency in the ways in which individuals position themselves in relation to others and in relation to discourses. In my

analysis I found that therapists reproduced in their speech interpretive repertoires available to them in unique patterns. People in therapy similarly repeated their positioning in relation to discourses of power/knowledge, gender, culture, spirituality, and so on, in interactional sequences throughout the course of the therapy. For example, the positions taken by Jean and Vikram in negotiating discourses of power, gender and culture were enacted repetitively, although with variations in the resources employed. The specificity of each individual's location among many contradictory discourses that are each a product of contextually and historically bound cultural forces is not emphasized in Lacan's work. Rather:

> the symbolic is a monolithic system. Similarly, although Lacan recognizes that subjectivity is achieved in the context of the other, this other is also an abstract, timeless concept, not located in specific discourses and power relations.
>
> (Hollway, 1989, p. 59)

In returning history and context to the individual's use of language and positioning within dominant discourses, Derrida and Foucault provide a necessary post-structuralist reworking of Lacanian theories of meaning and subjectivity, which is more in accord with findings of the discursive analysis presented here. The emphasis of these writers upon the contextual specificity of meaning allows for a reinterpretation of subjectivity, which is held, enacted and discovered within intersubjective relationships. Furthermore, Foucault's interest is in the content of the discourse, the words used within specific contexts, and hence in tune with the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism, and indeed of discourse analytic methodologies; whereas Lacan's is a formal system of four positions or discourses, of the master, the hysteric, the analyst and the university, which exist prior to the spoken word. The subject's entry into the symbolic realm of language marks a fundamental alienation from her true self, and as this truth cannot be signified, all communication is doomed to failure (see Varharghe (2001) for a fuller account of Lacanian discourses).

A post-structuralist reworking of Lacanian theory allows for the subject to be located within a social and cultural context and for the construction of subjectivity that is founded upon the specific nature of the interaction between the speaker and the listener. The other is not drawn from a number of templates, but is specific to each encounter between individuals within a particular time and place. The same signifier signifies differently within each encounter, although it may

be drawn from the same discourse. The history of each individual influences that person's participation and reproduction of discourses, which can only be accorded meaning within a relational context.

In positioning herself selectively in relation to discourses of gender and culture, Jean, one of the therapists in the analysis, protects herself from being in a less powerful position than Vikram. Conversely, Vikram seeks to position himself as having more power to determine the conversational formats employed within the therapy. These manoeuvres may be understood in relation to both of their individual histories, specifically Jean's experiences of powerful men and Vikram's experiences of younger women within an Indian culture and of racism in Britain, as well as the specific contingencies of the encounter set out in the analysis.

This protection of the self from vulnerability and powerlessness recurs as an organizing principle for the places in which participants locate themselves in relation to others. Let me illustrate this with an example from the session transcripts. David and Julia have sought help for their own troubled relationship and the effects of high levels of conflict between them upon their children. David has, in the past, hit Julia. Liz is the therapist:

1. *Liz*: [David, you talked about your dad beating you and I just wondered
2. when you hear Julia talking about (.) you know (.) *she* says that one of the
3. ways she tried to deal with the violence was to try and keep things perfect
4. (.) do it as she thought you wanted it to be done (.) and I wonder (.) do
5. you recognize that from when you were a child?
6. *David*: No.

Liz describes David's 'dad beating you', whereas when describing David beating Julia, she removes subject and object and softens her description to 'the violence'. Note here again David's indication that he does not want to talk about his violence against Julia by his minimal response. For David, a participant in therapy sessions, to be constituted as a 'man who beats his wife' leaves him intolerably weakened and vulnerable, and hence all the participants seek to rhetorically protect him from this disgrace.

Louisa (Vikram's wife) finds the vulnerabilty of her position as someone in need of professional psychological help intolerable. Here

is Louisa, who comes from a highly verbal Italian culture, pathologizing the necessity for the family to see a psychologist in order to be able to talk:

1. *Louisa*: Actually I can't understand why do we have to come over to
2. talk (.) can't we talk at home? (.) *but* I think it's because we don't talk at
3. home that we have come to this point (.) I don't know about what is in
4. him (.) if for him is useful or not or (.) you know (.)if he wants to keep
5. coming and having help (0.2) I don't know because we don't talk (.) but
6. just to say these things (.) is not possible to talk at home is also is so (.)
7. is not natural isn't it (.) you need a psychologist or somebody because (.)
8. you can't *talk*.
9. *Jean*: So what sort of talking would you be looking for?
10. *Louisa*: Anything (.) I mean even exchanging ideas and saying 'how are you?'
11. ((Louisa continues))

These and many other corroborating findings lead me to adopt a Foucauldian analysis of the fundamental importance of power in creating and configuring the intersubjective space within which all relationships exist and are discursively enacted.

