The subjectivity of participation
Sketch of a theory

Morten Nissen

The article aims to develop a theory of human subjectivity as collective and participatory, and as mediated by – rather than counterposed to – objectivity. Basic theoretical assumptions are outlined – that view as central the ideological constitution and productive transformation of forms of activity and intersubjectivity. To substantiate the ideas, schooling is analysed as a well-established generic form of collectivity – which, however, is shown to itself imply the subject-object-dichotomy in its constitution, in the shape of the ideological self-misrecognition of a ‘boundary objectivity’. Though essentially conventional, the ‘knowledge’ objects of schooling are typically used to screen the subjectifications they realise. Psychotherapy is then discussed as a counter-example of a form that tends to eclipse its object and its collectivity alike. Since both forms rely problematically on the frame of a time-space slot to achieve an objectification as types of collectivity, a final discussion concerns social work, which can be seen to supersede that limitation in the ‘artificial’ everyday life collectivities it creates. Whenever social work is transformed to critically engage with its constitutive material Others (power, economy, body), it may provide the relevance for a new kind of theory of collectives sui generis.

Introduction
Even in critical psychologies, subjectivity is mostly established as a pre-theoretical phenomenological a priori and viewed as a ‘perspective’, or an ‘experience’ of the human individual, often bulwarked with the spatial metaphor of an ‘interiority’ of consciousness. This strong
identification of subjectivity with individuality has led to serious continuous problems for a critical psychology. Prominent among these is the subject-structure division – the split between cultural-historical objective forms, ‘structures’, and a subject that either develops in relation to those but is itself constituted outside of them, simply on account of being biologically human, or is completely formed by them and thus disappears as agent-subject. A split that either reduces the subject to structural positions (in language or social practice); condemns it to a primarily passive-contemplative existence, torn between the alien forces of reason and drive, as in psychoanalysis; or puts it on a pedestal in a utopian-humanist celebration of some metaphysical emancipation. This article suggests that if a more agentive and reflexive approach to sensuous subjectivity is to develop, it must be seen as primarily collective; it must first substitute participatory relations in social practices for the subject-structure duality.

This is, of course, no unique or original statement. Rather, it – and this paper as a whole – should itself be read as an attempted contribution to a collective effort to conceptualise cultural-historical collective activity.1 The specific idea that I am seeking to articulate is that of a particular collective subject: that the ‘we’ or ‘us’, even as a particular collective, is primary to the ‘I’ or ‘me’, and is itself characterised by both agency and self-conscious, reflexive subjectivity.

**Collective subjectivity in a nut-shell**

I shall first give a brief, rather condensed outline of the theory, which I will then attempt to substantiate in an analysis of practical examples.

Basically, subjectivity is conceived here, in the tradition of the German and Scandinavian development of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) into critical psychology (CP) (Tolman, 1994), in two theoretical aspects. The first is action potence. Action potence conveys the subjectivity of praxis that dates back (at least) to Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ through the concept of participation. Thus, it builds on an extended notion of agency as the production, the forming, and the proactive control, of life conditions, which is the co-operative praxis specific to humans, and which is distributed among individual subjects who participate in it, and whose participation is not simply a given, but precarious and developing (Tolman, Maiers et al, 1991). The second aspect of subjectivity is reflexivity – the subject is knowledgeable and relates to her own actions, as well as to the actions of others, not as givens or necessities, but as options.2

