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STUDI

Towards a theory of subjectivity

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Abstract After introducing general problems that a theory of subjectivity must address, the meaning of subjectivity is discussed and defined as the wholeness of first-person somato-psychological life. The most important principle in a theory of subjectivity is the entanglement of socio-subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, and intra-subjectivity. This entanglement entails that subjectivity is unique and irreplaceable, which are philosophical elements in a psychological theory. Subjectivity takes place in work, relations, and the self, and in the way that persons conduct their everyday lives in particular contexts and times. Subjectivity is constituted and/or mediated through materialities, discourses, and actions, including technologies. A theory of subjectivity must include reflections on "what is" but also about "what is possible" in human somato-psychological life. Because traditional theories of subjectivity have no conceptual space for socio-subjectivity, forms of subjectivity into which subjects suture themselves are discussed. Consequences for the discipline of psychology are laid out.
KEYWORDS: Subjectivity; Theory; Interdisciplinarity; Society; Culture; History; Psychological Humanities

Riassunto *Verso una teoria della soggettività* – Comincerò illustrando le questioni generali che una teoria della soggettività deve affrontare, per discutere e definire poi il significato della soggettività come totalità della vita somato-psicologica dalla prospettiva della prima persona. Il principio più importante in una teoria della soggettività è l'intreccio tra socio-soggettività, inter-soggettività e intra-soggettività. Da questo intreccio ne viene che la soggettività è qualcosa di unico e insostituibile; questi aspetti filosofici devono caratterizzare anche una teoria psicologica della soggettività. La soggettività trova la propria concrezione nel lavoro, nelle relazioni, nel sé e nel modo in cui le persone conducono la loro vita quotidiana nei propri particolari contesti e tempi. La soggettività è costituita e/o mediata dalla materialità, dai discorsi e dalle azioni, comprese le tecnologie. Una teoria della soggettività deve considerare "ciò che è" unitamente a "ciò che è possibile" all'interno della vita somato-psicologica umana. Dal momento che le teorie tradizionali della soggettività non hanno concesso uno spazio concettuale per la socio-soggettività, in questo lavoro si discuteranno quelle forme di soggettività al cui interno i soggetti si vengono a trovare suturati. Saranno quindi illustrate le conseguenze di questi aspetti per la psicologia come ambito disciplinare.
PAROLE CHIAVE: Soggettività; Teoria; Interdisciplinarità; Società; Cultura; Storia; Psychological Humanities

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SCIENCES AIM AT MORE THAN just the accumulation of empirical data. They develop (general) theories that not only describe, but also explain objects or events, and sometimes enable predictions or interventions in (parts of) the world, based on abstractions from particular instances. They also identify underlying principles. Humans are part of this world to be studied, as is their subjectivity, by which frequently *first-person experience* is meant (for a definition see below). The discipline of psychology has amassed millions of empirical studies that include partial *expressions* of first-person perspectives, but the discipline has not developed a general or integrated theory of subjectivity that would assist in making sense of the variety of empirical studies, or in assessing their relevance, uniqueness, generalizability or replicability. It is evident, based on the historical record, that a natural-scientific approach will not exhaust theories of subjectivity (TEO 2020a; in press) and that the work of the *psychological humanities* is needed to include knowledge from history, philosophy, social theory, anthropology, geography, environmental studies, cultural studies, science and technology studies, and so on (including philosophical-psychological reflection; TEO 2017).

Given the integrative and general potential of a theory of subjectivity, located in contexts (e.g., culture) and time (e.g., history), such a theory will be different from a theory in physics, presumably one that is expressed in a non-formalized mode, where classical philosophy of science criteria such as *parsimony/simplicity* (e.g., POPPER 1992) would have to be reinterpreted because of the complexity of psychological phenomena. Simplicity appears to be less important for a theory of subjectivity than *plausibility*, as such a theory of subjectivity should articulate principles that those knowledgeable about psychology and the human sciences could agree upon. Such a theory should give voice to what is known, although the arrangement and the number of principles of the theory will certainly differ among authors.

Ignoring a theory of subjectivity leaves psychology impoverished and reinforces the multitude of problems of psychology that have characterized the discipline as crisis-ridden and problematic (GAJ 2016; GOERTZEN 2008; GREEN 2015; TEO 2018a; WIESER 2016). Such problems range from philosophical problems, to fragmentation, to the relevance and status-quo supporting role of psychology, to the reproducibility problem (OPEN SCIENCE COLLABORATION, 2015), which is just the latest in a long line of crises. From the perspective of a theory of subjectivity, the subdivision of mental life has led to the production of knowledge about increasingly minute parts of mental life without integrating the parts within a whole person (TEO 2018a). In addition, subjectivity not only contains the many faculties, functions, and processes of mental life, but also its *content* (e.g., what is the content of "my"[1] memory?). A theory of subjectivity that includes content makes any theorizing preliminary as contents change (e.g., technology can change the content of subjectivity). Given the limitations of a journal article, what is being proposed here is not a complete theory of subjectivity but a framework for subjectivity: A prolegomenon (introduction) to theorizing subjectivity through principles. Philosophers could call it a theorizing that captures the conditions for the possibility of addressing and understanding subjectivity.

