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## **Subjectivity and consumption: concerns for radical adult education**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter posits that the linked issues of subjectivity and consumption are essential concerns for contemporary radical adult education. Radical adult education has ‘a dialectical and organic relationship with social movements’ (Crowther, Martin and Shaw, 2000: 172). It is socially and politically committed, in the sense that it seeks to promote equality and social justice. The term subjectivity is developed throughout the chapter, but, briefly, it refers to the subjective sense of the self, including ideas, beliefs and emotions. The term consumption is used here to refer to personal purchasing patterns in the North and the ways that status can be accorded to those who have a high number of material possessions. It is increasingly recognised that Northern patterns of consumption and the consumerist discourses that justify them are inimical to both global and local equality and social justice (Korten, 1998; Schor, 1998). The chapter hinges on the need for citizens in the North to challenge the common-sense belief that consumption is a natural and benign outcome of development, and that it is a sign of a high standard of living. It asserts the need for adult education to facilitate individuals to critically address their own patterns of consumption. In this project, it is allied with alternative economics’ concerns for equality (Brandt, 1995; Henderson, 1991), and is part of the struggle for sustainable development in both the North and the South.

Radical adult education believes that education is a vital part of broad processes of social, economic and political change. While not claiming that there is an educational road to social justice, the tradition works towards an informed and politically literate citizenry. It asserts its contribution to social movements, via the facilitation of critical thinking, adult politicisation, and the construction of liberatory knowledge. Liberatory or emancipatory knowledge is characterised by its ability to challenge dominant ways of knowing, and is distinguished from adaptive knowledge, which leaves the status quo intact. Pedagogy, in this context, is a matter of principle and purpose, rather than mere technique (Crowther et al, 2000).

The concern with sustainable development and the role that limiting consumption has to play in it presents adult education with two opportunities, which could also be viewed as necessities. First, there is the opportunity to engage in critical thinking with a new constituency of people, namely consumers in the North. Radical adult education has traditionally engaged with silenced, excluded and objectified sex, social class and ethnic and racial groups. It has supported social movements such as feminism, anti-racist and anti-poverty strategies, and has promoted community development in disadvantaged areas and with marginalized groups. This has been a successful strategy, although limited in its ability to stimulate dominant groups to

examine and set limits to their privilege, in solidarity with oppressed groups. For instance, there is little reason why men, or the wealthy, should examine the consequences of their privilege. With the inclusion of economics on the adult education agenda, the opportunity arises to appeal to the privileged in ways that few other issues have allowed. In recent years, the economic boom in Ireland has provided the conditions under which many members of a privileged group, that is, consumers, may become candidates for critical thinking. The dominant economic view of the citizen as producer and consumer, who is responsible for 'keeping the economy going', has begun to come under scrutiny.

The rapid changes that have taken place in economic and social life have resulted in widespread discussions about the amount of time spent on paid work and commuting. Childcare difficulties and time poverty also feature strongly in the debates. Many workers are preoccupied with quality of life issues, or are experiencing crises that make them cast around for alternatives to their current lifestyles (Ryan, 2002a). They worry about balancing paid work, home life, relationships and personal development (Purcell, 2001). Many feel that they lack control over their lives, and that consumption can provide a means to create a sense of control (Ryan, 2002b). These issues are relevant to sustainability in all economic eras, and there have always been individuals and movements concerned with them. However, the current perception of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy in Ireland has created the conditions whereby many more individuals are open to critical thinking about sustainability, and the part that individual lifestyles and consumption can play in an economics of sustainability.

An adult education curriculum concerned with issues of paid work, consumption and quality of life could bring the intellectual capital of alternative economists to this new target group. The curriculum would provide alternative ways of thinking about and acting on the issues, and assist the creation of a critical community, based on the 'interface between the micro-politics of "personal troubles" and the macro-politics of "public issues"' (Crowther et al, 2000: 179). An examination of consumption as an expression of economic structures at the level of the individual could help illuminate global concerns about capitalist patterns of production and consumption. In taking on this project, adult education, far from turning its back on the struggles of excluded and silenced communities, could resource them, by making clear the connections between personal lifestyle choices, poverty and unsustainable development in both North and South.

The world's high and middle-income groups are caught up to a huge extent in a cycle of working, earning and spending (Ryan, 2003). They are concentrated in highly industrialised regions and their way of life is depleting the world's raw materials. The affluence of this consumer class exists in the midst of global poverty, and this class is also setting a standard to which many less affluent people aspire (Schor, 1998).

The consumption patterns associated with this group are also responsible for class inequalities. With increasing consumption, lower-income children and adults are left behind in the market, and the gap between the affluent and the poor becomes unbridgeable. This results in affluent communities trying to protect themselves from the poor 'outside', whether the poor are local or from other parts of the globe (ibid). Pressures on private spending grow, and as this happens, support for taxes and public

spending goes down. Public goods and facilities get little support, which causes them to deteriorate or even cease to be available, and this adds to the pressures to spend privately (ibid).