Both aspects of subjectivity are mediated by meanings: action possibilities that are socially generalised and externalised in material form (in artefacts) as cultural objects. This idea of an essential objective mediatedness of subjectivity is where this theory parts company with most phenomenological and functionalist approaches: in these latter, subjectivity and objectivity are mutually exclusive. On the other hand, of course, it is a point of connection with discursive traditions. According to fundamental ideas in CHAT/CP and, more generally, (Hegelian-) Marxian anthropology, objectification (German: Vergegenständlichung) is inherent to human life viewed generically as practice, as the production of objective – collective and material – meaning that in turn forms who we are as subjects. This may appear strange to anyone brought up to regard ‘things’ as ‘external’ to ‘subjects’; but the fundamental ideas are simple. When we build roads and cars, we produce ourselves as commuters, pedestrians, estimators of car-crash risks, etc, and we generate the divisions between us over the prospect of ecological disaster. When we industrialise, we become capitalists and workers. When we then create labour movements and achieve welfare states, we end up struggling over social exclusion and cultural minorities. And when we inscribe each other as so-called ‘subjects’ into records, graphs, images, narrative texts, or even gestures, such ‘tertiary artefacts’ (Wartofsky, 1979) prompt our self-reflection not only in the terms of the content of these ‘representations’, but also in their ‘form-content’ (Ruben, 1978; Zizek, 1994) – for example, we are at the same time shaped, and shape ourselves, as literate or illiterate, experts or lay persons, dealers or consumers, worshippers or iconoclasts, etc.

If the idea that subjectivity is mediated by cultural objects is fairly straightforward, it is conspicuously vague in its particular empirical reference. This is no surprise, as, taken by itself, a dynamic constitutive reciprocality implies the ‘deconstructing’ of any given empirical-practical objects and subjects. At this point, it is tempting either to stick to such ‘pure’ and abstract negativity (which really amounts to operating with hidden ‘repressed’ positivities such as utopian communities, academic texts, or one-self as researcher-subject), or to slip back to the comfortable one-body subject. This would match the prevailing notion (at least since Tönnies) that modernisation (and perhaps individual development as well) leaves all concrete collectivities behind in favour of the blank existence of the human individual in an abstract society.

As an alternative, the idea of a collective subject views situated activ-
ities or practices as particular instances of the dynamic reciprocal constitution of participants and collectives with particular sets of cultural objects, and thus, as particular subjects. This is a crucial determination since it establishes the collective as a positive singular object for (psychological) study. Yet it is far from merely a stipulative move. Rather, it is at once refreshingly critical of the ruling ideology of abstract modernity and troublingly affirmative in relation to specific collectives, since a basic process of the collective is that it (continually) posits itself as a (finite) object and as a particular instance of something general or universal.

A useful theoretical approach to this sort of dynamics (and this kind of closure) is the (Marxist) tradition concerned with the workings of ideology, since in this line of work, the constitutions of subjects and collectivities have been linked to the externalisation of meaning as a fundamental process in class societies, and the ‘transcendental’ or ‘celestialising’ reference (eg ‘this community is instituted by God’) has been seen as representing and distorting the dynamic transformative nature of human production in some alienated form as a ‘given’ (religious dogma, second nature, etc) (Althusser, 1994; Haug, 1979; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1969; Hänninen and Paldán, 1983; Hejrup, 2003; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Zizek, 1993; Zizek, 1994). What I ask of the reader, at this point, is to entertain the possibility of emphasizing an aspect already present in this tradition, but not always highlighted: the fact that ideology, with its universal reference, works to constitute particular collectivities (eg Hitler’s nazism, with its metaphysical reference to the Aryan race, etc, did not reconstitute ‘capitalism’, ‘Capital’ or ‘capitalist society’, but rather first Germany, then Europe), and works on many, including ‘micro’, levels of social practice.

In this vein, Billig’s definition of ideology as the discourse with which subjects are constituted (Billig, 1991; Billig, 1997) can be rephrased, with the wider CHAT/CP concept of objectification, to the effect that ideologies are the cultural objects relevant to the constitution of particular participants and collectives as subjects in distinct forms. To put it slightly paradoxically, ideology is the objectivity of subjects (pointing to the moment of ‘formation’ – the positive, closure).

But with the same concept of objectification, we can see that this is merely the flip side of what might be called the subjectivity of objects: the productive process (the moment of ‘transformation’ – the negative, opening) as a generic dynamic feature of human life, which, when related specifically to the objects that constitute subjects, to ideology, can be called a critical process. Notably, critique, as it is conceptualised here (dialectically, I intend), is not fundamentally an alteration or deconstruction superimposed from some (free-floating, pre-given, autonomous) outside position. Rather, it is seen as intrinsic to objectification that the productive realisation of a form is at the same time its development (an idea derived from Hegel’s ‘cunning of reason’).

