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Between personal identity and social subjectivity. The implications of education in the subjective constitution

Susana Seidmann

Universidad de Belgrano, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina

In the contemporary world, the conceptualization of subjectivity is undergoing a state of crisis and problematization (Rose, 2011). The great acceleration of life experiences, along with the effects of globalization and the immediacy of reciprocal influences, finds us immersed in a world where diversity and alterity assume great importance. The presence of the 'other', the 'no self', draws a boundary line between the experiencing subject and the others.

The social imaginary conceived as the universe of meanings that mold a society is intrinsically related to the problem of power, which defines social hierarchies, value systems and practices, as well as the social bonds in social life. This process strongly impacts men's and women's subjectivities, organizing and giving meaning to human acts.

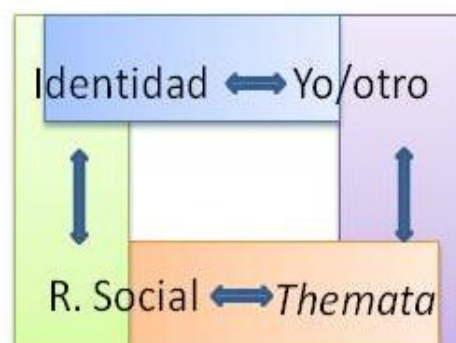
Different theoretical approaches regard the construction process of the social subject as a space to be problematized. They make reference to the emergence of the person, the processes of identity construction, the appearance of subjectivity in dialogical and narrative contexts, the corporal register of subjectivity, the decentered, multiple, nomad subject, and alterity. These definitions coexist with substantial levels of discussion and even of conceptual contradiction. It is a long-held debate that has never reached a definitive conclusion. The boundaries between social subjectivity and identity processes continue to be blurred, though they still constitute the matter of theoretical discussion. However, these theories

include the *other* as the one who defines the possibility of being, of self-recognition in the specular reflection. “The *other’s* gaze makes me who I am”; it is the other who defines me and gives me identity. The reflection on the subject’s construction involves the existence of an ‘other’ who gives meaning to his/her existence. I can only assume my uniqueness by sharing social spaces with others. This process gives rise to the constitution of social/collective identities. In other words, subjective positions result from the construction of knowledges about the world and about oneself, only in relation to others. Such knowledges are addressed in terms of social representations.

### **Representations, Identity, and Social Practices**

Thinking of identity construction from the perspective of the Theory of Social Representations (Moscovici, 1961, 2005; Jodelet, 1984, 2000; Marková, 2006) makes it possible to address different psychosocial processes:

- 1- Identity as an intersubjective product.
- 2- Social representation as the expression of identity.
- 3- The *themata* as an essential part of social representation.
- 4- The symbolic interdependence Self/Others.



### **1. Identity as an intersubjective product:**

Symbolic Interactionism is grounded in the construction of the self in the process of social interaction, which gives rise both to the individual subject and to society. This process is articulated by meaning; people act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them, and these meanings are constructed in interpersonal interactions and recreated permanently in the social process. Meanings are the great 'articulators' of the social process, thereby constituting not only society but also people. Therefore, the notion of the self is inextricably linked to the other's recognition, insofar as attributed meanings are shared in the social space. *The other recognizes and constitutes me* as a person by means of his/her gaze, which personifies me and allows me to see the world as others see it. Thus, I incorporate the 'generalized other' (Mead, 1968; Berger & Luckmann, 1972), that is to say, the most important meanings in my life, whose presence will guide me and allow me to develop in this world.

Bruner (1991) argues that there is a *distributed self*, insofar as I constitute myself by communicating with a myriad others, who recognize me and with whom I share social life. Bruner (2003) ascribes the creation of the Self to inner aspects - such as memory, feelings, ideas, beliefs, and subjectivity - and outer aspects - such as others' esteem and the expectations derived from the culture in which we live. In addition, the Self narrates itself and others by drawing upon the cultural models of the environment and the historical time, which point towards what the Self should and should not be. When the Self narrates itself, it is justified by what it is.

