On the Constitution of ‘Self’ and ‘Mind’
The Dialectic of the System and the Person

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Abstract. This article introduces a perspective in which questions at a psychological grain of analysis are integrated with a broad societal frame of interpretation, drawing on interdisciplinary feminist writings that provide alternative ways to theorize the social. It is argued that understanding the constitution of subjectivity, ‘self’ and thought requires a societal-level model of the social with both discursive and material constituents as well as local discursive processes that are deployed within, and configured through, that broader system. It is further argued that the ontological notion of a ‘person’ (in a specific, non-modern sense of ‘person’ and in a specific sense of ‘ontological’) is a conceptually necessary part of the theoretical language, as the anchor for processes of social constitution and as the substrate of agency, where agency is theorized as a multilevel process. One central claim developed in this article is that it is through the dialectic among these societal-level, local, and personal constituents that subjectivity, ‘self’ and thought are constituted, a ‘self’ that is assumed to be situated, hybrid, complex, tension-filled and unstable, yet substantial.

Key Words: agency, discourse, feminism, mind, poststructuralism, self, sociocultural, subjectivity, thinking

The social sciences have undergone major transformations in the last few decades, both in theoretical frameworks and in relations between disciplines. New questions are asked, and new, transdisciplinary objects of knowledge are constructed that integrate the societal, the cultural, the symbolic and the individual levels of analysis of social processes. Psychology in particular is slowly emerging from its individualistic and isolationist disciplinary history, as evidenced by the increasing impact of social constructionist perspectives, feminist interdisciplinary analyses, critical race theory or cultural approaches to the study of psychological processes.

This article introduces a theoretical perspective that is animated by two convictions. The first is that theorizing about subjectivity and thought requires a broad, macro-level systemic model of the social world, a feature
familiar in sociological writings but not always present in current work in psychology. The second is that poststructuralist accounts of the discursive construction of social life are crucial in accounting for the constitution of subjectivity and thought, but that they need to be reformulated so as to include the notion of a (reconstructed) ‘person’, and to be integrated with a broad systemic model of the social.1

The central claim of the article is that accounting for the constitution of subjectivity and thought requires processes at three closely intertwined grains of analysis: (a) macro-level, or societal-level,2 processes such as gender, ‘race’ and class that configure the social world and that have both material and discursive constituents; (b) those local discursive processes of social constitution that have been well described in poststructuralist analyses but that (contrastingly) are here construed systemically and taken to be configured in part through the macro-level processes that organize the social world; and (c) the ontological notion of a person (where ‘ontological’ is understood in a specific, non-‘modern’ sense, to be discussed).

Whereas the notion of the person and the attendant notion of the self have been foregrounded in other theoretical perspectives, they are generally rejected in poststructuralist approaches, which highlight instead the contingent, discursive construction of the subject. While endorsing the discursive construction of the subject, I shall argue that the notion of a ‘person’ (in a specific, non-modern sense of ‘person’) is a theoretical necessity for discursive analyses. The present claim that local discursive processes are centrally involved in the constitution of subjectivity and thought is, therefore, formulated accordingly, with the (reconstructed) ‘person’ at the center. The reconstructed ‘person’ is taken to be the anchor of local discursive processes that dynamically contribute to the constitution of her/his subjectivity, a subjectivity which is assumed to be complex, situated, contradictory and unstable, as well as agentic.

On this theory, it is through the dialectic among societal-level, local and ‘personal’ constituents that subjectivity and thought are produced. The notion of a dialectic is crucial: it denotes that ‘personal,’ local and societal-level processes are co-constitutive in a dynamic sense. The model is systemic in that it has societal scope—it is grounded in an analysis of the structuring of society as a whole and of the internal politics of society—and it entails dynamic, mutually constitutive relations between processes at different levels. Thus, as will be elaborated later, a ‘person’’s subjectivity and ‘mind’ are constituted over time through her/his social location in a gendered, ‘raced’ and class-stratified world, the attendant formative societal discourses, the local discursive processes in which s/he has participated and which have been configured by those larger discourses/structures, and her/his agency in appropriating, rejecting or modulating various societal discourses and in constructing the subject positions s/he inhabits in local
discursive exchanges. At the same time, social subjects affect local and macro-level social processes by their actions and their positionings.

Issues concerning self and subjectivity evidently have been addressed by a number of theoretical traditions within psychology. In recent years alone, the self has been described as a discursive production (e.g. Harré, 1991), a semiotic construction (e.g. Barclay & Kee, 2001) or a dialogical process (e.g. Hermans, 2001). I do not attempt to engage in detail with these diverse traditions, although I refer to specific works when indicated. Though each approach contributes useful insights, one of their limitations is a failure to place the processes they describe within a societal-level analysis of the internal structuring of society. Aside from other theoretical differences, the present theory departs from these earlier works by explicitly relying on a systemic model in which the social world is seen as configured at all levels (societal, local, ‘personal’) by gender, ‘race’ and class, both discursively and materially. This discussion draws on interdisciplinary feminist theoretical analyses from sociology, political science, cultural studies and philosophy that provide complementary ways to theorize the social, so as to outline the societal frame of understanding in which I argue that ‘self’ and ‘mind’ must be construed, and on psychological writings that contribute to such an understanding.

The next section stresses the necessity of a societal-level approach to questions regarding ‘self’ and ‘mind’, and it emphasizes the interdependence of local and societal-level processes. In doing so, the theory crosses established theoretical boundaries and it rejects what I see as false oppositions between particular ways to theorize the social, exploiting instead their complementarities. The constitution of subjectivity and thought within this framework is then outlined in the following section, with an illustration from current research on modes of reasoning (Falmagne, 2003; Falmagne & Iselin, 2002). In the remainder of the article, and expanding in more specific terms on the general perspective delineated thus far, I then consider issues involved in theorizing a complex ‘self’, the conceptual necessity for a notion of ‘person’ and a substantial ‘self’ in poststructuralist theorizing, and the multilayered nature of agency.