In one sense, it is a highly elitist suggestion that already privileged people take time to examine their high-consumption lifestyles and to try to create better quality of life for themselves (Korten, 1998). But in another sense, it would be an enormous change if the consumer class developed awareness of these issues and began living with purpose, clarifying their priorities, consuming only what they need, avoiding meaningless production and possessions, and devoting time to their relationships, families and communities (ibid). Such a change could create the conditions for understanding that economics is relevant to everybody and that the organisation of the economy is a political process.

All pedagogical efforts need to attend to both content and process. In other words, they need to provide concrete information (content), and they need to attend to the emotional and psychological responses of learners to new content (process). If adult education were to take on these issues, a rational critique of consumerism and consumerist discourses and the provision of alternatives would form the content. While not downplaying the importance of intellectual and rational understandings of the role of consumption in inequality, it is also important that the critique be capable of moving beyond rationalism. The pedagogy needs to be capable of dealing with the ways that people cling to certain practices, even though they may have a good understanding of the ways that these practices are personally and politically harmful, and even if they make rational plans for change in their lives. For example, possessions and purchasing power can confer status and self-esteem, and an individual may desire possessions, while having a rational understanding of the ways that they use up scarce earth resources or contribute to inequality. The pedagogical process therefore needs to attend to personal attachments to patterns of consumption.

Thus, the second opportunity for adult education is to attend to the psychological aspects of economics, about which little is known (Douthwaite, 1999). The discipline can do this both in its pedagogical practices and in the research that informs its pedagogy. The chapter suggests that a way to do this is to draw on a theory of subjectivity, treating it as a dynamic relationship between discourses, psychodynamic processes and relations in the present moment (Ryan, 2001). The theory is illustrated by examples from recent fieldwork (Ryan, 2002a, b). The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of its assertions for researchers and practitioners in radical adult education.

### **The theoretical framework**

It is essential that radical adult education theorise subjectivity. The production of all knowledge, including knowledge about the human subject, is political. The political nature of this knowledge is often overlooked, and the subject is seen in terms of a pre-given human nature, as natural, normal, common sense, asocial, or beyond the social. Politicised communities or praxis-oriented social movements have an interest in generating knowledge about the individual, in order to sustain adult politicisation. The politics of a multiple subject, whose desires, emotions, reasoning and knowledges are

constructed discursively, is a paradigmatic challenge to theories that posit the individualisation of the self in late modernity. It is a direct challenge to liberal humanism, which is the legitimating ideology of late modern capitalism, and which portrays itself as common sense, free of ideology. If adult education fails to theorise subjectivity, and fails to include it in research and pedagogical practices, then knowledge about the person will be colonised by rightwing forces. The politics of subjectivity is thus explicitly ideological work, which must be added to work for legislative, economic and policy changes. This assertion does not discount the importance of materiality, but emphasises the equal importance of meaning, discourse, discursive practices, culture and discursive power in any planned approach to change.

This chapter draws on a theory of the human subject that has developed from a base in feminist poststructuralism and critical psychology. It uses a variety of theoretical work and practice influenced by, for example, post-Saussurean linguistics, Marxism (especially Althusser's theory of ideology), Lacanian psychoanalysis, the feminism of Kristeva, the deconstruction of Derrida, and the work of Foucault on power, knowledge and discourse (see Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine, 1998; Ryan, 2001). These poststructuralist ideas have avowedly political uses, and are to be distinguished from postmodernism, even though they share postmodernism's questioning of the existence of fundamental truths and universal explanations.

The recognition of the ongoing nature of the constitution of self and of the non-unitary nature of self distinguishes poststructuralist theory from theory that is purely structuralist or social constructionist (Davies, 1990). Structuralist thought differs from poststructuralism, in that it sees the human subject as socially constructed, but static. Feminist poststructuralism also allows that each person simultaneously occupies a range of positions in discourses, including discourses of sex, class, race, age, ability, self-esteem, naturalness, progress, and normality. This makes possible strategic alliances between feminist poststructuralism and other progressive social movements, and is central to its value for adult education.

### **Subjectivity**

Subjectivity is 'the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world' (Weedon, 1997: 32). Adult education, which sees the human subject as the agent of change towards social justice, through the medium of praxis-oriented critical thinking, has traditionally relied on mainstream psychology for its theorisation of the subject. However, psychology itself is dominated by liberal humanist assumptions about the person (Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997; Henriques et al, 1998). The term subjectivity is drawn from critical psychology to refer to a way of theorising the self that does not fall into an unproductive individual/society, or agency/structure debate. The self and the social are seen as existing in a mutually productive relationship (Mama, 1995).