1 The meaning of subjectivity

Subjectivity has gained interest recently at the margins of psychology (e.g., KIRSCHNER 2013, 2019; MALONE 2012; REY *et alii* 2019; ROALD & KØPPE, 2015; TAFARODI 2013), in (psychological) anthropology (e.g., BIEHL *et alii* 2007; LUHRMAN 2006; SPRONK 2014), philosophy (e.g., CODE 1993; FOUCAULT 2005; HALL 2004; ZAHAVI 2005), history (e.g., SNELL & MCGUIRE 2016; STEWART 2020) and science and technology studies (e.g., SHAPIN 2012). In the humanities, subjectivity has never disappeared, and is connected to recent debates, for instance, in postcolonialism (JABRI 2013). In the discipline of psychology, subjectivity is often identified with inner life (intra-subjectivity in the terminology of this paper) and is substituted for concepts such as self and identity. From the proposed framework, identity and self are parts of subjectivity, but certainly do not exhaust it (the same argument applies to *consciousness*). Of course, intersubjectivity has remained an important research topic in psychology (e.g., parenting styles, friendship, attachments), although the term might not be used widely in psychological science (discussions exist in cognitive science; e.g., RIGATO *et alii* 2021).

Subjectivity is a real object in the sense that "we" encounter people with first-person standpoints; what this first-person standpoint means is disputed. Subjectivity can be considered a scientific "object," although it is evident that very divergent ideas about subjectivity exist, and authors do not refer to the same thing when talking about subjectivity. For definitional clarifications, the terms *first-person standpoint* (HOLZKAMP 1983) and *first-person perspective* (ZAHAVI 2005) are used in the literature. However, the terms perspective or standpoint imply cognitive-perceptual dimensions that are part of subjectivity, but may not account for the synthesis of experiences, call it *apperception*, which is central to the proposed understanding of subjectivity. The term *standpoint* may be misleading as it does not account for someone who might have a *sitpoint* as critical disability studies have emphasized; or often we do not have a standpoint but rather an unarticulated *move-*

point where "we" are in the process of developing a standpoint in interaction with others or in personal reflection. In terms of *first-person experiences* (e.g., RIGATO *et alii* 2021), one can ask whether an experience that one might be unaware of, or a relational reality such as a *privilege,* should count as an experience.

Proposed here is a working definition of subjectivity as the synthesis (wholeness) of first-person somato-psychological life. *Synthesis* refers to a theorizing that integrates the many parts (subdivisions) of mental life that psychology has studied (thinking, feeling, willing, etc.). *First-person* mental life includes not only processes but also the contents of "my" somato-psychological life (what are "my" experiences or what is part of "my" memory?). *Somato-psychological* means that both the body and mind must be included when theorizing subjectivity. The body does not just refer simply to the biological but also to the social body, expressed in concepts such as Butler's (1990) *performativity* of the gendered body, Bourdieu's (1988) *habitus* or embodied practices such as *privilege* (e.g., TEO, 2016) ("I" enjoy social privileges due to certain socially meaningful characteristics without being aware of them). *Life* means that although psychologists should not exclude experiences from the "lab" or the "couch," subjectivity should be understood in the way that persons live their actual lives. In this definition, it also becomes clear that in human subjectivity, the personal, interpersonal and the cultural/historical/societal are entangled.

In challenging important scholarly practices of the humanities, I suggest that it is not fruitful to reconstruct subjectivity solely by what *great authors* have said about it, but that theorizing subjectivity must include a broad knowledge base that includes classical and current psychological research as well as research from the social sciences, humanities, and the arts (see also FREEMAN 2023). Because critics of psychological research practices have pointed out that a standpoint from nowhere is impossible, and that it is important to disclose one's own theoretical horizon, I would like to mention that my own theorizing follows traditions of critical-theoretical psychology (TEO 2015) without uncritically accepting its premises or conclusions. A theory of subjectivity needs to frame what we have fundamentally learned about subjectivity; this knowledge is articulated in "principles" of a theory of subjectivity.

2 The entanglement of subjectivity: Socio-, inter-, and intra-subjectivity

The central principle in a theory of subjectivity is the *entanglement of socio-subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and intra-subjectivity*. Those three terms do not refer to three different parts but are analytical tools to make sense of the complexity of somato-psychological life, embedded in society/history/culture, in relationships and interactions, as well as in inner life.

Entanglement means that socio-subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, and intra-subjectivity are always connected, to the point that in the process of development they can no longer be disentangled in an adult person. Disentanglement can be accomplished conceptually-analytically but not in real life. The entanglement will present differently for various persons at different times and ages and in different cultures. Thus, additive percentages or statistical models are insufficient to make sense of that nexus.

Entanglement also means that for any psychological process/content the historical/cultural/societal, the relational and the internal need to be addressed, and that primacy cannot be given to any analytical part. If one were to choose a metaphor, the concept of a *rhizome* (DELEUZE & GUATTARI 1987) could be employed. Entanglement means that the model of nested arrangements or hierarchies (BRONFENBRENNER 1977), or the classical division between the "external and internal," would miss the mark. Contexts become and are part of one's subjectivity, and the term entanglement neither suggests that the external determines the internal nor that an understanding of the internal is sufficient to account for the wholeness of subjectivity. When the term subjectivity is used in this argument, the entanglement of socio-, inter- and intra-subjectivity is implied.

Socio-subjectivity addresses the historical, cultural, and societal dimensions of subjectivity. Subjectivity is connected to the world and there exists a societal and social world that "connects" with "our" somato-psychological life (see also GONZALEZ REY 2017; HOLZKAMP 1983; ROTH 2016A; VYGOTSKY 1997). Socio-historical mentalities, discourses and materialities (forms of subjectivity such as *Zeitgeist*; see TEO 2018B) are part of subjectivity. To be precise, socio-subjectivity refers to those dimensions of historical, cultural, and societal mentalities and realities that become part of "my" mental life. From the perspective of entanglements, societal conditions neither cause mental life nor are they autonomously chosen, but subjects *suture* themselves into those conditions, on the background of inter-subjective (e.g., relational) and intra-subjective (thinking, feeling, willing, desiring, etc.) processes and contents. It should be emphasized that forms of subjectivity are not fixed and that it is possible to transform them.