Thus, subjects are relationships of participation which are constituted in the form of ideologies; and ideological forms (and thus, subjects) are both substantialised and contradicted in the transformation of objects.

The discursive forms of cultural objects, when shaped in language or otherwise, objectify and mediate and thus both realise and transform the logic of practice (on these matters, cf. Nissen, 2003).

The logic of practice should be understood as including its ‘teleological’ (or ‘intentional’) structure of ends, means, agent-positions, and objects, which makes it identifiable (for-itself) in terms of distinct forms, and which is then reapplied to ‘frame’ (Goffman, 1986) activity reflexively in terms of norms, rules, methods, etc. For example, when ‘therapy’ becomes recognisable as a ‘cure’ sought by ‘therapists’ applying ‘techniques’ on ‘patients with disorders’, that framing is mediated by artefacts like ‘clinics’, ‘therapeutic spaces’, ‘textbooks’, ‘fees’, etc, and this, again, leads to standard methods and professional ethics, invokes the client as user/customer, and eventually comes to contradict the objectification of the client as patient.

The logic of practice should also be understood in terms of its ‘intersubjective’ structure – the simultaneous relation of identity and distinction between the collective and any of its participants, and, by implication, between participants; this at one extreme dissolves cooperative intersubjectivity in immediate identification, and at the other extreme dissolves it into the absolute conflict in which one subject precludes (excludes, destroys) the other; but, between those extremes, it is resolved in the objectification into discourse that forms it for-itself, as power, selfhood, membership etc. For example, the format of patriarchal marriage comes to stabilise the self-transcending emotional mutuality of romantic love, forming its telos and consumption, and at the same time its negation, its transmutation into a regulative power structure that recognises each spouse as (relatively) independent (and perhaps soon seeking romantic adventure elsewhere, heading towards divorce).

The identification with, and differentiation from, the collectivity as reflexive particular subject can be regarded as central to how partici-
pant subjects are constituted. At this point, the Althusserian concept of interpellation (Althusser, 1994) can be reinterpreted as portraying a participatory realisation of self-consciousness. The hailing and recruiting of unique individuals into pre-existing subject positions in the collectivity is in the first moment a symbolic social practice that the individual takes part in more or less unknowingly (as in a baptising) or superficially (as in the AA motto ‘fake it till you make it’), but it needs to then be substantialised in a second moment of realisation – a process which not only transforms as well as fulfils the symbolic gesture, but thereby also implies, perhaps more than is apparent in Althusser’s own formulations, a fundamental constitutive mutuality between collective and participant. Think of the simple example of a child, born into a (modern, western) nuclear family, given the pre-defined social tag as unique member of the collective (the name), learning to speak by being treated as always-already a competent speaker, referring first to herself in the third person, then, as this ‘self’ grows more autonomous (participating in other collectives, etc), becoming an ‘I’ complete with an interiority with obscure beginnings and endpoints. And think of how radically the family itself as a collective is reconstituted in this process.

The example of the child as participant in a nuclear family also serves to illustrate the vicinity of this approach to the Vygotskian concept of a Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1962), at least when this is read as a feature of a living social practice, much like the ‘situated learning’ idea of a ‘legitimate periferal participation’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991). What is added is the further complication that self-reflection is itself participatory. This is what necessitates theorising ideology, and in turn provides an approach to ideological dynamics.

It follows from the idea of an ideological constitution of subjects as relations of participation that particular collectives are themselves singular subjects who participate in larger practices and who themselves perform reflexivity, not only in the explicit shape of a ‘we’ (which may or may not be linguistically realised) but also in the ongoing indexical regulation of activity. This again leads to conceiving of a structure of ‘Russian dolls’, collectives participating in each other, along with a ‘matrix’ structure where each collective may simultaneously participate in several others – a structure which must be at some points quite stable, at other points extremely fleeting or volatile. Thus, for instance, when two strangers exchange polite remarks having bumped into each other on the sidewalk, they realise a very short-lived collective between them, but only on condition that they also realise the centuries-lasting collective of the state to which they are citizens or guests and which grant them the civil rights that make the position of a ‘stranger’ and the space of the street benevolent enough to allow, but alien enough to require, such politeness.

