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Academic Desire Trajectories

Retooling the Concepts of Subject, Desire and Biography

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ABSTRACT   This article is an attempt to rethink the interconnectedness between discourse and subjective agency and to highlight methodological approaches to studies of gendering processes as a central part of it. The notions of desire, subjectification and biography are understood as mediated by narratives and metaphors, as a movement between the individual and her contexts. The transformative methodological project suggests conceptual retoolings as new analytic approaches to empirical analysis of the kind that aims to provide complex understanding of subjectification processes in lived life. The empirical field brought into the article as a means of explication deals with university cultures, and more specifically with a case of an assistant professor caught in conflicts between official academic discourses and more subtle political and gendered discourses. The author takes the concepts of desire trajectories, discursive authority, multifaceted discursive realities and past experiences (biography) into an analysis of the enacting forces involved in the processes of exclusion that finally ejects the protagonist in the empirical case from the university field.

KEY WORDS   biography ◆ desire ◆ discourse ◆ empirical analysis ◆ gender ◆ methodology ◆ poststructuralism ◆ power ◆ subjectification ◆ university

This article focuses on the concepts of subjectification, desire and biography. The ambition is to help, in Haraway's wording (see later), retool these concepts within poststructuralist and sociocultural analysis and thereby try to retain the possibility of complex psychological thinking while simultaneously de-essentializing and deindividualizing exactly those kinds of concepts. The retooled conceptualizations will help develop transformative methodological and analytic approaches.

To ground the retooling efforts, the concepts are put to work in an empirical case taken from a study of gender and power in academia.[1] The case deals with Linda, an assistant professor from a university department haunted by power struggles among staff and theoretical fields.

Linda's story is about the process from her appointment to assistant professor, through years of intensive teaching and research, up to the rejection of her application for an associate professorship. Linda's case is particularly promising in relation to the mentioned methodological and conceptual ambitions since it raises a number of issues concerning the mutually enacting processes between the individual and her context. How, for instance, could we conceptualize the interaction as a flow, yet not 'just' as a straightforward and frictionless relation? And how may we understand and conceptualize the complexities that characterize individual processing of sociocultural discourse?

It is, however, already at this point relevant to address another question, namely: How is it possible to instigate new discursive practices given our subjectification through those that already exist? Basically, this is a methodological question aimed at the very idea of potential conceptual retooling. In an interview, Donna Haraway quotes the following statement by Marilyn Strathern: 'It matters which categories you use to think other categories with' (Lykke et al., 2004: 335). And she continues:

> You can turn up the volume on some categories, and down on others. There are foregrounding and backgrounding operations. You can make categories interrupt each other. All these operations are based on skills, on technologies, on material technologies. They are not merely ideas, but thinking technologies that have materiality and effectivity. These are ways of stabilizing meanings in some forms rather than others, and stabilizing meanings is a very material practice. . . . I do not want to throw away the category formation skills I have inherited, but I want to see how we can all do a little retooling. (Lykke et al., 2004: 335)

As Haraway indicates, our retooling of thinking technologies is not about throwing all discursive power overboard, but about deciding which categorizations to use and how to use them. We have to move with care in our selection and development of alternative categories needed for disrupting phenomena that are already discursively constituted. We must move carefully when we open up these phenomena by offering alternatives. We will have to bear in mind that the status of these alternatives is also only temporary. For these are the discursive conditions: We cannot escape discourse. We can move within discourse, find fissures, ruptures and contradictions to move with or against. We can, in Haraway's words, turn up and down, foreground or background, interrupt or leave alone – in the search for alternative ways to push and move the already constituted towards new discursive practices.