On the other hand, identity is also constituted on the basis of difference, inasmuch as I differ from the others with whom I share common experiences and from whom I diversify on the basis of my unique characteristics.

In this intersubjective context, identity is constructed, therefore, on the basis of otherness – the recognition of the other different from me – and on the basis of alterity – as a product and process of social construction and exclusion (Jodelet, 2002). Taub claims clearly that the construction of identity imposes on man the task of imagining an other, building the symbolic constructions, the values and forms having to do with the self and with the relations with alterity (Taub. 2008). Thus, the intersubjective social context becomes the stage where the subjective constitution is shaped, in the interplay between the personal and the socio-historical worlds. Addressing this aspect in terms of education, as stated above, would involve the way in which the experiences within educational institutions of workers (the teachers) and of students (the youngsters outside the formal schooling system) intervene in identity construction. The workers' narratives about how dedicated their labor is, about the poor working conditions, and about "doing everything they can for their students" contribute to shaping a social space of "true vocation".

An ongoing research study at the University of Buenos Aires characterizes 'invisible youngsters' as those who '*lack social insertion*' in formal social structures; studying their exclusion in the formal labor and educational systems involves studying their social representation of education (Vera, 2005; Reutlinger, 2001; Berkman, 2007). Other ways of identity construction derive from the peer groups and their own geography, interrelated with the territories they inhabit and with their attempts to preserve their spaces with their identity marks.

Youngsters experience of failure, which entails having been unable to meet the expected standards set by the school system and the way that adults view their inability to make an effort, results in their experience of an inadequate self, which does not account for the social and cultural dimensions of exclusion from education.

## **2. Social representation as an expression of identity:**

In reflecting about social subjectivity as the object of study of social psychology, Moscovici (2005) highlights that the identity question is not only a question of difference and similarity, but also, and above all, one of interdependence and interaction, transforming us in the social field. Therefore, the relationship with the other bears extraordinary relevance. The other confirms my way of being, as a result of both similarity and difference. In this process of social interdependence, we keep recreating ourselves from our subjectivity, together with the others. This is how we generate the dynamic social process.

Social representations provide knowledge and beliefs about the self and others, about society, thus participating in the feeling of identity by relating all of these perspectives. The different types of representations – about the self and the group, social representations, representations of the society, and collective representations - are participatory spaces involving shared knowledge and values that constitute social identity. Such bodies of knowledge are called identity representations, and they are the foundation for the feeling of identity (Deschamps & Moliner, 2009).

Maintaining identity is one of the functions of social representations and an influence on the culture of reference groups that provide the symbolic possibility of identity construction. Similarly, ideology overdetermines social representations as well as knowledge processes, and provides social meanings that lead to social practices. Regarding the teaching practice, there still is a hegemonic social representation ruling that *“to become a teacher, all you need is a vocation”*. Likewise, with regard to the youngsters that are not included in the school system, the unmet expectations in terms of what is considered ‘normal’ by society give rise to a social representation concerning the lazy youngster stigmatized *“it’s not that he/she can’t, but rather he/she doesn’t want to”*.

Marková holds that social representations are part of the symbolic environment in which people live. At the same time, this environment is reconstructed by the individuals' activities (Marková, 1996).

Along these lines, Castorina (2010) argues in favor of observing the nature of ontological reality that symbolic context have for people. This nature contributes to perpetuating the environment by means of the habitual and automatic activities that recycle and reproduce social practices.

In this sense, the identity of the teachers is linked to the particular task of teaching or leading the pedagogic process, and such specificity is the source of their social legitimacy, which endows their everyday practice with a public sense. An understanding of this social self provides evidence for the role played by the subjects – the teachers – included in a social order and a historicity (Jodelet, 1984, 2000, 2006). For youngsters, “freewheeling, being irresponsible, not wanting to, and having problems” are reported as the main reasons for not going to school. They are constructions about the self, resulting from the agreement between the lived experiences and the expectations and fears concerning future practices.