A theory of subjectivity replaces the liberal humanist concept of role with that of position. Discourses produce positions, which people actively take up. Psychodynamic processes such as splitting, projection, or emotional investments

accompany positioning. Each instance of positioning (either reflexive self-positioning or interactive positioning, that is, positioning by others) depends on the situation, or on the social relations of the present moment. This multiple positioning creates contradictions in experience. By taking contradictions into account, a theory of subjectivity is able to address resistance to dominant discourses, attachment to dominant discourses, and the complex emotional responses that accompany them. In the case of consumption, the theory is therefore able to address positioning in consumerist discourses, as well as positioning in anti-consumerist discourses. The following sections elaborate on what is understood by discourse and psychodynamic processes.

### **Consumption and discourse**

The relationship between language and meaning is addressed in the concept of discourse, particularly as developed by Foucault. A discourse is not a language or a text, but an historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, categories and beliefs, habits and practices. Discourse is used to filter and interpret experience and the discourses available at a certain historical moment construct the ways that people can think or talk about, or respond to phenomena. Discourses 'invite' us to be human in certain ways, or to respond to others in certain ways. They produce certain assumptions (about, for example, women, men, economics, work, childcare, or money) and they provide subject positions from which people speak and act. For example, in a recent study (Ryan, 2002b), a discourse of consumerism invited parents to think about childcare in terms of finding paid external care for their child, as well as the money to pay for it. It facilitated the assumption that childcare was a question of organisation and efficiency. It did not allow for the contradictions that arose when parents left their child with a carer. Consumerist discourse also facilitated the assertion by a research participant that gift-buying at Christmas required giving gifts of equal value to those received, in order to maintain good family relationships, even if this caused unwelcome financial strain for individual family members.

From this perspective, discourse, language and visual imagery do not simply 'reflect' or describe reality, but play an integral role in constructing reality and experience, the ways that we know and understand the world, and what we assume to be natural or normal. Foucault's work suggests that the elaboration of meaning involves conflict and power and that the power to control meaning in a particular field resides in claims to (scientific) knowledge. In recent examples, the assertion arose frequently that women and men have different consumer needs, namely, that women 'need' to shop more, because of their 'naturally' greater interest in clothes and appearance than men (ibid). Such assertions draw on mutually reinforcing discourses of consumption and essential gender difference. They are constantly being reproduced and constituted, and can change and evolve in the process of communication. They allow the dismissal of cases that do not fit the general rule. For example, one research participant cited the example of his brother, who had a strong interest in clothes, as evidence that not all men are the same. However, the dominant discourses allowed other group members to dismiss this as an exception to the general rule (ibid).

Foucault (1972a, b; 1973; 1980) maintains a distinction between veridical and vernacular discourses. Veridical discourses are those knowledges such as psychology

and economics, which 'function in truth'. They are organised around norms of truth and falsehood, maintaining the ability and status to divide the normal from the abnormal. They are embedded in and organise specific discursive practices. Discourses articulate and convey formal and informal knowledge and ideologies and are thus contained or expressed in organisations and institutions as well as in words.

Vernacular discourse is a conception of the ways that power and the norm-producing effects of the veridical discourses are implicated in the production of everyday knowledge. Foucault uses the power-knowledge couplet to highlight this distinction. He develops his idea of a 'history of the present' to re-pose questions concerning the relation between truth and power, asking under what conditions certain discourses and practices emerge. He shows knowledge and discourse to be political, material products that represent a privileged way of seeing things, reflected in power, position and tradition. Meaning, situated in the power-knowledge nexus, cannot be separated from time and place, culture and history, politics and society. Foucault argues that underlying power relations shape a discursive practice. Its rules are rarely explicit or subject to criticism, but those who participate must speak in accordance with them. Discourses, then, represent political interests and, in consequence, are constantly vying for status and power. The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual (Weedon, 1997: 40).

By using the concept of discourse, Foucault is able to link into macro-conceptions of society and social change. Currently, we can see that several discourses of consumption are emerging in Ireland, which constitute and shape our discussions of 'Celtic Tiger' and post-tiger lifestyles. Speaking about lifestyle automatically activates these discourses. Consumerist discourse can provide a subject-identity, as in the case of a research participant whose brand new car, for which she borrowed money, allowed her to construct an identity separate from and independent of her family of origin (Ryan, 2002b). In addition, many discussions of spending and lifestyle are limited by the absence of a discourse that distinguishes between needs and wants (ibid).

One difficulty with Foucault's work is that it tends to take for granted that discourse and discursive practices are always successful in creating norms and in masking how power works. His view of recent historical change is thus one of profound pessimism. However, the feminist poststructuralist engagement with his work has challenged this reading, emphasising human agency in the search for social change, and encouraging practices and situations where new discourses can find expression.