Judith Butler formulates some of the basic premises for discursive existence and thereby of subjectification as follows:

> Power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion,

and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject's 'own' acting. As a subject of power (where 'of' connotes both 'belonging to' and 'wielding'), the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; it eclipses power with power. The conditions not only make possible the subject but enter into the subject's formation. They are made present in the acts of that formation and in the acts of the subject that follow. (Butler, 1997: 14)

The basic premises of subjectification constitute the simultaneous submission to and coming to subjective existence and agency through the discursive power embedded in sociocultural context (Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1979, 1981). In an elaboration of this way of thinking, it becomes possible to pursue a conceptual ambition that aims to evade individualization without losing the individual and to avoid social determination without losing the contextual or sociocultural aspect. Subsequently, it also becomes the ambition to avoid universalizing on an all too concrete theoretical level (Søndergaard, 2002b).

DESIRE, DISCOURSE, SUBJECT

One could think of Linda's failure to be promoted in terms of a mismatch between her academic desire and the desire of those positioned with authority in the specific organization. Linda's ideas about the development of her academic discipline were rather different from the ideas of some of her colleagues. Making this suggestion, we must, however, think of desire as emerging and changeable, something that does not merely reside *in* Linda, but as something that is nurtured and confirmed, changed and reshaped through specific relational practices, in which those involved participate with their respective desire trajectories. All participants in these formative processes contribute to the constitution of legitimate and illegitimate discursive forms of desire, which in turn will become accessible for (new) participants to take up as their own. Bronwyn Davies writes along the same lines:

In various humanist guises, desire has been used as an indicator of who we 'really' are, as signifying an essence that is 'natural' and personal, as independent of social influence. But I argue here that desire is spoken into existence, it is shaped through discursive and interactive practices, through the symbolic and the semiotic. Desires are constituted through the narratives and storylines, the metaphors, the very language and patterns of existence through which we are 'interpellated' into the social world. (Davies, 2000: 37)[2]

Desire in this sense is not something that can be fixed and confined to someone's interior. It is constituted through the interaction between the

individual and the context, mediated by narratives and metaphors. Desire is created through discursive practices, and does at the same time become a basis for further formation of those practices. This does not, however, imply that desire will be experienced less emotionally, or that its seriousness or vital importance will be diminished for the people who live it. Desire is a form of will to live, a focusing of the will to exist, formed and reproduced through sociocultural interaction.

Butler has similar thoughts on the will to existence, but she emphasizes the survival aspect in the way power exploits people's desire to live:

> As the condition of becoming a subject, subordination implies being in a mandatory submission. Moreover, the desire to survive, 'to be', is a pervasively exploitable desire. The one who holds out the promise of continued existence plays to the desire to survive. 'I would rather exist in subordination than not exist' is one formulation of this predicament (where the risk of 'death' is also possible). (Butler, 1997: 7)

Compared to Butler's articulation, my definition of desire would, additionally, emphasize the pleasurable takeover of specific forms of subject positions and discursive formations.

For Linda, it is a desire in relation to the university arena that is bound up with a particular form of disciplinarity and with particular disciplinary traditions in and through which to think. The desire is in Linda's case linked to particular types of theories/theoretical discourses, to an extensive cross-disciplinary movement, and to a rethinking of the boundaries of the discipline to which she belongs. It is also a desire that is concerned with specific kinds of interaction, which in this particular field are organized around teaching situations and research cooperation. Linda describes the joy of working in these modes. She experiences moments of insight that she cannot imagine being given a chance to obtain in any other working environment, or through any other types of paradigmatic orientation. In other words, it is a relatively intense passion that she experiences in this kind of practice. On the question of what she likes about university work, Linda says:

> . . . it's the kicks, isn't it? They come when you discover something new. They come – they come in the actual . . . they come when I write, that is they also come . . . sometimes when I give talks. Giving talks can be really great as well. That is, teaching can be quite tough. But when I can inspire somebody else, that is when it – I am regarded as a very committed teacher, and when I am able to sort of . . . I want to pass on my enthusiasm for my field, right? And when I can see that I've done this – I think that's really fantastic. But even just sitting studying: Wow! And writing something, and 'now it dawns on me that' . . . when these moments of insight come.