**Local and Societal-Level Processes of Social Constitution**

*On the Necessity of a Societal-Level Approach*

At the present historical time, the idea that subjectivity involves the local operation of discursive processes that position subjects in particular ways does not require elaboration. The poststructuralist emphasis on discursive construction and on the local (as well as the postmodern emphasis on the play of meaning and language) infuses the theoretical landscape. As one
illustration. Mouffe (1992) characterizes the social agent as an ensemble of subject positions, where subject positions are discursively constructed and temporary, and she notes: ‘The “identity” of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those subject positions’ (p. 372). Mouffe’s characterization in this passage aptly illustrates the primacy of the local represented in much poststructuralist theorizing on subjectivity. Butler (1990, 1992), Probyn (1990, 1993) and Flax (1993), among many others, exemplify a similar commitment to contingency and a similar theoretical focus on the local when theorizing subjectivity. Those works are cited here on an illustrative basis, in order to anchor a general feature of much poststructuralist theorizing, for which the reader undoubtedly has many other examples.

These contributions are valuable. As stated previously, however, it is the contention of this article that they are insufficient as theoretical accounts of ‘self’, subjectivity and thought. While local discursive processes are crucially implicated in the constitution of subjectivity, the present view is that they are systemically related to broader societal processes that require macro-analysis. Put differently, the local operations of discourse need to be considered in the context of an integrated social theory.

Such a perspective is present in Foucauldian accounts. Foucault (1969/1982; see also Rabinow, 1984) considers discourse both in its material local effects and in its societal function as constituting regimes of truth, constituting the objects of which it speaks, and sustaining regulatory practices (see Fairclough, 1992, for an alternative dual-level account). Likewise, Wetherell (1998) advocates a synthetic approach in which the ‘highly occasioned and situated nature of subject positions’ is part of the analytic focus, but is considered in its engagement with a more inclusive notion of discourse (p. 394), and she emphasizes the need analytically to consider local discursive practices within a broader, systemic societal-level analysis that attempts to uncover their genealogical context and ‘the social and collective patterning of background conceptions’ (p. 405). Along related lines, Hennessy (1993) points out that only a societal-level notion of ideology ‘makes it possible to acknowledge the systematic operation of social totalities like racism across a range of interrelated material practices’ (p. xvi).

The present proposal concurs with those societal approaches to discourse but, in contrast to their primary emphasis on the discursive construction of the social, it does explicitly emphasize material conditions of existence and it involves some structural elements. A full discussion of the relation between the discursive and the material in social theory exceeds the scope of this article (for a thoughtful review, see Howarth, 2000). For discourse-theoretic approaches, discourse represents the basic ontology of the social world in that it is discourse that is constitutive of social processes both at the
local scale and on a societal scale (e.g. Butler & Scott, 1992; Howarth, 2000). Materialist analyses, on the other hand, accord an explicit constitutive weight to the concrete, material aspects of social life, such as different groups’ access to material resources (e.g. Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997).

The view taken here, building on the work of sociologists such as Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1999), Dorothy Smith (1990) and others, is that the discourse-based mode of analysis and the mode of analysis based in material conditions complement one another in a fundamental way. In her elegant discussion of the elements of an integrative social constructionist approach, Glenn (1999) stresses that the social construction of race/gender is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation. Her detailed analysis of labor market segmentation, residential segregation or class identity and consciousness exposes the joint involvement of material conditions and of the available rhetoric of race, gender and class in these social phenomena and ‘suggest[s] a dialectical relation between material and structural relations and cultural representations’ (p. 12). Fraser (1989), Hennessy (1993) and Marx-Ferree, Lorber and Hess (1999) provide similar perspectives and show that, for instance, societal discourses of inequality have material effects in regulating distribution of and access to material resources, and that, reciprocally, material conditions have efficacy in enabling and supporting particular societal discourses. Thus, societal discourses and material conditions provide interlocking constituent processes for an integrative account of the social world, constituents that are mutually enabling and mutually constraining.

This interlocked, mutually constitutive relation between societal discourses and material realities is compellingly illustrated in Frankenberg’s (1993) study of white women’s experience of ‘race’. Her account of the construction of ‘race’ in the US exposes how societal discourses of ‘race’ at various points in US history (a societal-level phenomenon with local ramifications), concrete immigration patterns and material geographical conditions of urban segregation have been mutually constitutive historically. The concrete patterning of social life is produced through this interplay. Frankenberg’s empirical analysis of ‘white’ subjectivity, discussed in the next section, illuminates the joint effects of geography and discourse on her participants’ social experience and on their experience of ‘race’. Likewise, Wetherell and Potter’s (1992) discourse-analytic investigation of the language of racism in its psychosocial aspects, an investigation which is explicitly framed within and informed by the attendant social and economic conditions in New Zealand, clearly exposes the interdependence of the discursive and the material.

Thus, societal discourses and material conditions are mutually constitutive, and jointly constitutive of power relations. It is in this manner that gender, ‘race’ and class are taken to configure social life. Materially, gender, ‘race’ and class organize access to economic resources and division of labor.
Discursively, discourses of gender, ‘race’ and class regulate social practices and they configure, control and legitimate material arrangements (Glenn, 1999; Walkerdine, 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). In addition, those ideological discourses are materially implemented through institutions and texts, and in that way, they exercise semiotic control over individual subjectivity (Smith, 1990).