There is some assistance here in Foucault's assertion that power is best examined in terms of resistance to it. Faith (1994: 46,7) points out that, while Foucault does not examine specific resistances,

... rather, again and again, [he] stresses in passing the importance of resistance as a conjunct of power. In discussing Foucault's view of resistance, Dreyfus and Rabinow summarize as follows: 'Foucault holds that power needs resistance as one of its fundamental conditions of operation. It is through the articulation of points of resistance that power spreads through the social field. But it is also, of course, through resistance that power is

disrupted. Resistance is both an element of the functioning of power and a source of its perpetual disorder' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 147).

Some specific resistances to consumerist discourses can be seen in Ireland, although they could not be considered dominant. New practices emerging are organised around the discourse of quality of life. This discourse centres on the premise that happiness and a sense of control of one's life are not necessarily connected to having a large number of possessions. Quality of life is perceived as a qualitative phenomenon, and a critical attitude is emerging to money and the demands made by paid work, as well as to the idea that money is always the route to wellbeing (Purcell, 2001; Ryan, 2002a, b; 2003). Within this discourse, there is resistance to the currently dominant belief that families need the equivalent of two full incomes, in order to make ends meet. There is an emphasis on the value of social and human capital, as well as economic capital. While the gender-blindness of many approaches to social capital (Blaxter and Hughes, 2000) and quality-of-life (Ryan, 2002b, 2003) discourses should be scrutinised and challenged, they have the potential to supply positions from which individuals and groups can resist consumerist discourses.

### **Psychodynamic processes**

The discursive approach succeeds in conceptualising subjectivity and the human subject as multiple, dynamic and as historically and socially (discursively) produced. Nevertheless,

... we are left with a number of unresolved problems. First, in this view the subject is composed of, or exists, as a set of multiple and contradictory positionings or subjectivities. But how are such fragments held together? Are we to assume, as some applications of post-structuralism have implied, that the individual subject is simply the sum total of all positions in discourses since birth? If this is the case, what accounts for the predictability of people's actions, as they repeatedly position themselves within particular discourses? Can people's wishes and desires be encompassed in an account of discursive relations? (Henriques et al, 1998: 204)

Given the theoretical lack in both traditional left liberation theory and in Foucauldian theory, it is productive to make a critical and selective use of psychoanalysis and its account of subjective processes that resist change, as well as accounts of failure of identity, which make change and resistance possible. It is important to take into account that contemporary psychoanalysis, like contemporary feminism, is not a single entity. The aspects of psychoanalysis on which feminist poststructuralism draws in its theorisation of subjectivity are principally the theories of Freud and Lacan and, more recently, the feminist object relations theories of Klein.

Mama (1995) points out that psychoanalytic theory is a truly relational and social account of the history of the individual, because in it, the person is constructed in the course of relationships with other people. Contrary to popular appropriations of psychoanalysis, for Freud and Lacan, the unconscious is not the seat of drives or instincts, but of traces of repressed ideas, signs or memories. These can become

linked to words and find psychic expression. Despite several problems (see Ryan, 2001: 48-54), Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis has provided a theory of the dynamic unconscious, radically challenging the unitary rational subject. 'This is one of the sources of the subversive impact of psychoanalysis: it overturns the western view that the distinguishing mark of humanity is reason and rationality' (Frosh, 1987: 25). It is not that rationality does not exist, rather that it is always being contested by forces of the unconscious, where repressed ideas, feelings, desires and fantasies lie. 'The forces governing subjectivity and action are therefore not derived from a single source' (Hollway, 1989: 29).

A crucial question for adult education is: if we accept that subjectivity is constructed, how do we explain why people take up subject positions in one discourse rather than another? If the process is not a mechanical one, why, for example, do some people take up positions that challenge the dominant discourses, and others not? According to Hollway (*ibid*), we can address this issue by paying attention to the histories of individuals and also to the question of a subject's investment in a particular position in discourse. By claiming that people have investments in taking up certain positions in discourses, and consequently in relation to each other, Hollway means that there is some satisfaction involved for people through these actions. Sometimes this feeling of satisfaction may be rational, and consciously articulated (see, for example, Ryan, 2002a).

However, feelings of satisfaction associated with investment in a certain discursive position may not be conscious or rational and may also be in contradiction with other resultant feelings. For example, during a focus-group discussion, Michael<sup>1</sup> took up a position in consumerist discourse in order to put down Tony, who was critical of borrowing and buying on credit. Tony expressed satisfaction with his car, a 1991 model, which he had bought from savings. Michael questioned the car's safety, especially for transporting children (Ryan, 2002b). This position achieved two outcomes for Michael: it bolstered the consumerist discourse that was a prime source of meaning for him, because it drew on the consumerist assumption that newer is always better and, in this case, safer. It also defended his own decision to borrow heavily for a brand new car. The unforeseen nature of this exchange could not have allowed Michael to consciously plan his responses to Tony. It was, rather, an outcome of relations in the present moment in the focus group. Michael had already told the group that he was finding it difficult to meet the repayments for his car loan. But by achieving a sense of power over Tony in the exchange, he was also able to (at least temporarily) ignore any contradictions he may have felt regarding his decision to borrow.