Inter-subjectivity refers to relational processes and their importance in constituting somato-psychological life, including relational processes with parents, friends, groups, peers, teachers, communities, and so on. Intersubjectivity refers to the insight that subjectivity is constituted dialogically, relationally, and empathetically (e.g., HERMANS 2001). In psychological science a well-known ap-

proach is research on attachment (see VICEDO 2013), whereas in the psychological humanities relational ontologies have been emphasized (GERGEN 2009; RICHARDSON & WOOLFOLK 2013; SLIFE 2004). Intersubjectivity connotes and denotes that subjectivity is not alone nor solipsistic (see also Zahavi 2012). Even if personal experiences can be private or secret, they do not emerge isolated, but are constituted with other people and objects that exist in culture, history, and society. However, from the proposed analytical perspective, the concept of intersubjectivity would be insufficient to understand societal, historical, and cultural changes and mentalities. Subjectivity is not only entangled with interpersonal but also with structural realities. "We" live not only in a world with other human beings, but also in a world that encompasses histories, cultures, and societies. "We" are not just *social* but also *societal* beings (HOLZKAMP 1983). Intersubjectivity takes place on the background of socio-subjectivity and is entangled with it.

A large body of empirical research has been accumulated on *intra-subjectivity*, including numerous studies on cognition, emotion, motivation, agency, and embodied practices and its many categories and concepts in psychology. Discussions range from internal dynamics in psychoanalysis (e.g., FREUD 1940) to the study of causal or correlational relationship between psychological variables as conducted in most empirical studies in psychology. A theory of subjectivity cannot neglect to address the question of how human cognitions (e.g., memory), feelings, and motivations (and their parts and interconnections) work. It may be equally important to address unconscious motives in "our" subjectivity or how agency may be based on values. At this point, I do not suggest that one should privilege one particular theoretical approach but rather emphasize that in a theory of subjectivity, the synthesis of these faculties need to be considered, along with their entanglements with inter- and socio-subjectivity. Moreover, empirical research needs to be assessed in regard to the degree to which these entanglements are accounted for, and their neglect needs to be theorized as it pertains to psychological knowledge.

The literature has discussed mechanisms for the dialectic of the traditional division of the external and internal and psychologists have proposed various concepts from *learning,* to *adaptation* to *appropriation* (e.g., WATSON 1913; PIAGET 1972; VYGOTSKY 1978). These concepts are important for academic reflections, but a theory of subjectivity is more concerned with the results of those entanglements. This is not to deny that thoughtful arguments have been produced, particularly in the cultural-historical tradition, from the idea that the intermental constructs the intramental, to the idea that development reflects a process of internalization from the outside to the inside (VYGOTSKY 1989), to the Spinozian idea of an identity between the external and internal (ROTH 2016a).

Many critical-psychological authors who pay attention to the societal agree that the external does not determine the internal. Holzkamp (1983) suggested that societal conditions are not determinants but *premises* of actions. From the perspective of the subject, societal realities are grounds with regard to which "I" can act or not. The term *premise* embraces the idea that we are not determined by society but that "we" have agency to react, not in unlimited but in constrained ways, and that we have the ability to alter societal conditions. In sociology, Giddens (1984) famously articulated the relationship between *social structure and agency*, suggesting that both are dynamically important. In the Foucauldian tradition, for which the concept of subjectification is central, subjectivity is a by-product of power (DE VOS 2012).

Given the neglect of socio-subjectivity in psychology, it is suggested that this dimension needs more attention. Such an analysis begins with the insight that if "I" were born in a radically different time and culture (or social position), "I" would not have the same subjectivity; "I" would not live the same everyday life and "I" would not want, think, and feel *all* the same things; "my" first-person somato-psychological life, particularly its contents, would be profoundly different. "I" might still work, interact, and relate to myself as an adult, but the contents would be very dissimilar. This insight had been articulated in philosophy by classical thinkers such as Vico (2002), Hegel (1967), and Marx & Engels (1958). In traditional psychology, the idea that culture, history, and society play a role in human mental life is somehow accepted, but not fully integrated when research employs a variable-based strategy with culture as an independent, moderating or mediating variable, which is insufficient to capture subjectivity in its entanglements. In psychology, cultural-historical and critical approaches have attended to that insight (see GONZALEZ REY *et alii* 2019; HOLZKAMP 1983).

Arguably, the enduring popularity of psychoanalysis in the public consciousness and some sites of therapy can be attributed to the appeal of a program that provides a set of ideas, methods, techniques, and applications on how to work with subjectivity and its pathologies. Yet, from the perspective of entanglements, psychoanalytic approaches (e.g., ATWOOD & STOLOROW 2014), even those which emphasize intersubjectivity (e.g., FRIE 1997), have little theoretical space for socio-subjectivity. The same can be said for phenomenology that accounts for intra- and intersubjectivity, acknowledges the importance of the social and political, but does not theorize socio-subjectivity (e.g., JENSEN & MORAN 2013). On the other side, critical Foucauldian approaches that include reflections on socio-subjectivity may not devote suf-

ficient attention to intra-subjective realities (see also WALKERDINE 2002). A general theory of subjectivity should be able to include but not limit itself to pathologies of individuals or societies.