Linda has pursued and refined this desire through many years of study and many years of constructing academic 'competencies'. The

opportunities for pursuing and reproducing this desire have been linked to her unfolding of 'competencies' and practices as well as to her participation in relevant networks and potential spaces for development. In this sense, it is not possible to consider this desire as an interchangeable, easily transferable aspect of Linda's subjectification. First of all, her desire trajectory has a prolonged history of constitution. Second, it moves as process and practice between herself and a powerful environment that keeps reproducing its formation.

Saying this, I want to emphasize that the notion of an exclusively individual desire, a construction reiterated in many academic and everyday discourses, is unfeasible. A desire has to derive its sustenance from somewhere. However, if the context that sustains it is disconnected from the very place of its actualization and development, the person's processing of desire will either gradually be transformed, or she/he will become isolated and detached from their current context.

My efforts to conceptualize desire consequently identify the phenomenon as a process in discursive practice. Moreover, I emphasize that 'discourse' is not unitary. On the contrary, it includes many and often conflicting discursive practices within the same space.[3] Some of these conflicting discursive practices will work to fight, destroy or undermine each other. Some will be experienced parallel with one another, without provoking any significant mutual interaction. Others will integrate in mutually supportive, challenging ways. Let me clarify these theoretical points by relating them to Linda's story.

MULTIPLE, INTERACTING AND/OR CONFLICTING DESIRE TRAJECTORIES

Linda's desire to teach, to do research and interact with students and colleagues, and to take up particular theoretical discourses, was, arguably, reasonably well received and responded to in her everyday life at the university department. Her desire encountered corresponding desire trajectories among colleagues and students. To formulate this in terms of everyday discourse, we would say that Linda had colleagues who shared her professional commitment, and the students showed a great deal of enthusiasm for the kind of disciplinarity that she offered. Her way of defining and practising the discipline was received as a new, promising suggestion of future expertise.

At the same time, Linda was involved in research projects outside the department. Together with others, she had obtained external funding for a project that would create an even better space for the development of the academic desire that she pursued and was a part of. This did not simply provide a space for academic development; it also pointed towards a

potential for increased legitimacy of the academic discourses Linda and her particular network were enthusiastic about. The collective processing of desires, in which Linda, her colleagues and students were involved, were thus not the only things that contributed to legitimizing this particular form of academic practice. External forces that were more wide-ranging, prestigious and financially resourceful, than the ones inside the department, played a role, too.

Linda was not blind to the fact that other academic desire trajectories were present in her department; lived by other colleagues, who had other networks and access to other supportive forces for legitimizing *their* professional practices. Linda saw this. To some extent, she was also aware of the fact that this other form of professional practice was incompatible with her own, on questions such as the boundaries of the disciplinary field, interdisciplinary work, the definition of 'core areas' within the discipline, choice of methodological approach, teaching curricula, etc.

She saw that the other kind of disciplinary practice was linked to special opportunities for support. She recognized that those who adhered to this practice held central positions in the formal decision-making structures of the department. But in her view, this latter aspect was less important than that relating to the content of academic work. She thought it important to enter into the dialogues of the department in order to promote her own academic desires as relevant for the development of the discipline. It seemed both necessary and obvious to her to do this, among other things, in the interest of the students, to provide a platform for collaboration with and support from certain colleagues and to act in accordance with international developments within the discipline.

However, Linda's aspirations were regarded as *too* incompatible with the desire trajectories of the powerful colleagues at her department. They could not accept further advancement of her particular endeavours. This was not simply due to the alternative view of how the content of the discipline should be defined that characterized Linda's academic desire trajectory, or because her efforts to create space for the development of the trajectories were regarded as oppositional. A combination of both of these factors played a role *plus* the kind of forces that would confirm their legitimacy. By means of the support of external financial sources, the students' appreciation, the good international contacts and the backing of some colleagues, the desire trajectory that Linda represented had become a competing factor of unacceptable dimensions.

