Subjectivity and work: Critical-theoretical reflections

Thomas Teo

York University, Department of Psychology, Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

Because psychology lacks a comprehensive theory of subjectivity that accounts for the entanglement of the social, cultural, historical, interpersonal, and personal, relevant elements for a theory of subjectivity are identified and presented. An important dimension for a theory of subjectivity is the reality of living everyday life, which includes working, relating, as well as self-processes. However, traditional psychology, including philosophical psychology, has neglected the role of work in mental life. It is argued that it is insufficient to address interaction and relationality or internal processes in the development of a theory subjectivity. Using Hannah Arendt's and Nancy Fraser's distinctions, it is argued that political-philosophical reflections on work remain important for understanding subjectivity. Consequences for an approach that includes work in a theory of subjectivity are discussed.

Keywords

Subjectivity – mental life – philosophical psychology – political economy – labor phobia

Arguments that psychology needs a theory of subjectivity have been expressed increasingly inside and outside the discipline (e.g., Rey, Martinez & Goulart, 2019). The ongoing subdivision of mental life into minute parts, hollow concepts and quantifiable variables and the lack of theoretical integration have shown that the natural-scientific approach remains insufficient to solve significant foundational problems in the field of mental life (Teo, 2018a). It has become historically and conceptually evident that the *psychological sciences* are not able to address the problem of subjectivity and that the *psychological humanities* are needed (Teo, 2017). Arguably, ignoring a theory of subjectivity will leave the theory and practice of psychology impoverished. Yet, it should be apparent that any proposed theory of subjectivity will remain preliminary due to temporality and contextuality of psychological phenomena and that it may be more appropriate to reflect on the conditions for the possibility of such a theory.

From the perspective of the psychological humanities, subjectivity refers to the *wholeness of first-person somato-psychological life*. This means not to isolate and privilege one dimension of mental life (e.g., cognition, the unconscious, behavior, affects) and that *physis* and the body need to be included in a theory of subjectivity, whereby they refer not only to natural but also socially constituted entities (e.g., gendered body).

The focus on first-person mental *life* includes the idea that psychologists need to understand subjectivity in the actual *conduct of everyday life* (see also Holzkamp, 2016), which is embedded in history, culture, society, lifeworlds, communities, relationships, and the personal. A theory of subjectivity neither neglects the socio-historical dimensions of subjectivity nor the intricacies of inner life. I submit that a theory of subjectivity that accounts for knowledge cannot be gained by reinterpreting ideas of grand thinkers but must be gained from the „objects" themselves, which include current empirical (quantitative or qualitative) research on mental life.

Theorizing subjectivity

They are several *elements* in a theory of subjectivity, but for the purpose of this argument the most important principle is the *entanglement of socio-subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and intra-subjectivity*. From a critical-theoretical tradition, this entanglement refers to an overarching principle, from which all psychological contents and functions must be understood (it does not mean that this principle always plays out in the same way). Socio-subjectivity should account for the historical, cultural, and societal dimensions of

subjectivity. It refers to those parts of an individual subjectivity that incorporate and transform societal forms of subjectivity (socio-historical mentalities). From that perspective, societal conditions neither determine mental life nor are they autonomously chosen, but subjects suture themselves into those conditions, on the background of intersubjective (e.g., relational) and intrasubjective (thinking, feeling, willing, desiring, etc.) processes and contents. *Entanglement* means that socio-subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, and intra-subjectivity are always connected to the point that they cannot be disentangled in an adult person.

Societal conditions are more than *premises* of actions (Holzkamp, 1983) because they are entangled and embodied in human subjectivity. From the perspective of entanglements, neither external nor internal realities alone (when conceptually separated) account for subjectivity. Thus, psychological topics such as suicide, sexuality, language, power, and so on, must be understood in the nexus of socio-historical, interpersonal and personal processes and contents. The same applies to more recent concepts such as *responsibilization* and *psychologization*. In short, every psychological function, expression or experience needs to be understood and analyzed based on the entanglement of those dimensions. Although this point appears trivial, the trivial needs to be given voice, and, strangely, is not incorporated into psychological research or practice.