More generally, studies that do not address the social, cultural, historical (and relational) would provide a limited understanding of subjectivity. Thinking means thinking within a given society with regard to objects and subjects; feeling is always feeling within a given culture with regard to objects and subjects; agency is always directed toward socio-historical objects and events. Individual obsessions are related to socially existing practices, as a counting compulsion requires a counting system; even sexual fantasies have historical, interpersonal, and personal meanings that are entangled; deciding to commit a mass shooting at a school has societal, interpersonal and personal dimensions; and personal religious practices include socio-subjectivity. Even academic subjectivity cannot abstract personal achievements from the societal, historical and cultural dimensions of mental life (see also BOURDIEU 1988); and suicidal ideas are not just personal but rather are entangled with societal developments (as DURKHEIM (2002) already understood; consider the history of colonialism in indigenous communities) and connected to relationships.

Given that the body needs to be accounted for in a theory of subjectivity, entanglement means that the body is not just an internal biological or mechanical entity but also a relational, cultural and political object, as Fanon (1967), for instance, has shown for the black body. For Fanon, bodies have historical, cultural, and societal meanings (e.g., colonialism), interpersonal relevance (a white person sees a black body and sometimes only the black body), and a racialized black person needs to process the experiences of Blackness. The black body co-constructs the subjectivity of the oppressor as well as the subjectivity of the oppressed (the same applies to the white body). In the terminology of this paper, socio-subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, and intra-subjectivity are entangled.

The analytic differentiation of socio-subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, and intra-subjectivity, is a conceptual tool to understand important dimensions in human somato-psychological life that account for the role of society, history, and culture, including social structure, interpersonal relations, attachments and communities, as well as individual differences in human subjectivity. Yet, subjectivity in its entanglements is a whole, a unity, a synthesis. From a theoretical perspective, the entanglement refers to an overarching principle, from which all psychological contents and functions must be understood. This does not mean that this principle always plays out in the same way but that psychologists should always include those three analytical dimensions when discussing human subjectivity.

3 Subjectivity is unique (and irreplaceable)

"We" are not determined by real or imagined external conditions but "we" suture "ourselves" into them and they become temporarily or permanently part of "us." From a developmental perspective there are precursors and successors. For instance, the English language exists before and outside of a subject and *langage* and *langue*, to follow Saussure (1983), and becomes internalized to enact individual *parole* (a person's ability to speak human languages is required). Once "accepted" by a person, the entanglement of langage, langue, and parole can lead to unique outcomes. "I" am able to produce new sentences, never spoken or heard before, but the sentences are comprehensible to others because (and only if) we share a common langue/langage. However, one should not presume that every psychological process and content operates like language, and it remains the task of psychological science to research specific entanglements. From a theoretical point of view, one could argue that in many instances socio-subjectivity is mediated through inter-subjectivity to form intra-subjectivity (with its own agency).

Uniqueness and irreplaceability are themes located in philosophical reflection (e.g., STRAWSON 2017). Arendt (1998) argued that *action* that involves *speech* is unique for each individual and corresponds to the plurality of distinct individuals, based on human relationships. From the perspective of the entanglement of subjectivity, "my" friends and peers, parents and family, communities in which "I" participate, and those parts of society, history, and culture that "I" sutured "myself' into, that "I" deem important, inhabit, or give meaning to, and "my" personal idiosyncrasies, together, produce and enable "my" unique subjectivity. The saying that "this person is a character" reveals unique combinations of socio-, inter- and intra-subjectivity that make a person singular; the singularity is not simply a result of internal traits. Entanglements themselves cannot be reproduced because they have produced peculiar, "twisted" outcomes.

Societal conditions are forms into which persons suture themselves, and are dependent on interactions as well as internal processes (actively, passively, unconsciously, consciously, embodied, disembodied, etc.). *Suture practices* for those conditions may vary significantly and for that reason societal conditions do not determine psychological life (whereas internal life is insufficient to understand the wholeness of subjectivity). Yet, while subjectivity may be unique, subjectivity still makes sense only within a socio-cultural context, reinforcing the notion of entanglements. For instance, a current and original rap musician would be incomprehensible in 19th century Vienna. Uniqueness does *not* mean that subjectivities are unpredictable when they fulfill existing forms (e.g., roles

or *social character*; FROMM 1941). This includes academics that often assume the *habitus* of an academic (BOURDIEU 1988). Yet, despite a general habitus, subjectivity remains unique, when mental life takes place on the background of socio-subjectivity and particular histories and subcultures, inter-subjectivity and particular people with their own subjectivities, and the meaning that "I" give these experiences and the activities that "I" assume or choose. Accepting the idea that a personal somato-psychological life is unique, but always entangled with the societal, even if not experienced in that way, means that we need to theorize and observe entanglements in particular persons (see also MARTIN & BICKHARD 2013).

If one were able, in a thought experiment, to clone an adult person, the clone would develop their own subjectivity, from the day the clone was brought into existence, based on their own (new) experiences, interpretations, relationships, and historical developments. The clone would develop their own unique first-person somato-psychological life. Although originally biologically identical, they would develop their unique subjectivities once they live their everyday life. "My" clone would be unique and not identical to "my" subjectivity. However, our subjectivities may be similar because of related socio-subjectivities should we live in the same history, culture, and society. This stream of thought has also critical-theoretical consequences: Growing up in monocultural societies, with similar cultural-historical experiences, may nudge psychologists to neglect the role of society/history/culture, or take them for granted. From an outsider perspective, however, an understanding of the subjectivity of a person would include accounting for the culture, history, and society of the person. Especially in culturally complex societies, it would become obvious that we need to account for the society/history/culture of a person in order to describe, understand, and explain a person's subjectivity.