An understanding of the dynamics and interactions between the many, conflicting, discourses in a field will, in this sense, also involve an understanding of the positions from which the representatives of these discourses may be able to speak and act. The hegemonic status of certain discourses is not only about expansion; it is also about representation in positions to which institutional authority is attached. Status of this kind

may be materialized in its representatives achieving particularly prestigious posts and academic degrees, but especially through their obtaining central positions in the formal management structure (director of studies, head of department, chair of research management committees, positions on selection committees, etc.), which can be used to regulate the access of others to institutional positions (see also Bourdieu, 1990a, 1990b). As a crucial aspect, the struggles between the various forms of discourses will in that way involve the opportunity to restrain and promote the processes of integration of other discursive positions in the institutional context, and thereby restrain and promote the movement of other desire trajectories and subjects (Søndergaard, 2003, 2005).

A number of complex and interacting discursive patterns appear here. One set of patterns is concerned with the precondition for the individualized professional desire investment (psy-scientifically founded following Rose [1998, 1999]) and with the movements and scatterings that differences and similarities, affirmations and conflicts between the investments show in relation to the notion of academic merit. Another pattern emerges when the 'political' element is seen as part of the spectrum and as an integral part of the disciplinary competency and of the participants' reciprocal interactions. In the first instance, I deal with the political element.[4]

One should, thus, keep in mind that desire investment may be attached to 'political' enactments in the university field. As mentioned earlier, Linda's desire for a specific form of disciplinary practice and a specific form of professional interaction with colleagues and students was pursued and refined through many years of studying, teaching, research and networking. This is one type of desire trajectory that will open gates into the academic field. But there are other types of trajectories that may act as gate-openers for academic participants. These trajectories carry, as a prominent feature, a passionate commitment to current processes of integration and to manoeuvrings between various discourses that characterize the participants' respective inclusive and exclusive interactions with one another. This is where we find yet another basis for the discrepancy between Linda and some of her colleagues, one that concerns the fundamental premises of legitimacy in the academic field.[5] It concerns a type of desire trajectory that over and above academic research, theoretical and methodological investment and pleasure also, and sometimes especially, emphasizes the political game. Politically invested desire, too, has its own history and concrete contexts of affirmation. This, too, articulates itself through discursive practices that are (more or less) accessible and may be taken up in the process of subjectification by participants in the field.

I now turn to the question of the interference among the different patterns of discursive practices and the (gendered) cultural codes that are

involved in the interaction, and thereby in the formation of academic desire. At the end of the article, I discuss the question of biography.

GENDERED ACCESS TO THE MULTIPLE DISCURSIVE
CONDITIONS

We will never arrive at a definitive understanding of how desire trajectories are taken up and made someone's own in specific contexts with their many conflicting and intersecting discourses. But it may be possible to indicate some patterns of interest when taking the gendered processes of segregation into account.

In an academic context, woman or rather femininity constitutes 'the other'. This has been repeatedly argued in literature from Fox Keller (1985) to Haraway (1991, 1997) and Bourdieu (1999); in a Scandinavian context by, for example, Hasse et al. (2002) and Søndergaard (2005). Man–academic–rational–scientific–professional, form a chain of reference that marginalizes what is connoted as feminine from academic relevance. Simultaneously, the masculinely connoted individuals tend to appear as neutral and unmarked.

Since femininity, currently, is not necessarily totally merging with woman (as well as masculinity is not simply coinciding with man), female-marked individuals have the possibility of appropriating these chains of reference as relevant discourses for themselves as *academic* subjects. Current discourses do, however, still tend to link 'femininity' to the female-marked body, which means that subjects coming into existence through female-marked bodies, to a slightly higher degree, than those coming into existence through male-marked ones, will have to continually convince their surroundings of their academic relevance. Because of the cultural codes through which they are read and understood, female-marked subjects will in other words be suspected of representing whatever is constructed as femininity, and they are continuously referred to and expected to subjectify as 'feminine' and to develop desires containing primarily femininely connoted goals and expressions (for a detailed and empirically based analysis, see Søndergaard, 1996). To achieve legitimacy as academic participants, it becomes necessary for female-marked individuals now and again to contradict these expectations.