Subjectivity cannot be understood sufficiently if psychologists focus only on internal dynamics without discussing societal, historical and cultural realities. Perhaps in *unicultural* societies it was convenient to ignore something that was crucial but appeared self-evident. On the other hand, critical approaches need to include the personal when theorizing subjectivity. From this perspective, subjectivities are captured sufficiently neither in mainstream psychology, nor in psychoanalysis, phenomenology, or cultural-historical psychologies. For instance, thinking about entanglements allows one to include topics such as privilege (as a psychological topic), where society, history, culture, interpersonal and personal discourses and materialities are entangled (see also Teo, 2016). One might not be aware of one's privileges, but they are still part of one's subjectivity.

Certainly, the entanglement can lead to unique constellations in different individuals. This means that subjectivity is *unique and irreplaceable*, which is another philosophical element in a theory of subjectivity. Other elements include that subjectivity is embedded in *concrete everyday life, its temporality and contextuality* (including class, gender, race), that subjectivity is *constituted and/or mediated through materialities and discourses* (including technologies), *that subjectivity comprises both actuality and*

potentiality (what happens and what is possible in subjectivity), and that *subjectivity exists in concrete forms of subjectivity* (e.g., fascist subjectivity). Here is not the place to discuss these principles, but to emphasize that subjectivity needs to be understood and analyzed from how people live their everyday lives. Indeed, human beings live their lives engaged in work (or play), in family and community, and in self-practices. For many adults, a significant amount of time is given not only to interacting with other persons and relating to themselves, but also to *working* (temporal changes take place over a lifetime). It is epistemologically peculiar that not more effort has been invested in psychology in understanding subjectivity on the background of work.

Labor, interaction, self

Indeed, it was Marx and Engels (1958) who suggested the constitution of the human species through *labor*. Whereas particular material conditions, eating, drinking, and procreating are pre-conditions for human existence, humans become different from animals when they start to produce. For Marx, as Arendt (1958 / 1998) argued, labor and not God created humans, and labor and not reason distinguished humans from other animals. Marx did not exclude *interaction* in the concept of productive relations, but primacy was given to labor, and language was understood as necessitated by work. As feminist theorists have pointed out, Marxism promoted a gender-biased understanding of work because its focus on production neglected and dismissed the importance of care or service work, historically often accomplished by women (e.g., Mies, 1994). With a male focus on productive wage-labor, the many forms of unpaid labor have been overlooked and undertheorized.

In the Marxist tradition, labor meant an instrumental relationship that transforms nature. The idea of tool making and language as a tool remained even in Vygotsky's (1978) theorizing, who spent much time reflecting on language. To a certain degree it is also reflected in Holzkamp's (1983) critical psychology when in the transition from human-animal to human-societal life, language is understood as secondary. However, the linguistic turn in philosophy also meant a re-focusing in critical traditions on interaction. Assuming that labor was insufficient as a core category in social thought, the second-generation German critical theorist Habermas (1968) included *interaction* as a category, emphasizing the duality of human existence, expressed in his reconstruction of Hegel's Jena lectures. Habermas developed sophisticated analyses of communicative action but as a result neglected labor. In the next generation of German

critical theory (e.g., Honneth, 1992), labor has been orphaned or subsumed under recognition.

Arguably mainstream psychology neglects both models (labor and interaction) and in philosophical psychology the primacy of interaction is cemented, advanced as *dialogue*, *conversation* and as part of a *relational ontology* (e.g., Gergen 2009). Forgotten is that most current humans spend significant amounts of time working, often in wage-labor or in precarious labor. An *interaction-only-model* of human beings would not be able to explain how humans conduct their lives in real societies. It is fair to argue, that mainstream psychology and significant parts of philosophical psychology have constructed a homunculus that engages with the self, narrates, is in dialogue, and converses with others – an entity that may even be constituted by history and society – but does not work. Labor and associated categories such as wealth, money, debt, income inequality, dispossession, economic privilege, and production hardly appear in psychological reflections on subjectivity.