Billig (1999) posits a dialogic model of repression that is in tune with this explanatory framework. His too is a culturally and situationally specific view of the mechanisms by which an individual learns to repress, remove from discourse and from conscious thought, that which is shameful within a given time and place. Billig's thesis, intriguingly constructed from a textual analysis of Freud's case studies, is that each individual becomes socialized into blocking from conversation, and hence from conscious attention, those desires that are forbidden. Thus an impression of competence is maintained in relation to others and the social self is protected from vulnerability and shame. That which is repressed may be alluded to within the subject's speech and equally may be detected through lapses, omissions and errors.

Subjectivity, discourse and psychoanalysis

I have sought to locate the subject within the postmodern relativity of contextualized but depersonalized talk that has been the focus of interest for some systemic and discourse analytic writers. To return the person, in all her complexity and variability, to the talk, as it were. This theoretical insertion seems to me to be a necessary precursor to Flaskas' (e.g. 1996) project to assert the importance of the therapeutic relationship within the 'depersonalized discourse' (Flaskas, 1996, p. 266) of systemic therapy.

The person who we discover, the agent of the talk, is a paradox. She has a strong sense of her uniqueness, conferred upon her by the sense she makes of her history. Yet she is only discoverable through encountering her, talking to her. And her talk is extraordinarily variable and subject to the specific contingencies of each situation. The multiple contradictory discourses that create and are created by her preclude the possibility of a single, unitary, rational subject, although this is one of the dominant Western discourses within which her subjectivity is located (Guilfoyle, 2002). For the therapist to act therapeutically, she must hold these paradoxes in mind and be prepared to analyse the meanings that are signified which might be quite other than those that correspond in a simplistic fashion to the signifiers used. She must also be attuned to her own subjective experience in the therapy session in relation to others. This will give her clues as to where she is being positioned by others and the effects of her own speech upon participants. This requires considerable skill and expertise.

The further step is a theory of the subject encountered in therapy. A post-structuralist version of subjectivity drawn from psychoanalytic, specifically Lacanian, theory, modified by the work of Foucault and Derrida, provides a position that is congruent with these research findings. This account of the person is capable of accommodating both the variability of the talk of participants and its consistency, and is congruent with family therapy's interest in the social. Frosh (1997) has already made reference to Lacan's work in problematizing the narrative turn in contemporary family therapy theory. My study supports Frosh's (1997, p. 98) assertions that a reading of postmodernism in family therapy theory which posits a straightforward relationship between the person in therapy's speech and 'narratives' signified is flawed, as (after Lacan) the real 'stands outside the symbolic order'. My findings add credence to a view of language as

standing in multiple, contradictory and complex relationship to that which is signified by the subject. The therapist must listen for this complexity, for that which is subjugated, concealed, implied, within the socially sanctioned speech that emerges.

The view of individual subjectivity to which the analysis has led me is a contradictory social creature for whom interactions with others are organized within relational, institutional and cultural fields. The sense she makes of the demands of multiple discourses is governed by her unique history, which is itself a history of immersion in cultures and subcultures. My analysis, in common with Hollway's (1989), points to the importance of power in organizing the enactment of relationships. Positioning within discourses follows Foucauldian principles of the reproduction of power relations and the protection of the self from vulnerability and anxiety. In making this last step, a theory of the self emerges that is in tune with the interest in power to be found in contemporary family therapy theory, but in proposing a protection of the self/ego from anxiety, one finds an interpretation of psychic mechanisms that has some resonance within Kleinian theory. This bridge from Lacan via a Foucauldian analysis of power predicated upon a Kleinian premise of intrapsychic defences against anxiety is a juxtaposition that Lacan would surely have resisted.

It is true to say that psychoanalysis, even in its most radical and progressive forms, does not situate itself within a relativist paradigm, but rather posits real personality structures, developed through real personal experiences and amenable to fixing within classificatory systems. The complexity of reading and fixing the subject in this way through the subjective assessment of the assessor is variably emphasized. Lacanian theory with its post-structuralist influences has been employed in bridging this philosophical gap, in shaping a version of interiority that is embedded in and reproduced from cultural forms. Agency is shaped within social and cultural discourses, relationally mediated within regimes of power, and then enacted and understood within this social and relational realm. However, the person whom we encounter is both constructed by social and cultural rules and alienated from her desires by these same rules. If we imagine that there is a pre-Sassurian correspondence between what each of us may say and an external reality, we miss much that is signified in speech and at the margins of what is said.

In making use of a post-structuralist reading of psychoanalytic theory we have found a way of adding complexity to the relational self posited within some versions of social constructionism. Elliot (2004)

confidently explores similar territory in locating the subject within postmodern readings of psychoanalysis. He invites a celebration of the 'psychoanalytic rehabilitation of irrationality at the heart of rationality' as an antidote to 'modern selves' which are 'constituted through a repudiation of difference and heterogeneity' (pp.16–17).

This is a construction of personal agency that I would support and which can be accommodated within the postmodernist turn taken within systemic theory.

The findings of the study set out in this article lead one to a similarly complex version of the speaking, relating self. This allows us, I would contend, to thicken our understanding of a relational ontology of subjectivity within a social constructionist epistemology.

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