The position as 'other' is, however, continuously negotiated through the varying responses of concrete subjects. It is negotiated through the ways in which they take up the potentials for reiterating, challenging or reshaping gendered subject positions in their own everyday life conduct (Søndergaard, 1996). This again has to do with their access to competing or confirming discourses with which to work and synthesize the array of available positionings in specific contexts. In relation to this it is

interesting to consider how the position as 'other', the gradually taken-for-granted participating 'other', but nevertheless the 'other', intersects with other discourses – how, for instance, individuals' gender-specific subjectification also makes possible alternative trajectories into discourses of science and politics in academia.

The professional discourses of academia concerned with scholarship and academic standards constitute what are externally presented as the legitimate, central discourses of university institutions. What, in this sense, is defined as 'academic', is constituted through exclusion of a number of elements; 'political', 'personal' and 'gendered' dimensions are, among others, excluded from the definition (Petersen, 2004). 'Political', 'personal' and 'gendered' discourses do, however, operate in the everyday life of academia, but in a less legitimate form.

Well-subjectified participants in the field will master 'translations' that are sensitive to the context. They will know how to move between types of discourses in ways that best hamper or promote the interests they might deem it most appropriate to hamper or promote. This mastery is not necessarily done reflectively. The more well subjectified the partici-pant, the more 'natural' and given the premises appear to be, the less attention and visibility will be attached to them.

The official discourses (i.e. the discourses into which all types of inter-ests, also political investments in their *official* versions will be translated) are presented to people positioned as 'other', e.g. the female-marked indi-viduals, as *the* available discourses: the ones which they can use in their efforts to understand the workings and conditions of academic culture. The illegitimate discourses will to the same extent be invisible and inac-cessible to these particular participants. In my material, it is typically the female-marked subjects at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder who state, 'It's the academic work I'm here for, that's what I love. I'd rather steer clear of all the other trouble. It has nothing to do with the academic side of things.' Or in a different version, 'If it wasn't for the academic work I wouldn't be here anyway.' These subjects do not, as a rule, see and acknowledge the necessity of engaging with other discourses than the officially offered 'academic' ones. Or to put it differently, these subjects act along the officially demarcated lines that it is possible to develop their academic desire within the framework of 'purely academic' discourses.[6]

The invisible, inaccessible and illegitimate discourses are by these potentially 'othered' individuals sensed as 'other forces' (trouble), but are considered and treated as not worth wasting time on. Sharon Traweek's (1988) concept of an academic 'culture of no culture' becomes relevant here as the self-presentation that the university offers in official settings, but also as the discourse offered to new participants, and especially the rather more inappropriate(d) ones, to take up as their means of navigation and subjectification (Haraway, 1992). It is this self-representation that

newcomers take up as 'the truth' about the workings and conditions of academia. Well-subjectified, experienced and well-integrated participants, on the other hand, only recognize this to be the legitimate discourse working among a much more complex set of multilayered discourses to be mastered as a condition for integration.

In other words, to be 'other' means something for the ability to find a way around these complex, multilayered discursive conditions. It is interesting to see how those in 'othered' positions, in a certain sense, come to share the blindness towards the non-academic, illegitimate political discourses, the 'other forces', with the well-subjectified individuals. However, the 'others' only vaguely sense these forces, without receiving/demanding access to them, whereas the well-subjectified individuals actually master them, but master them as the unmentioned obviousnesses; or in other words, the powerful individuals master the complex and multilayered spectrum of discourses in a way that implies a relative blindness to the composition of their own mastery.

This is one of the ways in which gender acquires significance, through a relative difference in orientation towards the discourses of the place. Being 'other' gives access to the discourses that are held up as legitimate and central, and individuals who are positioned as 'other' are linked to these discourses in particular ways. To Linda, who clearly invested a lot of academic desire in her work at the department, and who possibly saw but did not wish to participate in the manoeuvrings of political discourse, the conditions for integration appeared to be highly ambivalent. In the following, she talks with hindsight about what went wrong:

> Of course, I didn't choose the right strategy for me – that strategy would have been to suck up to the professor of that place, then you'll be safe, yes . . . That's what my colleague said to me, 'You should have gone after him, the professor – not after the weak one.' But it would have been out of character for me to do that.