Hollway's concept of investment is a re-theorisation of the psychoanalytic concept of desire and is connected to power and the way it is historically inserted into the subjectivity of individuals. Desire comes from a lack of a feeling of control over and oneness with the other, as experienced in Lacan's imaginary. If people's individual histories have taught them that a certain subject position in a particular discourse can, even fleetingly, reproduce a feeling of fulfilment of desire, then they may make an investment in that position.

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<sup>1</sup> All names used are fictitious.



Power is thus more than material or economic. If discourses alone are examined in relation to power, then the examination is confined to material structures and practices. Material inequalities need to be addressed, but Hollway's work also points to the importance of the construction of subjectivity in power relations, which are not a direct or immediate effect of material structures. Power is always 'dynamic and two-way and tied to the extra-rational forces' (Hollway, 1989: 84-5) of the unconscious, which she conceptualises through the notion of anxiety and intersubjective defence mechanisms.

Hollway argues that the interconnection between power and desire is overemphasised in Lacanian accounts, resulting in a psychic determinism, which is not useful for theorising change. She emphasises therefore the connections between power and anxiety, based on an understanding of pre-Oedipal relations, derived from Kleinian object-relations psychoanalysis. Although this understanding was developed on the basis of work with young infants, Kleinian theory asserts that primal processes pave the way for processes that continue throughout adult psychic life (Hollway, 1995). Klein privileges the defence mechanisms that work *between* people rather than *within* a person, so that intersubjective relations become the location for the negotiation of meaning and its effects, through power, on subjectivity.

These relationships are always the product of two or more people's unique histories, the contradictions between meanings (suppressed and expressed), differentiated positions in available discourses, the flux of their continuously renegotiated power relations and the effect of their defence mechanisms. Thus, they are never simply determined, either by the intentions of those involved, or by language / discourse. (Hollway, 1989: 84-5)

Although the relationships and their effects on subjectivity are not determined, neither are they arbitrary. Hollway posits that the principle that motivates the taking-up of positions and the mobilising of defences is the vulnerability of what psychoanalysis calls the ego. According to Klein, vulnerability is an unavoidable effect of human nature; anxiety is its original state. Hollway accepts the importance of vulnerability, but without resorting to human nature as its cause: she examines the ways that the infant is positioned by adults. According to Hollway, adults, as a result of their anxieties, defence mechanisms and power relations, along with their access to differentiated positions in discourses, create a situation of cultural anxiety for human infants, rather than a *naturally* occurring state of anxiety. The continuous attempt to manage anxiety and to protect oneself is never finally accomplished, although in mature adulthood, people can achieve relative stability and a state of apparent peace with anxiety. Anxiety thus provides a continuous, more or less driven motive for the negotiation of power in relations.

Mama and Hollway both take up the experience of contradiction as indicative of anxiety. Feminists have long identified women's experiences of contradiction as pointing to the need for and the possibility of change, in non-feminist women. Women who identify themselves as feminist women also experience contradiction and ambivalence when they make changes in the gender status quo, despite a rational

conviction of and commitment to feminist change (Ryan, 2001). The case of Jack and Rhona illustrates the value of having tools available to attend to contradiction (Ryan, 2002b). Jack, at 40, was twelve years older than his partner Rhona and wanted to have children before he was 43. Rhona wanted to develop her career, which was important to her identity, for several years more, before having children. Jack reported that he did not want to stand in her way on this issue, but also reported strong feelings of lack of control, and of anxiety about the situation. Both of them drew on a discourse that saw childcare as primarily the responsibility of women and both recognised the difficulty for a woman of combining career and childcare. Their positioning in discourses of essential gender difference and consumerism limited the possibilities for them to resolve this dilemma in an egalitarian way. Gender difference discourse blinded Jack, who was a teacher, to the possibility of taking a career break in order to take responsibility for childcare. Consumerist discourse, and in particular, the emotional payoffs afforded Rhona by the acquisition of possessions, limited their ability to think creatively about how they could manage financially on one income. Both were also located in liberal humanist discourses about the subject, which reify individual experience as the arbiter of what is real or true, and therefore unchangeable, about the world. But these discourses were incapable of helping Jack and Rhona to find ways around their contradictory feelings.