The notion of ‘social formation’, an extension of Omi and Winant’s (1994) groundbreaking work on racial formations in the US, is introduced here to connote this systemic property of gender and, likewise, of ‘race’ and class. Societal discourses of gender, material conditions, the attendant social and institutional practices and (as will be discussed next) local discursive processes and individual subjectivity are intertwined and support one another in a systemic manner (Barrett, 1992/1999; Glenn, 1999; Marx-Ferree et al., 1999; Smith, 1990). Gender is here construed as a social formation in this sense, and so are ‘race’ and class. Furthermore, gender, ‘race’ and class inflect and constitute one another. As many feminist theorists have described, they are interlocking, intersecting social formations in which, for instance, constructions of gender are inflected by ‘race’ and class, and experiences of race differ as a function of gender and class (Alarcon et al., 1993; Collins, 1990; Glenn, 1999; Marx-Ferree et al., 1999; Mohanty, 1991; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). Thus, it is in this intersectional context that subjectivity, ‘self’ and ‘mind’ are considered here.

The Interdependence of the Local and the Societal Level

The societal-level structuring of the social world emphasized so far merits emphasis because it is generally not reflected in psychological works. At the same time, as noted previously, local discursive processes are seen here as equally critical in configuring the social. The view taken here is that macro-level social relations and local processes are interdependent and complementary. These are linked processes at two different levels of analysis. Local negotiations of power and of subject positions take place within the macro-level material and discursive social relations just discussed, and are configured (though not determined) by those relations. Local discursive processes are enabled and constrained by the interlocking effects of the social structure and of societal discourses.

Thus, for instance, in an (academic) exchange in which a disagreement is negotiated, for one of the protagonists to be able to adopt the discursive positioning of an authoritative voice requires that there be an institutional or societal structure/discourse of authority (e.g. ‘expertise’ or status) that provides the meaning and the implicit justification for this local positioning. The local positioning, whether contested or not, is enabled (though evidently not determined) by the institutional or societal structure and discourse of ‘knowledge’-based authority. While other positionings certainly are possi-
ble, and while the protagonist certainly is agentic in adopting subject positions, the point here is that this particular positioning relies for its meaning on the existence of a societal-level structure/discourse of authority. In a fully egalitarian (utopian) academic world in which such structure/discourse would be absent, the same local discursive move would either be meaningless or have an entirely different meaning. Likewise, the local positioning of gendered agents in a discursive exchange is configured (not determined or rigidly constrained) by the wider social formation of gender that structures society at all levels, and its meaning is produced accordingly. Consider, for instance, how the meaning of a local discursive positioning of claiming expertise in a particular domain, say cooking, is modulated by wider (and intersectional) societal discourses of gender.

Subjectivity and Thought: An Illustration

Subjectivity and thought are constituted in and through the systemic interplay of societal discourses and material aspects of gender, ‘race’ and class and of the social practices and local discursive processes they sustain. For instance, Frankenberg’s (1993) empirical analysis of white women’s experience of ‘race’ illuminates the way in which the women’s perception of themselves and others and their relation to issues of race draw jointly from the material conditions of each woman’s life (where she lived, in what demographic context she grew up and with whom she interacted) and from different ‘discursive repertoires’ of ‘race’ that have become sedimented in the culture at different historical periods. Frankenberg shows how the woman’s particular historical location and her material circumstances have been jointly efficacious in constituting some of her (white women) participants’ subjectivity as ‘race-evasive’, while other participants have appropriated a ‘race-cognizant’ discourse. Likewise, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) describe how the material and discursive social formations of gender and class configure young girls’ subjectivity.

Further, while social subjects do contribute to social reproduction by instantiating these processes of social constitution in their subjectivity, their actions and their thinking, they are, equally, active agents who appropriate, resist, transform or modulate available societal discourses, who negotiate their social locations, and who discursively co-construct the subject positions they inhabit (e.g. Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994; Fine, Powell, Weis, & Wong, 1997; Henwood, Griffin, & Phoenix, 1998; Macpherson & Fine, 1995; Tizard & Phoenix, 1993; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Subjectivity, ‘self’ and ‘mind’ are constituted through a dialectical interplay between processes of social constitution and the person’s agency. Thus, for instance, Frankenberg’s analysis brings into relief the ways in which some of her participants have contributed to the social reproduction of racial segregation,
while at the same time agentically constructing their own identity over time by accepting or contesting available discourses of ‘race’ and positioning themselves in particular ways in the discursive practices in which they have participated. I return to theoretical issues about agency in a later section.

The ideas discussed so far can be illustrated with reference to people’s modes of reasoning understood in their societal context, the focus of a current interview research project in which women participants are asked to think through conflicting accounts of a particular situation they encountered or conflicting theories about a phenomenon (Falmagne, 2003; Falmagne & Iselin, 2002). The analytic focus is on the knowledges and other resources the woman brings into her reasoning, the interplay of those resources, the potential tensions between competing discourses of knowledge, the intertwining of the participant’s ‘self’ and of her mode of thinking, and the discursive positioning she constructs at various times as she reasons through the epistemic dilemma. An initial segment of the interview explores in depth the woman’s social location and cultural history, so that her reasoning can be contextualized accordingly. The dual mode of data analysis of the research, which includes analytical constructs characterizing ‘moments’ of reasoning as well as profiles of each woman that particularize her as a social agent in terms of her social location, her cultural history and her modes of thought, reflects the tenets of the present model through its analytic focus on both local discursive processes and the societal-level dynamics through which subjectivity, thought and local processes are interpreted. It is important to note that, in the analysis as well as in the present discussion, societal context is used interpretively to understand a particular participant, not causally and not as a basis for generalizations to her social group (Falmagne, 2003; Falmagne & Iselin, 2002).