To Linda, the academic and the political desire trajectories became mutually exclusive, and Linda's (academic) desire *is* 'herself' in the sense that it is a central part and expression of her subjectification. Therefore, to consider whether she should renounce developing and pursuing her particular desires in order to achieve inclusion does not simply make up a tactical option for her. It threatens her existence as a subject in the university arena. In the interview, Linda fluctuates between insisting that her (academically invested) desire was important, realizing that it led to exclusion, considering whether it could have been removed in favour of a politically strategic navigation, rejecting that possibility because it would threaten her existence as a subject, realizing that it led to exclusion, considering whether it could have been removed, etc. Her reflection does not lead to any solution. Her desire is too much a part of 'herself', for 'her'

to be able to renounce it without at the same time renouncing her 'self'. At the same time, the opportunity to develop her desire is dependent on inclusion. But inclusion demands the renunciation of . . . and so on.

Therefore, Linda reverts to a type of thinking that resolves the conflicts through a self-characterization as naive vis-a-vis the premises within which she was acting. Yet, she defines these premises as unacceptable, in the light of the discursive practice and primacy given to scholarship by which she had previously orientated herself.

> *Linda*: I have really lost my innocence, now . . . it's rotten, rotten, that is, in a way that I didn't . . . no, I damned well hadn't . . . that is, I'm naive . . .
>
> *Interviewer*: . . . because you believed what?
>
> *Linda*: I believed that it went according to merit. That is, I'm no genius but I can hold my own in the field, that is, I feel that I am just as good as the others. But I didn't think there was anything like that. Well, yes. I'm not very good at making . . . that is, it probably also has something to do with making . . . or it probably also has something to do with being a proper politician in a way. But that's not meant in a negative way, I perhaps also mean it in a slightly positive sense as well. Because it's right that when you're in a workplace, you can say. . . . That is I look after my own things – I really do, I never let anyone down, I'm never ill and anything like that, you know, and I write too and all that, and I really work my socks off and almost can't fit it all in. But even so, I'm probably a bad politician in the sense that I'm not very good at selling myself to the institution, if you understand what I mean.
>
> *Interviewer*: How could you have done it?
>
> *Linda*: Well, how could I have done that? Well we're back to all that about making the right alliances . . .

THE QUESTION OF BIOGRAPHY

How may we include Linda's biographical experiences in these reflections? Until now the text has focused on current discourses, on their contradictory and fragmented nature, on the importance of gender as shown in the ways in which gendered codes open up specific repertoires of interpretation (making 'other', femininely connoted practices) and thereby, to a higher degree, open up access to some discursive practices rather than others. We have thus thought of all these things in concert as complex forces that interact with, and are mediated by, each other in the movements of the context and in Linda's syntheses. But the past, and experience, also interact with these complex dynamics.

It is impossible to identify experience trajectories back in time. A 'journey back' will always be a 'journey' with the perspectives and optical instruments of the present as the mediating tools of information (see also Butler, 2004). Should anyone put forward the hypothesis that Linda might at some point have integrated and developed a state of readiness for

'opposition', we would not be able to trace this feature in her process of subjectification backwards in time, with real and certain knowledge. Nor would we ever be able to state, with any finality, what its status might be in her current state of preparedness, let alone to what extent this, rather than the position in which circumstances had placed her, made it emerge as a theme in this particular university context.

Linda did not see herself as particularly oppositional in this process; not until the end, when she had to admit that a small circle of people in positions of authority had the final word in relation to her exclusion. At this point, she was forced to see herself and her practices through their eyes. It was only then that the less visible, but very active, political discourses of the place actually became evident to her as powerful, reality-constructing forces. Her contribution to the preceding inter-actions, seen through the eyes of the opposite parties and understood in terms of the political discourses, only then emerged as oppositional and threatening. It is this change of perspective and the clash with her own perspective that made her say that she had not believed things happened in that way, that 'anything like that existed'. To her, access to the political discourse signified loss of innocence. Until then, she had confined herself to the academic discourse and its exhortations to produce original research results, to be true to her own academic professionalism and disciplinarity, to the belief that inclusion would take place 'on merit', etc. – this discourse of merit that exists side by side and usually integrated with the political one, which, in return, operates on rules of loyalty, networks, alliances, etc.