For many of the study (ibid) participants, positioning in discourses of lack of control and blame had the effect of ruling out part-time working, career breaks, or considering freelance work. A lifestyle where paid work was central left little time for radical personal reflection and development, for relationships, or for community or voluntary work. The idea that couples needed two full incomes prevented participants from considering creative approaches to having and caring for children. In turn, the perceived need for two full incomes made childcare a consumer issue, because the only perceived option was for both partners to continue working fulltime and to pay for childcare. The assumptions surrounding these choices were further complicated by a discourse of essential gender difference, which operated on the assumption that having children was an issue more pertinent to women than to men. This had several effects. It meant that many women participants were constrained by the idea that they must 'do' career and children in a correct order. That is, they believed that they needed to make career progress before having children. It ruled out the possibility of men being active parents and taking responsibility for childcare, thus possibly freeing women to concentrate on career for a while. It also precluded the most creative and potentially sustainable solution, which is for women and men to construct peer relationships, where both work fewer hours and both actively participate in childcare (Hochschild, 1990, 1997; Purcell, 2001)

Access to a theory of subjectivity could have helped participants work towards an egalitarian solution to the dilemmas they experienced. By viewing the subject as multiple, inconsistent and contradictory, such theory denies the existence of an essential human nature, and offers an explanation of experience as ideologically constituted, that is, as social, rather than as pre-existing or asocial. It is therefore able to contend with contradictions in experience and behaviour. It allows us to understand desires as socially produced and potentially open to change. This is in contrast to the humanist assumption that desires are an indicator of the 'real' person underneath the social layers. Humanist discourses assume that when desires conflict with movements

towards equality, the desires are an indicator of a more fundamental – and therefore closer to the truth – reality, which cannot be denied.

Experiences of contradiction, anxiety, ambivalence and guilt are major forces in the dynamics of subjectivity. Discursive changes accompanying politicisation are, at the same time, psychodynamic movements. In taking an approach like this, we can hold on to the importance of the unconscious, but also see a route past Lacan's failure to deal with the material conditions of people's lives. Such re-workings can produce a more historically specific reading of desire and the unconscious, which will, by implication, be less universalistic and less pessimistic (with regard to the possibility of change) than Lacan's. At the same time, the discourse determinism of Foucauldian theory has been addressed, by acknowledging that individual history plays an important part in the reproduction or change of social relations.

### **Interpreting experience in research and pedagogy**

Liberal humanism treats experience as a transparent reflection of reality. Similarly, language is seen as directly describing experience. As such, to speak 'from experience' has almost unquestionable authority in a liberal humanist context. The importance of discourse, language and situation as processes constitutive of subjectivity and experience is largely ignored. A theory of subjectivity insists that experience must be treated as an outcome of discourses, and often of contradictory discourses. Therefore experience is something that needs to be scrutinised and explained, rather than treated as authoritative, simply because it is seen or felt.

Liberal humanist theory has actually had the effect of reinforcing orthodox common-sense understandings of the world, in assuming that the meaning of accounts is unproblematic. This results from the practice of taking people's accounts as an expression of the real person, rather than trying to examine how the account is generated by social understandings. There is an idealist assumption, which at a deeper level is shared with orthodox psychology, that an account will produce facts whose truth-value is not problematic for either research or pedagogy. It is believed that an account can reflect directly something real about an individual (Hollway, 1989: 41). Poststructuralist developments in theories of subjectivity, on the other hand, can draw on the value of experience and emotional responses, but are able to see subjective accounts as produced within discourses, history and social relations. Such developments allow us to generate emancipatory theory, by avoiding treating people's accounts of their experiences as descriptions of something absolute, and by focusing instead on *how* people generate descriptions.

To strengthen its achievements in asserting the importance of personal experience, adult education needs to draw on poststructuralist theories and to *interpret* experience, not just *describe* it. It is a mistake to think that there is no theory or ideology behind 'plain description'. We need to combine the value of experience with Foucault's idea that truth is an historical product and therefore not absolute (Walkerline, 1989: 40).

### **Implications of a theory of subjectivity**

A politicised approach to subjectivity requires that each claim to experience be examined in the context in which it is made, and seen as filtered through discourse. This implies that we must see discourses as 'real', in the sense that they shape social relations and have material effects on practice and identity. Discourses may be hidden from an individual, but nevertheless will be expressed in an individual's account or actions, in both research and pedagogical situations.

Radical educators and researchers cannot simply conclude by reproducing participants' categories. If, for example, the research study on the experience of the first year of marriage (Ryan, 2002b) had merely reproduced the participants' categories, it would have described the need for two cars and paid childcare, or would have treated childcare as essentially female work. Instead, the study scrutinised those categories, and showed how they constructed the participants' experiences of themselves and other people. It also looked for contradictions in the participants' accounts, where the categories broke down, or reached the limits of their explanatory power. In doing this, the study demonstrated not only how the liberal humanist understanding of experience can be used to regulate humans, but also how contradictions in experience can be explored to challenge the dominant explanations and allow people to construct liberatory knowledge. Many of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with their situations, but lacked access to discourses that could challenge the dominant explanations and form the basis for change. The research situation gave them the chance to unpick them, when they engaged with other participants who drew on different discourses. It thereby had a pedagogic function, which could be further developed in adult learning groups.