As an illustrative example (inevitably schematized for expository purposes here), consider a particular woman participant in this research, who is attempting to sort out various epistemic dilemmas she has encountered. ‘Simone’, a young Black woman from Jamaica, has been in the US for four years. For most of this time, she has lived and attended school in a racially and ethnically mixed, predominantly working-class part of a metropolitan city, which she liked very much and where she had many friends from Jamaica, the US, Barbados and other countries. Recently she moved to a predominantly white, upper-middle-class suburb, which she does not like and where she states that she has no friends. Her mother is a nanny and her mother’s husband does not work. Now in her first year at college, she wants to pursue the study of math and accounting, which she enjoyed in high school. Simone’s discussions are generally structured according to clear deductive processes and informed by social knowledge, and she trusts her own rational evaluations of evidence while also showing an awareness of the deduced status of her conclusions through her frequent use of the marker ‘I think’. She appears to have secure confidence in her own judgment.
One recurrent theme in Simone’s reasoning about the various situations she discusses is a distrust of the motives of the protagonists. This consideration, which she often mentions first, governs her reasoning strategies. For instance, referring to a hypothetical medical situation involving three conflicting diagnoses, she immediately evokes the possibility of deception: ‘Why is everyone saying, you know, something totally different? Is something wrong with me that they just don’t want to tell me, or is it that there’s nothing wrong with me and they are making up something? I don’t know.’ Simone later discusses an algebra course in which the teacher insists on a decompositional method that Simone finds unnecessarily complex. She herself prefers to rely on ‘straightforward equations’, a method she learned previously and which she argues is of wider use. She is suspicious of the teacher’s real motive: ‘Actually I think she’s just looking for a way to write her book, sell her book, that’s what I think, ‘cause she has a book, and we’ve been taught from that book, and naturally we have to buy the book so I think she just, my personal opinion is that she just wanted to sell the book, ‘cause to me, the way she’s teaching is making it more complicated.’ Later yet, when discussing theories about the colonization of Africa, her analysis is guided by a social knowledge of imperialist motives, a psychological knowledge of the mechanisms of deception, and her deductive inferences from both knowledge bases. She states: ‘I realized they [Europeans] came, at first you know with a friendly thing you know like, they were there to help us and, help Africans, you know; they, basically tricked them, you know.’ She notes that Africans subsequently were persuaded to fight in a war against another country, ‘not knowing that they’re fighting it for the Europeans, you know what I’m saying?’ She concludes: ‘And, I think that’s how that just happened, slowly but surely. . . . They come as friends, you know, friendly at first, and slowly but surely taking over. It’s not likely that you’re gonna notice it until its probably too far.’

In terms of the present theory, this woman occupies a particular social and historical location in a world structured by gender, ‘race’, ethnicity and class. The theme of distrust that inflects Simone’s reasoning at these various local moments can be understood interpretively in the context of the colonial history of her country, and seen as produced by the historical social relations of gender and ‘race’ that have shaped her experience at a societal level and that have organized the context and the nature of the local discursive exchanges in which she has participated and through which her ‘self’ and ‘mind’ have been constituted. In addition, the formative discourses of knowledge with which she has engaged have been shaped by her social location over time and her cultural history. At the same time, she has been agentic in appropriating, transforming, rejecting, modulating or interweaving dominant, subjugated and resistant discourses of knowledge in her thinking and her personal epistemology. Her agency is also manifested through the positioning she adopts at particular moments in the interview, for instance in
distancing herself from the ‘expert’ discourse of knowledge in her discussion of her algebra course or in her discussion of the medical dilemma. These local positionings, however, are understood in the broader context of the social relations and material conditions that have shaped her experience. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Simone’s approach to reasoning, overall, embodies an implicit reliance on the epistemic advantage of marginality described by many feminists of color (e.g. Collins, 1999; hooks, 1996), with whose writings she is likely to be unfamiliar.

This example also illustrates the systemic workings of agency, a point to which I return in a later section. While Simone distances herself from the ‘expert’ discourse, an agentic move, her thinking as social agent has been constituted in part through such discourses and within the educational institution in which she participates. Hence her agentic move is deployed within, and in a sense is constrained by, that systemic context. ‘Self’ and ‘mind’ result from a dialectical interplay between societal-level and local-level processes of social constitution, the efficacy of societal discourses of knowledge, the person’s discursive and experiential history, and her personal agency.

In addressing the constitution of ‘self’ (and, implicitly, ‘mind’) in more detail, the next two sections outline a proposal for conceptualizing the complexities of the ‘self’, and, after a meta-theoretical discussion on the conceptual necessity of a notion of ‘person’, elaborate on the notion of a substantial ‘self’ understood in its complexity and on the cumulative, temporally extended nature of human existence. The last section returns in more detail to the nature of agency.

**Intricacies of the ‘Self’**

Poststructuralist critiques have subverted the traditional notion of a unified, bounded, stable, transparent self who is the origin of his or her actions and of social life. I do fully endorse the spirit of that critique. But I would like to argue that the critique has been too indiscriminate. The impulse that has fueled the radical rejection of the ‘self’ and the shift toward a non-substantial, fluid notion of subjectivity in postmodern theorizing has been precipitous in assuming a necessary link between the notion of a substantial ‘self’ and the unified, bounded, stable Cartesian self. The ‘self’ whose subjectivity we theorize can be complex, unstable, contradictory and contingently shifting while remaining substantial.