If we understand Linda's 'opposition' in this way, however, as an insufficient reading of the extent and importance of the conflicting discourses, partly brought about through her particular perspectives as gendered 'other', we are directed back to the dynamics of the present. This, again, will be a different narrative to the one that aims to trace the biographical source of an oppositional state of psychological readiness.

If we were to address the biographical interest that we have developed via our partly psychoanalytic subjectification as late modern, western subjects (Parker, 1997), we may possibly try to *guess* what Linda's biographical trajectories might be. At the same time, we would have to realize that our guesswork serves a current meaning-making purpose. A guess might take the following form: the possibilities of directing energy and commitment into a great effort on behalf of a particular interest and of doing so with such intensity that one does not immediately read the danger signals in the form of possible opposition from other subjects, have probably been introduced and produced, in some form or other, as elements in Linda's subjectification processes, as they have occurred in the course of her life up until now. From these possibilities and their implementation, particular trajectories of experience and patterns of

navigation have emerged that Linda will be able to draw on and that she will be able to specify in different contexts. But the fact that it is exactly these patterns that are brought to interact in that particular context is linked to conditions for interaction to be found in a situated present.

Once more our curiosity and guesswork will, in that sense, fail to produce what we want, since we have to realize that Linda's present 'oppositional' ways of navigation are effects of a mutually constituting process between past and present, and that this mutually constituting process will render the envisaged patterns of navigation unrecognizable as what it is believed to originally have been. This discloses the biographical quest as a completely different project from the reality-revealing odyssey that many consider it possible to undertake. The biographical element searched for, Linda's potential for being 'oppositional' based on a fusion of commitment and insensitivity to danger signals, is hidden in the complex network of elements from present and past that are mixed and synthesized into current agency and meaning-making.

We may ultimately have to confine our ambitions of biographical reconstruction to this reading: the discursive offers of the past have been many, varying, intersecting and conflicting, just like those of the present. The subjectification that Linda has brought into existence by taking up discursive practices and by processing and synthesizing them with other and earlier discursive offers, is represented in fragmented and conflicting experience trajectories. The trajectories, and with them the 'unique' states of readiness too, have been created through Linda's synthesis and processing of whatever 'tracks and materials' were available. The experience trajectories and patterns of navigation must in this sense be maintained as multiple, ambiguous, flexible and in a state of constant processing – subject to constant movements of synthesis.

Linda's biographical trajectories must be regarded as very comprehensive.[7] If she had been treated in different ways in a given university context, or had had other opportunities for employment and connections, other parts of her repertoire would have been activated, other syntheses made. If, for example, the students had not supported her and she had not received national and international support – if the local authorities had integrated her in a positive way through invitations, conversations, explanations of how things work, through hailing in central fora, and by allocating her a prominent role in particular tasks – things would have turned out very differently: Linda would in a sense have become a different person. She would have been situated differently, have encountered different subjectification invitations and developed other forms of practice. Given the effects that such an encounter between her and the context would have constituted, nobody would have felt a need to look for an oppositional personality structure as an explanation of her situation.

In other words, it seems very appropriate to be sceptical about a biographical quest for stable, personality structures and unambiguous trajectories of experience. Insofar as our current discourses seem to take us in that direction, we must very seriously regard this quest as an endeavour mediated by the discourses of the present and we need to ask what endeavours at legitimizing current discourses such an interest actually serves.

POSTLUDE

It seems that a concept of desire trajectories as maintained and affirmed, changed and reshaped in situated relational practices, together with a concept of subjectification taken from Foucauldian traditions emphasizing the simultaneous subjection and coming to agency through discursive power, make up a promising, theoretical starting point. On this basis, more fluid and flexible analytical categories that may open understandings of the complexities and contradictions in an empirical field, can be articulated.