Uniqueness does not preclude that there is a certain continuity and coherence of experience based on a bio-psycho-social entity, which would contradict some postmodern analyses (GERGEN 1991) about the fragmentation of subjectivity. There is no contradiction between the idea that subjectivity can remain unique and at the same time be fragmented. A theory of subjectivity does not prejudge whether subjectivity is fragmented or not. *Uniqueness* is an ontic category, whereas *irreplaceability* has an ethical connotation. A person may have developed unique somato-psychological sutures to cultural realities and imaginations and the synthesis of their subjectivity may be divergent from any form of subjectivity that society had provided. Thus, a person's subjectivity can only be found once. If a person dies, "we" also have lost a unique subjectivity that cannot be replicated in another individual (however, expressions of subjectivity may survive in texts, pictures, videos, memories, etc.). Irreplaceability is also descriptive from the perspective of friends and family members who believe that no one can restore a particular subjectivity; similarly, from the perspective of the subject, one's own experiences are irreplaceable. In contrast, from the perspective of an economic and political system, everyone is expendable. However, in terms of academic psychology, the question about uniqueness and irreplaceability is less important than understanding how subjectivity is embedded in everyday life.

4 Subjectivity is embedded in concrete everyday life, its temporality and contextuality

Would an alien visiting earth understand human subjectivity if they were to visit only "couches" and "labs"? The lab and the couch can become part of everyday life, but they may be more important for understanding the subjectivity of experimenters and therapists than that of the majority of people. As Devereux (1967) suggested, the experiment helps "us" to learn about the experimenter's mental life. Subjectivity cannot be understood in abstraction from how persons actually live and conduct their everyday lives (DREIER 2016; HOLZKAMP 2016). A theory of subjectivity must include society/culture/history, interaction, and inner life but must also connect these to the conduct, actions, and activities in everyday life (see SCHRAUBE & HØJHOLT 2016). Subjectivity takes place in concrete lifeworlds and institutions (work, community, family, and self) and in the conduct of everyday life (working, playing, interacting, relating to persons and things, relating to "myself", etc.). Under existing historical conditions, it also makes a difference whether "we" conduct our lives as different genders, classes, or ethnicities (the conduct of life itself is entangled with historical, cultural, and societal meanings; see also VYGOTSKY 1978; LEONTJEW 1985).

Contextuality not only includes issues (e.g., diversity) related to concrete societies/cultures/histories, and lifeworlds, but also connected to "our" natural world, including environmental destruction and climate change (e.g., ADAMS 2021), as well as existential situations. This means that knowledge or experiences of extreme weather patterns as well as suffering, illness, frailty, and death (see Jaspers' (1960) *Grenzsituationen*) can impact how we live our everyday lives (for instance, a recent example would be the relevance of the COVID-19 pandemic for "our" somato-psychological life). Knowledge and awareness of the possible end of the world as we know it, or global catastrophe, may impact subjectivity (see also FISHER 2019). These contexts do not determine subjectivity but are sources for how "we" conduct our lives within such immediate realities. Instead of focusing on *competence,* a theory of subjectivity must

include *performance*, or how subjects live and act in their everyday lives. For instance, "we" also live our lives in more or less unequal societies with enormous consequences for "our" well-being and mental health, as research on the consequences of income inequality demonstrates (PICKETT & WILKINSON 2015; WILKINSON & PICKETT 2009). To conduct one's life in a highly unequal society has an impact on one's subjectivity without one even knowing it.

Conduct of life means that we need to include *actions* and *activities* in the analysis of subjectivity (e.g., DAFERMOS 2018; KERTSCHER & WERBIK 2014), based on the idea that actions and activities are never the sole result of an internal reality or choice, but are always embedded in socio-, inter-, and intra-subjectivity. Agency is entangled with subjectivity as well as with the conduct of life. For instance, psychologists can reconstruct the increase in perfectionism as entangled with neoliberalism (CURRAN & HILL 2019). To understand agency in neoliberal societies, "we" need to connect it with neoliberal subjectivity, thinking, feeling, and willing (TEO 2018B). Working, interacting, and technologies of the self are enacted in the context of neoliberal capitalism with consequences for "our" relationships, how "we" relate to ourselves, and the contradictions and problems "we" encounter in this world. For instance, agency changes in processes of neoliberal responsibilization and in a context where the family becomes the prime target of economic power (see also COOPER 2017).

Concrete persons live their lives not only in societies, lifeworlds, and self-practices, in contexts such as nations and countries, but also within the reality of temporality. A theory of subjectivity must account for dynamics and changes over a lifetime. Forms of subjectivity may be different for children, adults, retired people, or persons with disabilities. The forms and contents of eating, drinking, and sexuality, the way "we" work and interact with other people, how we love, and how "we" take care of ourselves change over a lifetime embedded in different contexts. General descriptions of inner life remain abstract if they are not connected to developmental realities, as well as to evolutionary, historical, and situational temporalities (PETTIT & HEGARTY 2014). The same way that temporality is a dynamic process, created, co-created and re-created, the inner life developed in one historical culture cannot be exported. This also means that the life of people, in real societies, cultures, and histories, and with social characteristics deemed meaningful within a culture, needs to be brought back into a theory of subjectivity, rather than assimilated into a particular pre-fabricated theoretical framework.