Such perceptions about the self are complemented by the perceptions that reference groups have about themselves and their practices. Both the perception of the ‘significant others’ and that of the “chorus” are crucial for identity construction. Comparison parameters are constantly established between the social demand of others and the construction of one's own value measures.

### **3. The *themata* as constitutive of the social representation**

Given that social representations are registered in preexisting thoughts, they depend on traditional as well as current, emerging values that are spread through discourse. This double nature between the two types of values accounts for the complexity and contradiction in the constitution of social representations. This symbolic construction evokes old as well as current meanings, thereby constituting

an emblematic cliché. These representations are central semantic nuclei that create stories, actions, and events sustained over long periods of time. There is a *thematization* process in language, which involves the identification of meaning nuclei – explicit references that are the key to understanding experiences. A content is associated with an action, and interpretations are generated in a semantic context. This is how objectivizations are generated as a constitutive process in social representations. These themes – themata – are primary ideas that underlie collective representations. They are archetypes linked to culture and history and deeply embedded in the genesis and structure of the world. These themata involve thematic oppositions or contradictions between different existing knowledges. They persist over time as part of our collective memory, as part of the process of social anchorage. Gender differences in the strong-man/fragile-woman opposition, sustained throughout centuries of patriarchal domination, is an example of themata (Moscovici & Vignaux, 2000).

Marková (2006) discusses Moscovici's dialogical relation, Ego-Alter-Object, as a threefold relation in which people confirm each other in an intersubjective context. The themata appear, then, as archetypes of antinomian knowledges, which are present in every culture, constituting social representations. The themata, which Marková regards as the most important concept within the theory of social representations, are thought of as concepts in opposition. They arise as relational categories, in dialogical symbolic thought, enabling us to see the ever-moving reality, and therefore, to stop thinking in terms of stable categories. We see reality in relations in which, for one category to exist, the opposite category must also exist and give meaning to the former, such as man-woman, up-down. The themata are embedded in common sense and passed on thoughtlessly from generation to generation, thus constituting social representations. The themata are made public and shared by the members of a culture. Thus, they problematize experience by giving rise to social representations. They also create discussions, struggles, and arguments. The construction of identity then emerges from re-elaborated context and discourse. It is born out of communicational spaces and may circulate in

implicit communication throughout many generations, changeless, unconscious of these common-sense knowledges. In the dialog between *Ego* and *Alter*, there is a reciprocal search for social recognition. *Ego* wishes to be treated with dignity and respect by *Alter*, and vice versa, thus mutually validating their identities.

'Invisible youngsters' appear as those *other* youths beyond the reach of traditional institutions, often including the so-called 'at-risk youths'. These youngsters are educated outside the institutions, in non-formal contexts denied by the adults, which render them invisible, unsafe, and problematic from the perspective of the hegemonic social representation. However, from a broader perspective, non-formal education works well, in the sense that it provides youths with the necessary tools for labor and social life (Seidmann et al., 2012).

Bauman (2005) posits that these subjects are the non-recognized waste of globalization processes, the human residue that weighs significantly and for ever in the liquid, modern, consumer culture of individualization. They saturate all the most relevant sectors of social life and tend to master vital strategies and alter the most important activities in life, promoting the creation of their own *sui generis* waste: failed human relations that are incapable, invalid, unfeasible, born out of imminent residue. Failure to participate in the traditional institutions of public life – work, school, and others – implies that the social interaction occurs in other socially non-visible territories / scenarios.

In turn, we found that the most significant dimensions of *being a teacher* are vocation, paid labor, and professionalism. These categories correspond to the Ego-Alter themata; in the objectivization process there is a tension between vocation viewed as a 'true calling' and paid labor, in which the teaching role is seen as devalued and powerless. The dialogical nature of the themata is re-semantized in the discourse of professionalism (Seidmann et al, 2009).