Philosophies of work

It is suggested that both labor and interaction are important for understanding subjectivity. Following the arguments of the psychological humanities, psychology needs to engage with social and political theory for a deeper understanding of work. It seems obvious that a theory of work developed more than 150 years ago will probably be insufficient. For psychology the philosophical question on how human beings constitute themselves is less significant than describing how actual humans live their lives, which includes not only interacting, self-relating (relaxing, self-regulating, exercising, making selfies, etc.) but also working. Psychologists may not need to suggest criteria on how humans and animals are different, but must understand that humans live their lives differently. Two examples of how psychologists can think about subjectivity in the context of work are discussed here. I suggest looking at Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) ideas from the 1950s, which provides a system for understanding work and human doing, and at the contemporary scholarship of Nancy Fraser (born 1947) who developed a multi-dimensional relational concept of work.

Arendt (1958 / 1998) points out that Western thought has had a contempt for labor from Aristotle who considered laborers as necessary but not part of the state to Aquinas's Christian philosophy that gave primacy to *vita contemplative*. The *laborphobia* in traditional philosophy is replicated in psychology where *work* is a research object but neither part of an ontology nor part of subjectivity. In philosophical

psychology, for instance in the *Wiley Handbook of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* (Martin, Sugarman & Slaney, 2015) which includes critical research, neither a chapter nor an index term for work or labor are included. The neglect of theorizing work is not only a self-model (academics seem to be interacting and reflecting) but also represents an elitist mindset. This does not deny that useful distinctions have been provided in the extant literature that distinguishes manual and intellectual labor, manufacturing and service, and skilled or unskilled work, and that the term has been extended to sex work, creative work, scientific work, critical work and to psychological grief work. In „our" neoliberal realities, activities that have not been part of work, have become work, including *technologies of the self* (see also Foucault, Martin, Gutman & Hutton, 1988).

Arendt (1958 / 1998) challenges classical Marxist ideas about (productive) work and expands them to the understanding of the human condition: „What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing" (p. 5). She provides an important distinction between *labor*, *work,* and *action*. *Labor*, accomplished historically by slaves, but also by domestic servants, deals with the necessities of life, involves the whole body („animal laborans"), produces futile products, not commodities, but life itself; work that Adam Smith and Karl Marx understood as unproductive. Arendt rejects that assumption, without employing a feminist argument, and points out that all activities possess a „productivity" and that every laboring activity „requires a certain amount of skill, the activity of cleaning and cooking no less than the writing of a book or the building of a house" (p. 90).

Work on the other hand is understood as work by hands („manufacturing") leading to the durability of products (for a certain time) and their materiality. *Homo faber* instrumentalizes, makes things into means, but also develops relationships with other people, by exchanging products, and the public realm becomes a market for work. Although art is the result of work, the instrumental characteristic of work, its utility and consumption do not apply, and art can attain permanence throughout the ages. Finally, Arendt discusses *action*, which is unique for each individual, and involves speech. This *inter-action* corresponds to the plurality of distinct individuals, based on human relationships. For Arendt the „world is guaranteed by the presence of others" (p. 199).

Certainly, psychologists need to understand subjectivity in the context of *inter-action* but work and labor should not be neglected. These dimensions occur in different proportions for concrete individuals. When theorizing subjectivity, even within advanced liberal democracies, „we" encounter persons who labor (e.g., temporary farm workers), people who

spend their time serving others (e.g., long-term care staff) and plenty are still working in manufacturing. A theory of subjectivity needs to account for action, work and labor (and their overlap) and how these modes of doing appear in concrete societies. The contents of agency, thinking, feeling and wanting must be understood on the background not only of relations but as contributing to an economy (paid or unpaid). Even for an individual, who spends most of the time interacting, one can find dimensions of work and labor (gardening, cleaning, cooking, repairing, etc., which have not disappeared and are not simply peripheral activities). Yet, the meaning of labor and work in a concrete subjectivity cannot be answered *apriori* but needs to be studied on the background of a theory of subjectivity.

Moving to the 21st century, Fraser (2022) has developed insightful ideas on how to conceptualize a *relational concept of labor* that includes feminist and postcolonial critiques of traditional concepts of work without giving up the socialist tradition. Fraser keeps to the idea of exploited labor (class) that she expands with the concepts of expropriated labor (race) and care or domestic work (gender). She combines the core categories of class, race, and gender in order to understand the workings of society. Psychologists interested in subjectivity need to ask what exploited work (e.g., wage labor engaged in commodity production) does to the mental life of persons, or which *forms of subjectivity* (socio-historical mentalities) have been developed in a given culture to account for the reality of exploitation. What happens in subjectivity when one is exploited, whether one knows it or not? Does exploited work still involve an alienated subjectivity; are persons still alienated from the things they make, from their working activities, from other people and from themselves?