5 Subjectivity is mediated and/or constituted through actions, materialities and discourses

Actions, materialities, and discourses are the means (important, but not the only ones) through which entanglements occur or are reinforced. For analytic purposes we can distinguish between external and internal materialities (and discourses) (in reality, they are entangled). Internal materialities could be called *physis*. Yet, even the biological body is at the same time biological, phenomenological, and social and entangled with societal and intersubjective ideas and practices (BUTLER 1990). The biological body is phenomenologically embodied as work on pain has shown (Scarry 1985), and pain has not only a personal but also a cultural meaning. This is not to deny that the body can be grounds of activity, sometimes spontaneously without the traditional elements of mental life (see also STAM 1998).

The body plays a significant role in one's subjectivity, referring to the mechanical body as well as the phenomenologically experienced, pre-linguistic physical entity that relates to "me." Based on "my" body I can have particular experiences, but they are still embedded in my subjectivity, contextuality and temporality, as well as in the way "I" conduct my life. Even death changes its meanings for religious or secular people, a meaning that cannot be determined a priori, which does not mean that death is not a biological reality that entails the end of lived subjectivity – at least from a secular perspective. There is no context-free subjectivity. Ideas and feelings can live on in materializations and relations, and in other persons' memories.

Physis is expressed in obvious biological processes that impact subjectivity. If it were possible to change "my" genes at birth, "I" might not have the same subjectivity, but I also would not be the same person (that argument holds also for changing lifeworlds and cultures). If "I" use certain drugs, "my" subjectivity changes either momentarily or for the long term. Should "I" have Alzheimer's disease, "my" subjectivity would change. If "I" have permanent pain, "my" subjectivity might be impacted. If "I" acquire a brain injury, "my" subjectivity would change. But even in such cases the quality of interpersonal care and the provision of facilities in particular health systems play a role in subjectivity. I suggest that even in cases of reduced intra-subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and socio-subjectivity play a role, admittedly a different one, although still unique in its new entanglements.

Biology and the brain, of course, are important, which are acknowledged in the psychological sciences. Some boundaries of subjectivity may be maturational: A typical 4-year-old cannot solve a calculus problem. One could make the argument that accumulated experiences, expressed in the notion of aging, might lead to new subjectivities (new entanglements). The brain is important in limiting the range of possibilities for action but does not determine subjectivity. Disorders of the

brain may mediate "my" subjectivity. If I am diagnosed with a disorder, "my" conduct of life may change, but such conduct still depends on subjective, intersubjective and societal expectations and opportunities that engage "my" subjectivity. If I live in a society that sees disorders as a miracle, a sin, or a challenge, different connections are available for "my" subjectivity. The concept of entanglement means that a biological condition at the human level is not just biological but also relational and societal. Critical disability studies (GOODLEY 2017) have pointed out that disability is not primarily a personal but a socio-political problem, which does not mean to neglect the specificity of the subjectivity of a person with a disability (e.g., what they experience), but to improve what can be improved and to provide conditions for the possibility of a good life.

Including the body as a source of subjectivity implies that subjectivity is more than mental life; it is somato-psychological life. The body may even be unarticulated in subjectivity and because certain bodily experiences may be pre-linguistic it may be difficult to theorize the role of the body (see also SLYVKA 2018). For this project it is important to keep all entanglements in mind and recognize that the experience of the body is not just internal but has intersubjective and socio-subjective meanings. For instance, the activity and experience of dance that may be difficult to articulate in language has an internal-bodily, but also relational and societal dimensions (BUTLER 1990; JOHNSON, 2007; LEGRAND & RAVN 2009). The visualization of dance refers to the importance of external materialities.

Braidotti (2013) points out that nature and technologies are not binaries because we are mediated/constituted by both. External materialities can refer to geography, architecture, art, landscaping, city design, and so on, as well as clothes and land in accordance with indigenous arguments; all can have an impact on subjectivity. External materialities also include technologies (e.g., biotechnologies, communication, information and surveillance technologies). Given the overwhelming presence of technologies in current life (ZUBOFF 2019), one could make the argument that technologies are no longer simply tools; they do not just mediate, but have become integral to human subjectivity and they constitute subjectivity (see also CHIMIRRI & SCHRAUBE 2019; SCHRAUBE 2024). At this juncture, I suggest that the issue of mediation versus constitution need not be answered *a priori*. Instead, what needs to be studied is the impact on subjectivity when elderly persons are taken care of by robots; how surveillance, information, and bio technologies, or social media, may lead to qualitative changes in the development of subjectivity; or how technoscience may lead to a posthuman subjectivity (PAPADOPOULOS 2018).

Han (2017) identifies a *digital panopticon* that allows surveillance from anywhere at any time combined with data totalitarianism and fetishism that overwhelms all other experiences. Subjectivity could be trapped in a perfect prison where Foucault's (1977) panopticon's guard becomes the self and when one is prisoner and guard at the same time. Foucault described how technologies of the self can constitute and change the self. Persons become subjects through subjectification, through processes of power. Self-measurements, self-monitoring, self-surveillance, and self-objectification (through various devices) can be used by big data, and mediate/constitute subjectivity (HAN 2017). What happens to the subjectivity of persons who do not participate or refuse to participate in the brave new digital neoliberal world where subjects without economic value are considered waste? Technological advances, whether instruments or sources of subjectivity, need to be studied in a theory of subjectivity, and in their entanglements with socio-, inter-, and intra-subjectivity.

