

Book Review: Gender, Ethnicity and Positioning in Processes of Subjectification

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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Seeberg, M. L. (2006). Book Review: Gender, Ethnicity and Positioning in Processes of Subjectification. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(1), 66-68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050680601300107>

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GENDER, ETHNICITY AND POSITIONING IN PROCESSES OF SUBJECTIFICATION

Dorthe Staunæs

Køn, Ethnicitet og Skoleliv [Gender, Ethnicity and School Life]

Copenhagen: Samfundslitteratur, 2004, 372 pp., ISBN 8-759-31094-4

This Danish book is based on the author's doctoral thesis and her fieldwork in two Copenhagen schools, Åskolen and Søsken. The main topic is the complex dynamics between gender and ethnicity in the schools, and – not least – how the young people (around the age of 13) actively created and changed these categories. The book is divided into seven parts. In the first, we are presented with two dominant and conflicting discourses on immigrants in Denmark. The author calls these the Narrative of Worries and the Narrative of Denial. Within the former, immigrants constitute a problem because they do not fit in; within the latter any significance of ethnic differences is suppressed. The two narratives do not map neatly onto the two schools, and Staunæs does not say whether or not she chose the two schools with any idea that they would relate differently to the narratives, or even that they explicitly relate to them at all. Both narratives, the author points out, rest on the premise of the stability of social categories, and she states that her ambition is to challenge this premise through showing how the pupils 'do' gender and ethnicity. She makes use of feminist perspectives on 'doing gender', drawing on West and Zimmerman (1987). Two other analytical concepts that the author discusses and makes good use of are the Foucauldian notion of 'subjectification' (with reference especially to the works of Bronwyn Davies) and 'intersectionality' (here, too, she refers to the relevant literature, although not to the interesting fact that this concept has been adopted and adapted from the world of law). The concept of subjectification is treated particularly thoroughly, and linked to various strands of 'post social constructionist' literature. In Chapter 3, the methods and methodology are, unfortunately much too briefly, presented. This part has, according to the author, been cut down considerably from the original thesis, and I find the result frustrating. After these introductory chapters comes the presentation proper of the empirical material, discussions and analysis. The symbolically and socially significant places, bodies and clothes are all clearly and meticulously described, each in a separate chapter. After this, Staunæs presents a discussion about boys' positioning in relation to masculine ideal types, followed by a discussion of girls' positioning in relation to feminine ideal types. After these discussions, we meet the 'figure' Bettina, a girl who, in her attempt to override ethnic categories, goes too far in ignoring the gender aspect, and finds herself in the category 'whore'. In Part 6, we meet the teachers, or the 'professional/s'. In the two chapters that form this part, we are introduced in each school to categories of children that are considered to typify troublemakers in the classroom and are described by the teachers as 'stealing the other pupils' time'. In one of the schools, the teachers' schematic representation of the 'time thief figure' is a Danish girl; in the other, a Turkish boy. Through these and the other 'figures' such as 'Bettina' the 'whore', 'Wahid' the 'queer', and 'Selma' the 'headscarf girl', the author demonstrates how ethnicity and gender are inextricably intertwined within an overall normative system that the schools share, although it takes different forms, which make different subject positions available in the two schools. In both cases, heterosexuality is the most firmly established or imperative norm. At Søsken, Staunæs convincingly argues, ethnic categories overshadow categories of gender and sexuality. At Åskolen, she shows how categories of sexuality and gender

overshadow ethnic categories. Through a discussion of the two schools' contrasting policies on ethnic difference, the author concludes that teachers as well as pupils at Søsken are trapped within the limited categories and available subject positions that this school's monocultural model has produced. Åskolen, on the other hand, has successfully managed to deal with diversity through its multicultural model, within which a wide scope of non-essentialist and negotiable subject positions has become available to teachers and pupils. Paradoxically, the downplaying of ethnic differences in Søsken's monocultural model has led to an emphasis on such differences in practice. This echoes what I myself found in a school in Oslo (Seeberg, 2003), where the acknowledgement of such differences was rendered taboo by the school, but the pupils busied themselves with making these differences significant in their everyday interactions. Towards the end of the book, the football metaphor that the Søsken leadership employs in its attempts to discipline its 'time thieves' is presented, discussed and analysed in terms of gender and ethnicity.