The issue is how to theorize this complexity. As a preliminary observation, it is misleading to assume that inner diversity entails fragmentation. Amy Mullin (1995) notes that critiques of the modern self often conflate unity with homogeneity and construe inner diversity as the juxtaposition of different person-like parts, a construal she coins as that of a ‘composite self’
and a fragmented, compartmentalized person. Interestingly, she submits that postmodern conceptions paradoxically have imported the legacy of the modern self into their reformulations, in that both conceptualize diversity as ‘the co-presence of relatively fixed and self-contained person-like parts’ (p. 15). The postmodern self constructed by multiple discourses or consisting of multiple subject positions has a structure that, in her view, does not depart significantly from the compartmentalized self. Jane Flax (1993), herself a postmodern psychoanalytical theorist, makes a similar observation and submits that, despite their contributions to displacing the unitary or fixed notions of subjectivity, psychoanalysts and postmodernists replicate aspects of these subjectivities within their own discourses (p. 98).

For postmodern approaches such as those that are the object of Mullin’s and Flax’s critique, non-homogeneity, contingency in discursive positioning and contingency in meaning construction are taken as reasons to reject ‘self’ as a theoretical notion. The position taken here, in contrast, is that a substantial ‘self’ is a theoretical necessity, a substantial ‘self’ that includes non-homogeneity and tensions.

One step in this direction is provided by dialogical approaches (e.g. Hermans, 2001; Valsiner, 2002) that assume a multiplicity of relatively autonomous ‘I positions’ and a corresponding plurality of voices engaged in dialogical negotiations. However, while it is a welcome feature of dialogical models that they offer an analysis of subjective complexity along with a substantial notion of self, they have not, in general, relied on a societal-level frame of analysis of the kind this article has argued to be needed. The self is seen as ‘continuous with culture’ (Hermans, 2001), but the internal politics of culture (Squire, 2000), the social location of the person and the multifaceted, power-imbalanced societal system (of which culture is but one constituent) generally are not part of the theoretical frame, a crucial limitation of those accounts (Falmagne, 1998, 2000). One exception is the ‘postcolonial’ approach3 of Bhatia (2002) and Bhatia and Ram (2001), who consider the self in the concrete context of historical relations of colonization, racialization, displacement and diaspora, and who stress the cultural and psychological contradictions and complexities of individuals belonging to diasporic communities, contradictions putatively addressed through dialogical negotiations between multiple I-positions. In their account, however, the ‘self’ remains compartmentalized along the lines of Mullin’s composite self, perhaps an inevitable feature of dialogical models. Contrastingly, Brah (1996), from a different, poststructuralist postcolonial perspective, stresses the contingent flux of identity formation through the articulation of structural power relations, contingent social relations and subjectivity, thus theorizing a fluid subject, albeit a subject situated in complex historical and cultural context. The present theory, while endorsing the societal scope of analysis of Brah’s account, parts company with her description of a fluid, non-
substantial subject and turns instead to alternative insights offered by Chicana feminist theoretical writings.

Chicana feminists have made important contributions to the theorizing of a complex, hybrid, tension-filled self that is substantial and not fragmented and that is formed in the context of societal-level historical and material processes. One particularly significant construct is Gloria Anzaldua’s (1999) notion of ‘*mestiza consciousness*’, a consciousness that involves belonging/not belonging to different social, cultural and linguistic worlds and embracing that hybridity in one’s sense of identity, along with its associated tensions, pains and potential for resistance. Within a discussion of the cultural politics and material history leading to and resulting from Northern Mexico’s absorption by the United States in 1848, Anzaldua describes how the mestiza, ‘cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures [white, Mexican and indigenous]’ (p. 100), experiences ‘psychic restlessness’, perplexity and insecurity, and how, from this position, she develops a tolerance for ambiguity and contradictions and a life-saving flexibility. Those aspects of her experience, however, are not fixed but rather can be transformed. Anzaldua states:

Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else . . . . The work takes place underground—subconsciously. It is work that the soul performs. The focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting that which is separate occurs. The assembly is not one where severed or separate pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspects of each new paradigm. (pp. 101–102)

Anzaldua’s mestiza is not a composite (in Mullin’s sense). There is no fragmentation. Nor is she multiple (in Bhatia and Ram’s unproblematic sense). Her *hybridity* and the attendant tensions and struggles are a core constituent of her sense of self and of her relation to the world in which she lives. Also, in contrast to the ‘fluid’ subjectivity described by Brah, her ‘continual creative motion’ is oriented toward synthesis, a synthesis that is hybrid and tension-filled.

Along related lines, Maria Lugones (1994/1996), in a marvelous discussion, ‘Purity, Impurity and Separation’, explores the politics of (theoretical and experiential) purity, which she links to the urge for control, and describes instead another form of distinctiveness, ‘*curdling*’. Lugones distinguishes two senses of *separar* (to separate), metaphorically illustrated with reference to culinary images. The first refers to the complete separation, or
segregation, of elements that are considered each to be pure and radically different from one another, as is the process of separating egg yolk and egg white where the goal is a radical segregation of the two. The second sense of separar is illustrated in the process in which, when making mayonnaise and adding oil too quickly, the mayonnaise se separa, curdles. With curdling, the curdled elements are separated from one another but the elements are intrinsically ‘impure’. Lugones writes:

When I think of mestizaje, I think both of curdling, an exercise in impurity, and of separation as splitting, an exercise in purity. I think of the attempt at control exercised by those who possess both power and the categorical eye and who attempt to split everything impure, breaking it down into pure elements (as in egg white and egg yolk) for the purposes of control. . . . And I think of something in the middle of either/or, something impure, or someone mestizo, as both separated, curdled and resisting in its curdled state. Mestizaje defies control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled, multiple state and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts. (p. 277)