In addition, internal/internalized (inner speech) and external/externalized discourses need to be included in a theory of subjectivity. The importance of language, conversations, narrations, and discourses is well known in psychological inquiry (GERGEN, JOSSELSON & FREEMAN 2015) and need not be detailed here. My emphasis is again on the entanglement of discourses with history/society/culture as well as with the contextuality and temporality of living everyday life (see also POTTER & WETHERELL 1987). Psychological discourses themselves have an impact on subjectivity. This has been discussed in the context of the *looping effects* (HACKING 1994) of psychological discourses and the process of psychologization (BALZ & MALICH 2020; DE VOS 2012), which means that the world is understood through psychological terms. This internalization of psychological concepts to understand "ourselves" changes how "we" think about "ourselves" (see also MADSEN 2018). When "I" experience stress "I" might refer to resilience from the popular or academic literature, which may change how "I" think about "my" own experiences. From a critical perspective, resilience is not just an internal but also an interpersonal and societal feature (see also KIRMAYER *et alii* 2011; MORGAN 2023). What in the past may have been part of a discourse on economic alienation is now interpreted as individual stress and "my" reaction to it. This means that "my" mental life changes when "I" incorporate psychological thinking and doing into my own life. The dynamics of inner life may change with an increased focus on inner life that at the same time is required in neoliberal societies (JOSEPH 2013). Thinking, feeling, and willing and the sense of what one is responsible for changes in neoliberalism. A theory of subjectivity needs to account for the nexus between inner and outer discourses.

6 Actuality and potentiality

Because societal conditions do not determine subjectivity, forms of subjectivity that exist in a given society can also be transcended and new expressions of subjectivity can be enacted. Transcending forms of subjectivity is possible with an understanding of the "frame" and by resisting a given process and content. Resisting certain forms of subjectivities allows "us" to modify existing or develop new forms of subjectivity that can be broader. A form of subjectivity that, in a thought experiment, could emerge in 500 years, and that is at first incomprehensible, could via intersubjectivity be translated into something understandable to "us" now. Engaging with new forms of subjectivity provides potentiality.

Since Wolff (1740), who dedicated an entire book to the topic, a distinction has been made between what happens and what is possible in human mental life. In psychology, actuality and potentiality have remained important distinctions. Indeed, from developmental to clinical psychology possibilities of mental life have been important normative reflections. For instance, postconventional moral judgments (KOHLBERG 1981) and formal operations (INHELDER & PIAGET 1958) may not always occur in mental life empirically but are possible. Correct statistical thinking is possible even if "we" may not perform it (GIGERENZER 2015). Empathy not only happens, but it is possible to extend it to people who have not been seen "worthy" of "our" empathy (TEO 2020B). In therapy it is important to understand what is possible for a person. From the perspective of this article, possibilities are not unlimited because they are embedded in history, society, culture, contextuality (e.g., neoliberal capitalism) and temporality. For persons from different cultures embodying certain classes, genders, or "races," certain potentialities may be reduced as well.

From a critical tradition, working on expanding human potentialities is important. Potentialities are not just individual options because subjectivity is entangled with socio-subjective and inter-subjective realities. In psychological research potentiality has been articulated in action research (LEWIN 1946) and participatory action research (FINE & TORRE 2021) that is not only about describing the status quo, but also changing it in order to increase possibilities in the conduct of everyday life for human beings. Martin-Baro's (1994) liberation psychology is about orienting human beings towards what might be in terms of improving their life conditions. In Holzkamp's (1983) critical psychology, the focus is on an agency that does not adapt to the status quo but transforms it. For Stetsenko (2017) transformative agency is core to what it means to be human (see also ROTH 2016b). Philosophers have also focused on *hope* in its potentiality as a source of change (e.g., BLOCH 1986).

From the perspective of the entanglement of subjectivity, change, transformation, and potentiality are neither purely internal nor societal projects. Potentiality needs to be understood in the nexus of all dimensions. For instance, "my" potentiality to write poetry is an option that is available to "me"; that I do not write poetry must be understood on the background of internal desires, intersubjective as well as historical processes, and the way I live my life. However, I have the potentiality to write (more or less good) poetry. Resistance to oppressive realities (e.g., lack of freedom, justice, solidarity) is a human potentiality. Again, from the perspective of subjectivity, psychologists need to reconstruct individual, interpersonal, and societal constraints/opportunities that enable such resistances. For instance, on societal and individual levels there are discourses emphasizing that "there is no alternative" to the status quo and that "you can change only yourself." Those assumptions need to be confronted with the possibilities of a subject, for instance, that their agency can be focused on individual or collective gain. The focus on individual gain, embedded very much in "our" culture/history/society restricts collective opportunities that in the long term could benefit most individuals. Connecting thinking, feeling and wanting with generalizable goals (HOLZKAMP 1983) is a possibility of human subjectivity (while this possibility is not unlimited).

Subjectivity needs to be understood in both its actuality and potentiality. It is important to understand why subjects endorse and embody the idea that "there is no alternative" and why others aim at transcending the status quo. Equally important is to understand why certain persons assimilate in their everyday life to neoliberalism, when they work, interact with people, when they participate in practices of the self that may include social media, while others do not. Psychologists also need to understand how choices and premises of action are perceived and how persons move between doing nothing, being hedonistic, focusing on money, and collectively wanting to improve their life conditions as well as their natural environment. Working on changing possibilities and researching potentialities – grounded in values of liberty, equality and solidarity – remain important tasks for critical psychologists. A focus on inner life would be too limiting for an understanding of subjectivity and its options.