Central to all of this is the question of gender. It means that instead of asking questions about what the 'real' differences between women and men are, or what people are 'really' like, we need to ask questions about how people construct men and women as different. Both consumerist and anti-consumerist discourses are prey to discourses that assert essential differences between the sexes. The absence of critical discourses of gender precludes a scrutiny of the ways that these assumptions are constraining. There is little room for contradictory experience in essentialist explanations. They do not account for men's desires to parent, nor for a critical examination of how parenting and paid work can be shared by both sexes. The explanations assume that socialisation is the same for all women and all men, and are unable to theorise the cases where socialisation fails, except to describe them as 'exceptions to the rule'.

Women's and men's different gendered experiences need to be included in research and education concerning resistance to consumerism and the promotion of economic discourses of equality, but as starting points for developing less rigid gender hierarchies, not for showing the 'true' nature of women and men. Research needs to take approaches that theorise experience and it needs to draw on these approaches in a politicised practice of education, especially when the personal, or personal experience is the topic (Ryan, 1999). We should use the category or concept of experience in a context that does not treat the category as neutral. As the examples above make clear, if only the dominant discourses are allowed to explain experience, they will not be able to make sense of certain aspects of those experiences.

Radical educators have a responsibility to put forward alternative discourses to the dominant. Adult education has a central concern with agency, that is, successful resistance to oppressive discourses and practices. Agency in turn requires the capacity for radical self-reflection, facilitated by access to radical discourses of the self. Traditional psychological approaches to the person may be unable to support this need, focused as they are on the idea that an essential human nature exists. They fail to take into account the socially constructed nature of desires and emotions. However, a theory of subjectivity insists that, in every instance, we need to simultaneously focus on discourse (the social content of subjectivity), psychodynamic processes, and the actual situation or social relations in which one is operating in the present moment.

Of course, 'drawing' on different discourses is not just a matter of rational choice or the availability of alternative discourses. It also depends on what discourses are likely to position us with power. Therefore, even if individuals have a good rational understanding of alternative discourses, and are politically committed to them, nevertheless, in situations of stress, or when they want to assert their own power, or to put down another person, they may draw on the dominant discourse, because of the power it offers, and because of the emotional payoffs afforded by such power. Therefore, critical reflection on discourse must be capable of attending to psychological investments in powerful positions.

Through locating the source of a contradiction in the available discourses, it is possible to examine the contradictory elements of one's subjectivity without guilt or anxiety. Dealing with contradiction within this model can enable one to make a simple decision to act within the terms of one discourse rather than another at any one point in time, depending on its relevance. Or it can facilitate a decision to refuse a discourse, or to refuse the positioning made available within that discourse. It can also facilitate an understanding of the collective and discursive nature of such refusals and of the ways in which one might begin to generate alternative practices (Davies, 1995).

Researchers and practitioners need to understand discourse, emotional responses and psychological investments, and how these are variously played out in different situations. We need to be able to draw on these resources in data collection and analysis, as well as in pedagogical situations. In research and pedagogy, we need to treat accounts of experience as discursive productions, and not as reflections of a 'true' identity, or as revealing some essential quality of the person. We need to understand that contradictory accounts from one person are indicative of the multiplicity of subjectivity and experience. They do not indicate bad faith, or a lack of authenticity, as liberal humanist discourses of the person would have us believe. In other words, we cannot assume an unproblematic, taken-for-granted link between experience and human nature, as liberal humanist approaches do. We need to be careful not to assume that practices and responsibilities are more properly the domain of one sex or the other. We also need to understand that, as researchers and practitioners, our readings of other people's experiences and accounts are 'controlled by our own location in various discourses – for example, scientific, humanist, therapeutic, feminist, and so on' (Gavey, 1997).

### **Pedagogical entry points**

Issues of paid work, overload, money, spending and quality of life could form pedagogical entry points for a critical curriculum which would put forward alternative ways of thinking about and making life choices. This curriculum could assist the creation of a critical community, which could develop a 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1970) and 'grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society (ibid:12)'. Critical thinking simply means examining the assumptions behind what we say and do, and looking at how the assumptions work to benefit some and disadvantage others. But telling people about alternative discourses is not enough. The process must facilitate learners to relate critical discourses to their own experiences. The relationship with the facilitator is of prime importance, in creating an atmosphere of trust, in which learners can move into critical thinking.

When people come together in educational groups, after the initial relief of finding that they have experiences in common, there is little comfort or use in knowing that their experiences are statistically normal. This is inadequate for dealing with feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction, overload, exhaustion and burnout. The educational challenge is to take people beyond the relief they feel when they realise that others share their experiences, to a position of critique and a sense of being able to make changes, so that they feel they can craft a way of living that is both manageable and rewarding. To construct such agency, learners need access to discursive resources and to other people who are collectively working towards the same goals. This is not to suggest that there are blueprints for critical thinking and action, but that people can learn and receive support from each other.