#### 4. Symbolic interdependence Self/Others:

At the dawn of Social Psychology, George Mead stressed the importance of communication in the constitution of the self, as it allows the roles of others to be incorporated, and the person to observe him/herself from the perspective of the other, assuming him/herself as the subject and object of experience. This process occurs in the context of social interaction, where special relevance is placed on the construction of meanings towards which the subject's actions are guided (Mead, 1968). Duveen (2001) points out that one of the primary functions of social representations is the construction of social objects that provide social actors with a stable pattern of meanings.

From the perspective of Social Constructionism, the self is considered in terms of narrative. We tell stories about ourselves, to others and to ourselves. We also experience our relationships with others through narratives; thus, the self is constructed through communication, in the context of continual conversations (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

According to Jodelet (2006), considering the problem of identity arises from a reflection about the *other* and the *others*, as representative of the diversity among people, and of alterity, as a gradient that ranges from closeness – inclusion – to difference – exclusion. The self is always shaped in relation to an *other*, a different person who constitutes me from the start. Alterity involves a space of discrimination attributed to some social character. Social representations allow us to study these related processes, because they provide us with the theme of the culture, its symbolic aspect that shapes common sense.

This matter is addressed by Touraine (2009), who states that the conditions of a person's life depend on the conditions of others' lives. This is an exchange among subjects, mutually perceived and recognized as such.

Moscovici argues that social subjectivity expresses, above all, the interaction between social selves, in a conscious alliance (Moscovici, 2005). This author

takes up Mead's idea that the person is not a passive member of the community, but someone who reacts actively to the presence of others, and this reaction transforms the person.

In addition, Doise (1973) holds that the social representations molded in and between groups are an organizing principle and a generator of meanings of a collective nature, whose contents crystallize in interactions by means of ideas, maxims, and images. These representations among groups perform two functions: they justify the behaviors of each group and anticipate them. They build, in this way, what Deschamps and Moliner define as *identity representations*, which people construct with the knowledges and beliefs they have about themselves and about certain groups (Deschamps & Moliner, 2009). These representations enable people to verify how similar to and different from others they are, and these comparisons make the representations evolve.

The tension between the vocation and the profession is an organizing axis for the subjective conflicts and the social identity of teachers. Whereas participants consider being a teacher as an innate 'gift', they indicate that as regards their profession, 'training' and 'personal effort' are their main obtained achievements. There is an argumentative dichotomy in the subjects. An image of teaching as a 'calling', as a 'mission', is constructed, whereas professional training is seen as an individual responsibility, which reinforces the need for the teacher to be committed, accountable, self-denied. Professionalism involves an underlying mission, prototypical of teaching, that used to be attributed to the vocation. Thus a discourse of identity self-legitimation is constructed (Seidmann et al, 2008, 2009).

Youngsters' exclusion from the formal educational system is attributed, by themselves, to individual causes, but this explanation does not account for the institutional and pedagogic failure of the model to adjust to social and economic challenges, or to youth, which is defined as unique, while the need to think of it as a situated category is ignored. This cognitive operation – reduction – is defined by Jodelet (2001) as one of the transformations taking place in the construction of

social representations. It is used for responding to the coercive effect of social rules and demands involved in blaming the self and ignoring the material, social, economic, political, and cultural conditions of all possible paths. The participants' narratives make evident that the School, whether a youngster is included in it or not, operates as an identity-shaping institution. Although definitions persist in conceptualizing it as homogeneous and static, the school needs to be problematized.

## **Conclusions**

Throughout this work, we have considered the diverse approaches and perspectives on the problem of subjective construction and identity definition, and we may conclude with what Martuccelli (2007) calls *identity fragilities*. Given the great existing tensions between the constitutive forces of identity, there is a difficult articulation between the individual subject and the changing social and cultural traditions. Subjective constitution is closely linked to the political experience that defines the modes of social relation (Duschatzky, 2007). Nevertheless, the inclusion of a subject in a social tradition, however problematic it may be, gives it a sense of stability and continuity, tying his/her experience to that of others and generating a feeling of social belonging.

These achievements create a fertile field in which the teaching practice may bridge the diverse generations along a path that will certainly unfold discontinuous and permanent values.

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