7 Concrete forms of subjectivity (socio-historical mentalities)

Being-in-the-world (HEIDEGGER 1962) requires a detailed description of what the world looks like, and the description of this world has been neglected in psychology. From the perspective of

this article, socio-subjectivity has been neglected. Socio-subjectivity refers to those parts of the world, those parts of society, history, and culture, that become part of "my" subjectivity. This also means that *forms of subjectivity* exist out there, the same way that *langage and langue* are real. Because history, culture, and society change, forms of subjectivity change. A significant current form of subjectivity is the neoliberal form of subjectivity, which reflects the fact that the world we are living in, the social reality, can be aptly described as neoliberal capitalism. The neoliberal form of subjectivity is a form of subjectivity into which persons sutures themselves (see also SUGARMAN 2015; TEO 2018b). However, the pathologies of neoliberalism have also produced *resisting* forms of subjectivity.

Because globalization is an important part of neoliberalism, forms of resistance can be described as *antiglobalizing or deglobalizing* (TEO 2023). While the anti-globalizing form of subjectivity is a form that has existed for some time, participates in a critique of political-economic globalization, draws on internationalist roots, sometimes operates with cosmopolitan ideas, and extends internationalism from economic to social and environmental justice, the deglobalizing form of subjectivity is angry with the results of economic globalization, is combined with the hope to return to better imagined or real (national) past before the globalized world, and attributes pathologies of neoliberal capitalism to cosmopolitanism and internationalism and the *Other* ("globalist agenda").

Whereas Hardt and Negri (2005) plea «for a world of equality and freedom» and a «democratic global society» (p. xi) that rejects neoliberal economic globalization and aims at economic, social, and environmental justice on a global scale, deglobalizing subjectivities rail against cosmopolitanism in their critique of intellectual elites, (labor) internationalism, and global environmental projects, but accept neoliberal global capitalism as natural, God-given, or inevitable. The focus for the deglobalizing form of subjectivity remains on the nation, family and immediate interests. In its extreme version, deglobalizing subjectivityies may turn into fascist subjectivities (TEO 2021a). The latter are based on the assumption that the *Other* cannot participate in "our" wealth, can be subhumanized, and is *dieable* or even *killable*. Again, these forms of subjectivity need to be understood in their entanglements with inter- and intra-subjectivity.

It is understood that the analysis of concrete forms of subjectivity depends on one's own position and location in history, culture, and society, as well as on one's own ethical-political orientation. Indeed, interest-free research is impossible (HABERMAS 1972), and studies focusing on forms of subjectivity are guided by certain interests. Discussing neoliberal, deglobalizing, or fascist subjectivities has a psycho-political dimension because a characterization of these forms employs value-laden descriptions that have certain meanings in a given culture (e.g., *authoritarianism*). As mentioned above, my own analyses of forms of subjectivity (e.g., TEO 2018b, 2021a, 2023) are embedded in a critical-theoretical tradition of research. However, a concept such as a *climate-change denying subjectivity* is not only a problem from an ethical-political, but also from a scientific perspective; and the re-emergence of fascist subjectivities is not just an academic, but also a psycho-political problem.

8 Conclusions

The vast literature on psychological processes that may apply to "me" (or not), for instance, when it comes to cognitive mistakes that we may make, is helpful but limited and insufficient to account for a theory of subjectivity. Mainstream psychological knowledge that pretends to be focused on the individual is rather group knowledge representing central tendencies and deviations. It does not apply to individuals (LAMIELL 2019), even when based on the data of individuals (RIGATO *et alii* 2021). One could make the argument that if everybody makes the same mistake, it should be part of a socio-subjectivity, but even then, caution is required because "we" cannot involve all humans, as research on cultural differences on optical illusions has shown (HENRICH, HEINE & NORENZAYAN 2010). The focus on individual differences indicates the position of a subject on a distribution, which may be helpful for practical purposes, but does not allow an understanding of the subjectivity of a person (LAMIELL 2019). Indeed, it is fair to argue that subjective features of a person are often better accounted for in qualitative analyses such as phenomenology or autoethnography. However, as emphasized in this article, a better understanding of subjectivity, of a unique subjectivity, requires an understanding of the entanglement of the societal, interpersonal and personal, the way persons live their lives, the discourses and materialities they encounter, and the options they have and envision.

Without a theory of subjectivity, the discipline of psychology will continue with its standard research practices but would be subject to critique about its limited knowledge productions. More consequentially, any comprehensive theory of subjectivity would imply a radically different way of doing psychology – one that goes beyond the idiographic versus nomothetic or quantitative versus qualitative distinctions. All methodologies could play a role in theorizing and understanding mental life, but any knowledge that is produced would need to be connected to a theory of subjectivity. The crucial epistemic issue is the relative contributions of empirical research to the understanding of

subjectivity, whether the research is experimental, narrative, or historical; and more generally, which method does justice to subjectivity or the problem under investigation (TEO 2021b). Doing justice to the problem means to account for the subject matter of psychology, to do justice to human subjectivity, based on the critical idea that methodology follows the problem and not vice versa.

A theory of subjectivity is a starting point from which the mental life of persons can be understood. Such a horizon allows existing research to be re-integrated into a theory that accounts for cumulative knowledge in the discipline and practice of psychology. In that sense a theory of subjectivity provides conceptual tools to *reconstruct* the relative knowledge contributions of existing research. At the same time, such a theory offers critique because a theory of subjectivity identifies the missing parts of a study of mental life. For instance, when the entanglement of subjectivity is neglected – whether the focus is on internal life or on society, in both cases – important lacunae can be *deconstructed* and research may be considered misleading. A theory of subjectivity as an open system allows for the *constructing* and creating of new concepts to speak to the emergence and re-emergence of particular subjectivities from different societies, cultures, and times.

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Notes

[1] "We" and "I" are used in quotation marks when they refer to a generalizable *we* or *I*. Without quotation marks they refer to the author.

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