Part of the process assists learners to recognise that there are other ways of looking at the world that may be more liberatory than their current resources. It also emphasises self-reflection and an examination of the sources of one's beliefs. Sometimes, challenging dominant discourses means that people have to examine the payoffs they receive from certain ways of living. In theoretical terms, it requires an examination of psychological investments and a pedagogical recognition that people learn via their subjectivities.

A further educational challenge is to find a language in which to talk to people about discourses. Educators need to find a 'congeniality of tone' (Brookfield, 2002: 97) in the ways they use radical theories concerning economics, the human subject, sustainability and the bigger global picture. It should not be assumed that discourse is a concept that those outside academia cannot understand. One can use terms such as assumptions, contradictions, complexity, ambiguity and priorities. As Cherryholmes (1988: 136) points out, 'the unfamiliarity of theory recedes when applied to everyday life'. The experience of adult educators shows that once the concept of discourse is explained and used in practical ways, it ceases to be an abstract concept, and learners see its relevance to their lives (Ryan, 2001).

It is possible to integrate a critical questioning into learners' reflections on everyday experiences and dilemmas. Learning how to contribute actively to shaping one's world is linked to a critical awareness of self. Part of this process is to pay attention to

the ways that broad socio-cultural issues intersect with personal experiences. Certain kinds of questions can facilitate this, no matter what the subject matter. They include:

- Where does this belief come from?
- What would happen if you changed this belief?
- Who benefits from this belief, and who is disadvantaged?
- What do you need?
- What would happen if you changed the way things are?
- How did things get to be the way they are?

In order to support the construction and dissemination of critical discourses concerning quality of life, we need to understand the discourses we are refuting. We need to scrutinise the dominant discourses of consumption, production and subjectivity that are passed off as inevitable and as normal, so that we can make them seem strange, and show their inadequacies. But the work needs to go a step further, in actively promoting radical discourses of quality of life and personhood. It is not simply a question of picking and choosing among discourses. Each choice is accompanied by emotional responses whose strength and effects should not be underestimated. The educational setting needs to supply learners with personal, social and theoretical resources.

*Personal resources include:*

- The desire to create sustainable personal lifestyles, relationships and households.
- Recognition of the emotional and psychological dimensions of planned change.

*Social resources include:*

- Access to other people who are striving for sustainable lifestyles, so that collectivity can be fostered.
- Access to people different from oneself in terms of gender, class, age and other social variables, so that drawing on diverse perspectives and experiences can produce knowledge.

*Theoretical resources include:*

- An understanding of the concept of discourse and the power of beliefs, emotional responses, attitudes and values in shaping behaviour and relationships.
- Understandings of the individual that offer a range of alternative ways of being, which are not fixed in dominant attitudes towards working, possessions, and gender roles.
- Understandings of the individual as an agent of her/his own life.

(Adapted from Ryan and Connolly, 2000)

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the processes by which people make sense of questions to do with experience, meaning, resistance and change. The power-knowledge nexus makes certain discourses (theorised as conveyors of history, culture and social meaning) possible and puts constraints or limitations on other discourses, or the development and acceptance of other discourses. Some discourses become cultural bulwarks that pass themselves off as natural, necessary, or commonsense. They are, nevertheless, human productions, not indisputable facts (Ryan, 2003). Even when

they appeal to neutrality and objectivity, reason, or science, they are embedded in social relations, which themselves are never devoid of power plays, investments and claims to truth. We always need to examine the interests served in any account.

The chapter has also posited that all social movements for change rely on theories of the human subject, whether these are explicit or otherwise. It has asserted that there is a constant resonance between psychodynamics and social experience in the construction and reproduction of the individual's subjectivity. This means that both discourses and individual subjects are produced in a continuous dialectic, out of reverberations between historical-cultural and psychological conditions. This is not to say that every individual change generates new discourses, but that when individual changes are provoked by conditions that are widely experienced, then these are more likely to become widespread, to gain social power and become discourses that convey culture and social meaning, or collective knowledge (Mama, 1995: 133). When the possibility of social change arises, then, it demands the tackling of feelings and needs and of the contradictions and difficulties of the situations that arise in tandem with discursive movements.

The formation of knowledge about the human subject is an ideological process. Failure to theorise subjectivity and identity from a radical perspective results in the dominance of liberal humanist explanations of human experience, including the experience of consumption, as well as the experience of resistance to consumerism. The chapter has argued that attention to these issues is essential, if adult education pedagogy is to retain a critical edge. Theorising subjectivity can provide a means to think about experience and behaviour beyond the confines of dominant ways of knowing, and thereby provide tools to engage with privileged groups in an examination of consumption.

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