For Anzaldua, Lugones and other Chicana feminist theorists (e.g. Moya, 2001; Moya & Hames-Garcia, 2000; Pesquera & Segura, 1993), a complex, hybrid, ‘impure’ self entails neither fragmentation nor fluidity: it is substantial in its hybridity, its complexity and its fluctuations. It is significant and highly interesting that Chicana feminists, writing from a structurally non-hegemonic social standpoint and, generally, from a materialist and historical perspective (but see Alarcon et al., 1993, for a non-materialist perspective), have articulated the problem of contradiction and multiplicity quite differently from postmodern writers, seeing it not as an impasse or a problem for a theoretical notion of ‘self’ but as the basis for its reformulation. For Chicana feminists, fluidity, instability, multiplicity, contradictions, are ‘owned’ by an embodied, conflicted person and make up the hybrid nature of a substantial, ‘impure’ ‘self’. I would like to suggest that these insights be extended to theoretical conceptions of ‘self’ more generally, and to the notion of a (reconstructed) ‘person’.

The Person as an Ontologically Permanent ‘Site’, and the Substantial ‘Self’

A preliminary, meta-theoretical argument that the notion of a ‘person’, understood in a specific, non-‘modern’ sense, is a theoretical necessity in poststructuralist theorizing will clear the ground for the subsequent, substantive discussions. The notion of a substantial ‘self’ is then elaborated, and considered in its temporally extended process of constitution.
Ontological Continuity

I would like to submit that within discursive accounts of subjectivity, there is a conceptual necessity for a ‘site’ that remains ontologically continuous through moments of relational meaning construction and through moments of discursive construction of the subject, a site that anchors these moments and contradictions. ‘Ontologically’ is used here in its strict philosophical sense of merely signifying that there must be continuity of reference between the moments of discursive constitution. Conceptually, the ‘person’ (and the attendant ‘self’) must be individuated as the same element through the different way in which it is constructed discursively and through subjective, experiential and contextual changes, lest theoretical statements about change, instability, and the like, become incoherent for lack of a common referent. A contradiction is not a contradiction without a site. A subjectivity is unstable only if it is the same element whose subjectivity we contrast at different moments. In those poststructuralist accounts that exclusively rely on momentary, contingent, relational discursive construction as an explanatory framework for the constitution of subjectivity, what used to be a person is now reduced to an intersection of discourses and a constellation of subject positions. The argument here is that, on conceptual grounds, there must be a ‘person’ as the site for those intersections and as the common element that anchors those discursive processes.

To nail that point, the moment of meaning construction I undergo in a particular exchange is different from the meaning construction I undergo in another exchange. The subject positions I occupy are different. In some content-related sense I am constructed differently at these different moments. However, I remain myself, not you. There is a fundamental ontological distinction between the differences I incur at my different moments and the difference between my moment and your moment. Even if we reject the modern notion of a stable, bounded and cohesive self, it does remain the case that the possibly fluid, possibly fragmented, possibly multiple self I hold is not you. Again, the contention here has to do with the logical coherence of the theoretical account, the need to posit an element that remains individuated as the same element even as it is transformed substantively over time.

The paradox of development may serve as a heuristic for conceptualizing the issue of permanence through change. The development of an individual through life (say between the ages of 3 and 50) involves radical change and genuine transformation, yet the person remains individuated as the same element through these changes. Her past is contained within the present, developmentally and meta-theoretically. On conceptual grounds, for something to be a transformation, the untransformed and the transformed state must pertain to the same individuated element. The issue in the case of development is how to characterize ontological permanence through change
and transformation, where permanence and change are temporally extended. The analogous issue for theoretical accounts of subjectivity is how to characterize the permanence of a substantial person who remains individuated as the same entity through the moments of relational construction of the subject.

A point of clarification about this notion of ontological continuity may be useful. To stress that the person remains individuated as the same element through its various moments does not assume that there is a substantive continuity of content across these moments. A particular woman may be positioned as a teacher at one moment, a mother at another, and a political activist at yet another moment, with the range of subject positions offered in each of these contexts differing widely from one another; thus, her subjectivity may be constructed discursively in vastly different ways in these different contexts. There may be little continuity in content between those moments but there is continuity of reference between moments of discursive construction of the subject; the ‘person’ is the anchor of that common reference. Thus, for instance, it is the ‘person’ who is the site of the shifting, conflicted, discrepant moments of meaning construction described by Anzaldua (1999) and Lugones (1994/1996). In a content-related sense, her ‘self’ is constructed differently at different moments through the fluctuations of subjectivity, but those fluctuations in discursive and experiential construction pertain to the same ‘person’.

**The Substantial ‘Self’**

The substantial ‘self’ posited here is, evidently, a contested notion in current theorizing. Stuart Hall’s (1993, 1996) argument for substantiality in the midst of fluidity and discursive construction will help clarify the status of that assumption. In an incisive discussion of postmodernism and the question of identity, Hall (1993) states:

> It may be true that the self is always, in a sense, a fiction, just as the kinds of ‘closures’ that are required to create communities of identification—nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities etc.—. . . are arbitrary closures . . . . But doesn’t the acceptance of the fictional narrative status of identity in relation to the world also require as a necessity, its opposite—the moment of arbitrary closure? . . . Potentially, discourse is endless: the infinite semiosis of meaning. But to say anything at all you do have to stop talking. Of course every full stop is provisional. . . . It is not forever, not totally universally true. It is not underpinned by any infinite guarantees. But just now this is what I mean; this is who I am. (p. 136)

Hall (1996) observes that in the wake of postmodern and deconstructive critiques of the essentialist concept of identity, some concepts are ‘no longer serviceable’ in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded by other, adequate concepts, ‘there is nothing to do but
to continue to think with them, albeit now in their detotalized and deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated’ (p. 1). This, Hall argues, is the case for ‘identity’, which he maintains is a necessary concept: ‘Identity is such a concept—operating “under erasure” in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all”’ (p. 2, emphasis added). It is the contention of this article that Hall’s compelling argument applies to the notion of a substantial ‘self’ as well.