Fraser argues that capitalism is entangled not only with exploitation but also with racial oppression and the expropriation of unfree, dependent, and unwaged labor, where human activities are confiscated. What does this social reality do not only to the subjectivity of the expropriated and their children, to the subjectivity of the expropriators, but also to the exploited (class) who are different from the expropriated in not being the *Other*? Concepts such as privilege as part of subjectivity can be developed here. Psychologists need to address issues of wealth and the degree to which a fascist subjectivity (Teo, 2021) is embedded in economic issues about who deserves and who can be excluded from wealth. The expropriation of the racialized *Other* needs to be accounted for in a theory of subjectivity (see also Fanon, 1952 / 1967). Fraser (2022) also includes the feminist critique in her reflections and the reality that „without this work of social reproduction … there could be no production

or profit or capital" (p. 53). Care-work is essential in society but not recognized as such and even denigrated. Gendered subjectivities should be understood on the background of such realities, for instance, on how women conduct their lives and are held responsible.

Subjectivity is not determined by external realities but is entangled with meanings and materialities that exist in this culture as well as with how humans are able to live their lives as women or men, workers or laborers, exploited or expropriated, productive or caring, etc. Everyday human activities that contribute to maintaining a political-economic reality need to be included when understanding subjectivity. Subjectivity is neither revealed in the laboratory of the experimental psychologist nor on the couch of the therapist, but in the way, people live their lives (which *may include* the lab and the couch). Human subjectivity needs to be understood as embedded not only in recognition but also in labor, work, action, exploitation, expropriation and in social reproduction. A theory of subjectivity needs to account for the multi-dimensionality of everyday life that challenges academic and therapeutic self-models, where language, narration, conversation and interaction become the standard from which subjectivity is understood. This also means to include studies on what work means under neoliberal capitalism (Silva, 2013), which may include bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018).

Conclusion

If one begins with the assumption that everyday activities that constitute, maintain and advances the social and societal system, whether one knows it or not (which includes productive and reproductive work, paid and unpaid labor, labor and interaction) are important parts of life, then they cannot be neglected in a theory of subjectivity. Work is a central but not the only category that is relevant to a discussion of subjectivity. Work allows psychologists to connect subjectivity to wealth and political economy on a societal level, to neoliberal capitalism, and to the options that humans have, given their location, position, and reality. Work in its broad meaning also allows one to theorize on how to resist neoliberal capitalism.

For instance, one can understand anti-globalizing and de-globalizing mentalities as forms of resistance. While the former rejects the dominant political-economic status-quo, the latter accepts it and attributes the problems to the undeserving, racialized, or *subhumanized Other* (Teo, 2020 and in press). This means that academics should not assume that deglobalizing subjectivities, and their most extreme forms, fascist subjectivities, should be reduced to internal psychological proclivities. Based on the

assumption of an entanglement of socio-, inter-, and intrasubjectivity, the internal is connected to external discourses and materialities, to interpersonal realities, and to the way people live their everyday lives. A fascist subjectivity must be understood through such entanglements (it is important to make a distinction between fascist politics and fascist subjectivity). Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand how something internal can re-emerge as dominant.

A critical theory of subjectivity needs to address neoliberal subjectivity (Teo, 2018 b) not from the perspective of the entrepreneur, but from the perspective of the exploited and expropriated. Psychology needs to advance these perspectives, and philosophical psychology needs to abandon its phobia of labor. Industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology can understand work not only as an empirical research topic, but also as an ontology that is entangled with subjectivity. A full understanding of subjectivity accounts for people working, connecting, and relating to each other and themselves, on the background of culture, history, and society; class, gender and race and other social characteristics, and their intersectionality; the social and biological body; as well as discourses and materialities, including various technologies. I submit that theoretical reflection remains relevant, particularly in the psychological humanities, should psychologists wish to understand complex problems such as work, which remains an indelible element in any non-reductionist theory of subjectivity.

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Correspondence to:
Professor Dr. Thomas Teo
York University
Department of Psychology
4700 Keele Street
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 1P3, Canada
tteo@yorku.ca