An adequate understanding of the subtle dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in academia seems to demand these types of thinking technologies. The categories and subsequent analyses must, as the basic perspective implies, be regarded as accessible for development and further negotiation. But this text has offered a provisional suggestion of one way of thinking of the complexities and multilayered discursive conditions. The interacting forces highlighted in this text were:

- Contradicting disciplinary discourses taken up in various kinds of desire trajectories among academic participants;
- Contradicting political discourses similarly taken up in various kinds of desire trajectories among the participants, here integrated in various ways with other academic discourses;
- Gendered codes with their relative assignment of specifically marked individuals to different kinds of repertoires of agency and performance; and
- Biographical trajectories of experience, emphasized as endlessly multitudinous and potentially accessible as multifaceted links of synthesis.

These elements may be described as some of the many aspects that are included in the discursive conditions that each individual has to interweave and elaborate in a constant interaction with parallel processes of other individuals.

NOTES

1.   In 1999–2000 18 men and women were interviewed on their everyday experiences as full professors, associate and assistant professors in the social sciences and the humanities at five Danish universities. The material was collected in context of a research project, 'Gender in the Academic Organization', financed by the Danish Research Councils. In the Danish university system, after completing a master's degree (five years), a typical career pattern would involve a three-year grant to write a PhD thesis, followed by an assistant professorship that includes three years of research and teaching. The next step will be an application for a permanent/tenured associate professorship. Finally, there is the opportunity at a later stage to apply for one of the few full professorships. There is open competition at every passage from PhD and onwards. Usually an associate professorship will, however, be advertised for an assistant professor to apply when the assistant professorship has run its course.

2.   Interpellation: Althusser (1971).

3.   Please note (with Haraway in mind) the retooling strategy: although I play down the differentiation between individual and context, and foreground the categories for mutual processing between the two elements, individual and context still appear as necessary categories for the meaning-making process. They cannot be done away with. That would be an example of too alien a discursive offer for us to be able to use it against the background that has been our discursive conditions for subjectification (Søndergaard, 2002a, 2002b). Also note that whenever the individual's contribution to the processing is being considered, there is an assumption of a general, human individual capacity to synthesize and manoeuvre discursively. This means that the individual is conceptualized as having the capacity to expose the contradictions among discursive offers (that exist historically and as trajectories of biographical experience) to integrating and elaborating processes. The term synthesizing, however, is maintained at an unspecific level in its general definition.

4.   Politics is employed in this text as a broad definition of collective or collectively contributory endeavours to promote and restrain particular interests, whether institutional, personal or group interests, through formal or informal initiatives within the field of practice of an organization or institution. In an academic context, politics is hardly distinguishable from 'administration' or from 'scientific work', since the aspect concerned with promoting and restraining particular interests is also realized through administrative, teaching, research-related activities as well as through many other kinds of enactments. This is a point argued very convincingly in, for instance, Latour (1987) and Traweek (1988). Nevertheless, there may in this context be an analytic point in reserving a concept for a particular focus on the strategies and kinds of discursive agency that are concerned with the representation, position and opportunities for development of particular interests in a given context.

5.   Bourdieu would talk about academic and scientific capital as the basis of authority in the field (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1990b).

6.   Current neoliberal discursive practices form yet another set of premises interacting with the more 'classic' academic and 'political' discourses mentioned – they may prove to transform the whole setting. For a critical discussion see, for instance, Davies and Petersen (2005), Shore and Wright (2000) and Wright (2002).

7.   It may be here that one of the misunderstandings between, on the one hand, the more constructionist and, on the other hand, the more traditionally psychologizing forms of thinking arises. When constructionist thinking is accused of asserting that individuals can be constructed at random between changing contexts, it is perhaps more a question of a constructionist idea of much bigger repertoires of experience with which to make contextually mediated syntheses, than of regarding each individual as randomly open to the contextual flow of discursive material.

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