My knowledge of Danish psychological research in this field is too limited for me to place this work within such a tradition. However, I am more familiar with the field of ethnicity in schools. My own recent doctoral dissertation has much in common with Staunæs's book, since I, too, focused on the ways in which difference was dealt with in two schools – in my case, one school in Oslo and one in Amsterdam. I therefore read Staunæs's book with special interest. What has she done that I have not, what can I learn from this book – and is there anything I have done that Staunæs might have learned from, had she been familiar with my work? My evaluation of the book is accordingly shaped by my own position. Of course, there is no lack of relevant literature, and one has to choose. One reference I should have liked to see, however, is that of Jayne Ifekwunigwe (1999). Her book about the experience of being 'mixed' serves precisely to question and disturb the naturalness and stability of dominant ethnic and racial categories. Otherwise, Staunæs positions herself favourably within recent work developing theories of intersectionality and subjectification. I am impressed by the sophisticated way in which she makes use of, and combines, such approaches in her discussion of this material. She presents us with thorough reflections on what informs the many choices that young people (have to) make all the time, choices that involve the quite subtle symbolism of group identification. We are also given ample knowledge of the structures (I call them structures, Staunæs calls them subjectivity networks) that exist within each school and that pupils and teachers relate to and reproduce in their own ways.

Staunæs's ambition was to disturb the apparent stability of categories, and this she manages to do, and to do well. However, I have two critical points to make. First: 'Much is possible, but context-free engendering is not' (p. 350). Exactly; and this is why I should have liked to know a good deal more about the wider contexts of which the two schools are part. The categories that are used in the creation of subject positions have not come into being in isolation in these schools; they are parts of a much larger picture. For instance, Staunæs does describe two dominant narratives about immigrants in Denmark, but we have only her words for them ('worries' and 'denial'). In such a sophisticated piece of work, one would have expected to find references to at least some of the more central authors of these narratives, and one would have expected Staunæs to present ways in which these two narratives were made explicitly relevant to, and by, people in school. This is just one example of what might have been done in order to situate the schools as part of a larger, historically produced universe of meaning, which in turn (one assumes) relates to fundamental power structures in Danish society. The school

leaderships remain anonymous, and one wonders why this is so. Staunæs has conducted an impressive amount of research in two schools and found intriguing differences between the two, without giving, I feel, adequate information about how these two schools have come to develop in virtually opposite directions. This objection, of course, has to do with underlying assumptions concerning the philosophy of science. I, for one, do not believe that structures simply come into being through individual actions, but I am led to wonder if that might be Staunæs's point of view. This criticism, however, she does to some extent forestall through arguing that other research has amply taken care of the more structural aspect; what she wishes to do is to focus on the other end of the structure–agency scale.

This brings me to my second criticism: I feel that the real people are missing in Staunæs's otherwise excellent descriptions. It may be an anthropological obsession, but to me, conveying a sense of closeness to the people to whom one owes one's 'data' is important. It is with a certain discomfort that one realizes that the de-humanization is part of the analysis. Take for instance the introduction to Chapter 5, 'The Bodies': 'Looking through the photographs the first time [after fieldwork] I see John, Cecilie, Esra, Anders, Ömer, Arne, Bitten, Hassan etc. again. Pupils and teachers at *Søskolen* and *Åskolen*. But the next time I look at them something happens to my reading of photographs, field notes and interview transcripts and the subjects are decentred to my eyes: what I now see is bodies in action' (p. 129). The intention, then, is not to give me a glimpse into the lives of living people – pupils and teachers with all sorts of emotions and experiences – but into abstract subject positions. This feeling of alienation is strengthened when Staunæs refers to as 'figures' those few selected pupils we do get to know a good deal about. It is also established through the way in which the visual is strongly emphasized both in the descriptions and in the use of metaphors. This is where I feel something important would have been gained through reading Ifekwunigwe, or anybody else for that matter who manages to combine theoretical lucidity with the feeling of being human. Paradoxically, 'attempting to disband the concept of structure by looking at more individual processes in school life' (p. 38) through the theoretical concept of subjectification throws much light on the local *structures* in the two schools, whereas the *individual people* remain strangers to us.

The book is very well written, and its strong points by far outweigh the weaknesses. To some readers, the post-postmodern language may give rise to some impatience, but all in all I think Staunæs has very convincingly defined and discussed the concepts she has chosen to make use of.

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