Jane Flax (1993) observes, in a discussion in which she stresses the necessity of conceiving of subjects as fluid, multiple and in process: ‘However, we never encounter a person without a body or discursive practices without embodied practitioners. Embodiment is simultaneously somatic, psychic and discursive’ (p. 98). Thus, for Flax as in the present discussion, fluidity and multiplicity do not entail a non-substantial ‘self’. Flax uses embodiment to ground substantiality. In positing substantiality, the present discussion stresses instead the ontological continuity of the ‘person’. The ‘self’ is substantial in the sense of remaining the ‘self’ of an ontologically continuous person through its various changes and contingent constructions and transformations.

With this in mind, it is important to recognize the temporally extended and cumulative nature of human existence and of ‘self’. Poststructuralist discussions of subjectivity, both within and outside of feminism, often seem to take place on the head of a pin: there is no time, no space and no past. Aside from psychoanalytically oriented accounts that interpret psychodynamic processes in terms of past experiences (e.g. Hollway, 1989), theoretical discussions of subjectivity and their associated methods often appear to approach the ‘self’ as a timeless entity encapsulated in a self-contained moment.

However, the experiences that the person has now, while being discursively produced (Scott, 1992), are configured by earlier experiences as well. The discursive positionings the person adopts and the positions she takes in discourse are constructed, in part, on the basis of her personal history. For instance, in replying to an aggressive address, a person may construct a defensive/aggressive subject position or a dignified subject position or a defeated subject position. What she does is shaped by the dynamics of the local exchange that position her in a particular way, by the larger societal context, both material and discursive, that configures that local exchange, and—this is the key point here—by her personal and affective history.

In a superb discussion of gender as a personal and social construction, Nancy Chodorow (1995/1996) argues that societal discourses of gender are animated by the personal affective meaning the person produces as a result
of her history, and illustrates these ideas with several case studies. Chodorow writes:

> . . . people use available cultural meanings and images, but they experience them emotionally and through fantasy as well as in particular interpersonal contexts. Individuals thereby create new meanings in terms of their own unique biographies and histories of intrapsychic strategies and practices. (p. 217)

Chodorow’s account eloquently illustrates the present contention that ‘self’, ‘mind’ and subjectivity are inherently temporal and cumulative. It ought to be clear that the notion of a temporally extended, cumulative ‘self’ does not imply stability. For instance, Chodorow notes that the personal constructions she describes are unstable, multiple, layered, fragmented and contradictory, both in terms of emotional meaning and in terms of cultural and discursive meaning. In part, the ‘self’ is ‘a historical accumulation of subjectivities’.4 But beyond this, ‘self’, ‘mind’ and subjectivity are cumulative. They are cumulative in the sense that the past is the genealogy of the present.

The reconstructed ‘person’ is the site of the hybrid, complex, impure, unstable, layered ‘self’ discussed in this section. Her/his subjectivity is produced through relational discursive construction deployed in the context of systemic processes of social constitution, both societal-level and local, in a temporally extended unfolding. We now turn to the status and nature of agency in this process.

### The Multilayered Nature of Agency

#### Agency: A Needed Theoretical Notion

It is now a familiar observation that a theoretical notion of agency is needed to avoid the determinism of models such as macro-structural models that rely on unmediated processes of social construction in their account of thinking and subjectivity. But the danger is not limited to macro-structural models. Newer accounts of the processes of social constitution have given rise to new versions of this danger. The danger is also present in some (not all) versions of contemporary discourse theory that give discourse the exclusive constitutive power. While it is a legitimate feature of discourse-theoretic accounts that they dissolve the social–individual distinction, those particular accounts in which the person and her agency are obliterated can be seen as instantiating a new form of social determinism. The issue hinges on whether or not discourse is given the exclusive constitutive power, a feature on which different discourse-theoretic accounts vary.

Thus, Hall (1996) critiques Foucault’s early work for offering a formal account of the construction of subject positions within discourse without analyzing why certain individuals occupy certain positions rather than
others. Hall emphasizes the necessity of having ‘a theory of what the mechanisms are by which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the “positions” to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize and “perform” these positions’ (pp. 13–14). Likewise, Wetherell’s (1998) discourse-theoretic account of discursive practices stresses that positioning is fueled by ‘participants’ accountability and orientation to their setting and the emergent conversational activities’ (p. 401) and by the ‘interpretative repertoires’ (Wetherell & Potter, 1988) available to them for making sense of, and accounting for, their experience. Wetherell stresses the theoretical necessity of these constructs and the inadequacy of the notion of a subject constructed by discourse, such as that posited by Mouffe (1992), thereby implicitly endorsing the notion of an agent in the theoretical ontology of her account.

A second ground for invoking agency as part of the theoretical language is that it is only then that one can theorize a subject who can be efficacious in the process of social transformation, a concern widely shared among feminist writers as well as other critical scholars. Once one recognizes that knowledge production inherently has political dimensions (Barrett, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Falmagne, 1998; Gill, 1995, 1998; Hall, 1993; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Morawski, 1994; Stanley, 1990), this concern has implications for theory development.

Agency as a Multilevel Process

Agency is theorized here as a multilevel process. First, it is important to note that agency is constrained, and its local deployment does not overshadow the systemic forces. Because the individual is located, (individual) agency is, of necessity, only deployed locally, and its effect must be produced through a dialectic engagement with systemic processes, processes that both constrain and enable those local negotiations. This observation does not imply that individual agency is not efficacious, but it warns against an unproblematic appeal to ‘agency’ in theorizing the constitution of ‘self’ and ‘mind’. Rather, it underlines the systemic functioning of agency in which, again, agency is deployed locally and in a dialectic engagement with systemic processes.

Thus, for instance, in the research on reasoning described above, participants appropriate, transform or reject different discourses of knowledge that have been formative in the development of their thinking, and, in doing so, position themselves in different ways. Participants draw from available discourses of knowledge and from their ‘experience’ to produce their personal epistemology and modes of reasoning through an agentive process that involves sense-making, and they co-construct their subject positions in the exchanges in which they are engaged. But the agency evidenced in these local positionings and in these sense-makings is deployed within, and
constrained by, the system of discursive processes and material conditions that are operative in their lives, as illustrated for the participant discussed in an earlier section.

Next, agency is multilevel in the sense that it involves both active and ‘non-deliberate’ processes. In the process just described, the person’s agency is manifested in her appropriating, resisting or reworking societal discourses, in negotiating material conditions, and in co-constructing the subject positions she inhabits. In a sense, there, agency implicitly involves a ‘deliberate’, or active deployment of some kind on the part of the agent (where ‘deliberate’ is taken in an extended sense rather than in a voluntarist sense).

But the notion of agency can usefully be broadened beyond this construal to include processes of personal construction that emerge not as the result of ‘deliberate’ positionings but as a result of subjective meaning construction. As illustrated compellingly in Chodorow’s (1995/1996) analysis of gender as a personal and social construction, societal discourses are interpreted by the person, they gain their meaning through the meaning they have for the person as a function of her personal and affective history and the particular intersections she occupies. Chodorow writes: ‘Emotional meaning, affective tone, and unconscious fantasies that arise from within and are not experienced linguistically interact with and give individual animation and interpretation to (that is, make subjectively meaningful) cultural categories, stories and language’ (p. 217). Likewise, from a different theoretical angle, Hollway’s (1984, 1989) analysis of subjectivity relies not only on discursively available subject positions, but also on ‘investments’: people position themselves in, and make sense of, contradictory discourses on the basis of their needs and desires, their unconscious dynamic processes and their investments. Investments, then, have become part of the person’s affective and motivational economy and they contribute, not necessarily consciously, to the person’s positioning.

The notion of agency can usefully include these processes of meaning-making and these kinds of emotional, non-deliberate figurations in addition to the ‘deliberate’ form of agency that is generally invoked. The complex, substantial ‘self’ and ‘mind’ are produced through the engagement of these multilayered agentic processes with systemic processes of social constitution.

Concluding Comments

This article has submitted that ‘personal’ and societal processes, both local and extra-local, form a system in that they are inseparably interwoven and co-constitutive, though the grain of analysis moves from one level to the other at different moments depending on the nature of the question. I
suggested that, to account for the constitution of subjectivity, ‘self’ and thought, our theoretical language requires processes at three grains of analysis: a broad systemic model of the social with both material and discursive elements closely intertwined; local discursive processes deployed within that broader system; and the notion of a person, not a ‘modern’ person but a person who is understood as one element of that system and whose ‘self’ may be complex, hybrid, unstable and fluctuating through local processes of discursive construction. ‘Self’ and ‘mind’ are a product of the dialectic between processes of social constitution and individual agency, where agency is understood as both constrained systemically and multi-layered. The notion of social formation usefully captures the systemic, multilevel workings of gender, ‘race’ and class, which this article has argued are key organizers of social life. This perspective relies on some structural elements, but it must be noted that structure need not be reified. Structure is a question of level of analysis.

Ignoring or simplifying the dialectic between societal-level and local constituents of subjectivity and ‘mind’ leads to two opposite theoretical dangers. When the macro-level processes that configure the social world are ignored, the danger is either to slide into the individualistic outlook on which much of psychology has relied (in which the person is understood in its individualistic sense) or to focus disproportionately on local discursive processes without accounting for the way in which they are constrained or enabled by broader societal formations, as some current theoretical approaches to the self seem to do. The reciprocal danger, when social construction takes over in an unmediated form, either by relying exclusively on macro-level processes or by giving discourse exclusive constitutive power, is to lose the person entirely. This article has advocated for a systemic, societal-level frame of interpretation, for the interdependence of societal-level and local processes, and for the central importance of the person in our theoretical language, as the anchor for the interplay of processes of social constitution, as the substrate of personal agency, and as an element in the dialectic through which ‘self’ and ‘mind’ are produced.

Notes

1. In what follows, ‘the social’ is used as a generic, pre-theoretical term connoting the ensemble of processes that make up the social world, however those processes are construed in particular theoretical formulations. Thus this section contrasts different theoretical accounts of the social.

2. The terms ‘macro-level’ and ‘societal-level’ are roughly equivalent in sociological writings, with ‘societal’ more explicitly marking the wide, inclusive scope of the analysis (for both structural and discursive modes of analysis) while ‘macro’ usually more explicitly connotes macro-structural analysis.
3. Inverted commas are used here to mark the fact that the postcolonial era has not fully arrived yet.
4. I thank Bruna Seu for this apt formulation.

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