The webs of inter-subjective relations are structurally, semantically and tempo-spatially mediated – as belongings, alignments (Wenger, 1998), trajectories of participation, concerns and stakes (Dreier, 1999), social landscapes (Ahrne, 1990), organisational structures, etc, etc. Thus, participation is an extremely complex, multi-layered, ever-changing affair. While it is tempting to reduce such complexities to simple abstractions such as ‘individual/society’ or ‘participant/community’, we should rather console ourselves with the obvious fact that it we all daily engage in and manage as lay persons these kinds of complex webs of participation. Conceptualisations such as this may help us follow in our own footsteps, as it were, and see, not just what we do and how, but who we are.

Approaching participation in such an ‘ethno-method’ has the distinct advantage that it provides a way of addressing the troublesome issue of how one social unit should be distinguished, discriminated, from another, a problem which remains unsolved in various (semi-) structural (eg Bourdieu, 1977; Engeström, 1987) or systems theories (Bateson, 1972). Thus, attention is directed to the reflexive collective subjectivity of the ‘we’: the ways the collective constitutes itself as distinct from and related to other subjects, including its participants, and itself works to achieve closure or summation (Middleton and Brown, 2005; Middleton and Murakami, 2004).

Finally, it is only at the topmost level that we encounter collectivity in the ultimate (non-) form in which it is most often conceptualised in social theory: the indistinct, boundless ‘society’ (aka ‘social practice’, ‘production’, etc, etc), collectivity ‘as such’, beyond the profane particularity of its instances (which, in social theory, are often simply taken for granted, or else their overcoming is sought in the abstract). Most succinctly, the notion of ‘everyday life’ seeks to paradoxically specify the non-specific in cultural theory (Nissen, 1999a; Nissen, 2002a), the substance or ‘stuff’ of social practice, the residual or all-encompassing totality which is only structured by the cyclic repetitions of life itself, but otherwise always emerges as the negation of specific forms, institutions, practices. But even if this ultimate collectivity resists specific determination, it would be wrong to think that it only exists as
empty abstraction in the minds of social theorists. In fact, given that any particular collective is (perceived by its participants as) contingent, references beyond are ultimately a logical requirement to provide criteria for its practical re-constitution or transformation, whether or not such criteria are explicitly stated (as ‘ethical’ premises, etc.). It is presumably this necessity of a reference to an – at once elusive and all-pervasive – final yet infinite collectivity that, in the end, gives rise to religious and other forms of ideological ‘absolute transcendence’.

These seem to me to be minimal elements of a theory of particular collective subjects. Of course, when they are simply stated like this, they inevitably contain ambiguities and gloss over theoretical problems, and their relevance can hardly be assessed. What is needed is their objectification – realisation and thus substantialisation – in more concrete problems, with a reflexive eye to how they are thereby transformed. Let us look, then, at collective subjectivity as it unfolds in some more specific practices.

**Substantialising the theory: schooling**

We shall first approach collective subjectivity as this issue itself has been constituted culturally-historically, that is, through practices that are institutionalised to the point where their objectification as practice forms, or types or kinds of activity, is visible so that we can discuss them in the abstract as generalisations. This method will prove problematic, as we shall see, but it would clearly be even more problematic to tacitly assume that collectivities are constituted from scratch each time anew. Such problems are better addressed at the front door than smuggled in through backdoor assumptions built into any terms with which we could model ideas about particular collectivities.

My first illustration is a type of activity with which we are all familiar, and which seems quite simple – that of schooling: the collective activity of teachers and pupils in the school context. You will see, I hope, that it is a quite complex structure of objectification and subjectivity which, when we get to the core of it, is already under transformation.

If we view schooling as a practice form it is immediately recognisable that we are dealing with two levels of objectification. Firstly, there is the object being handled in the practice itself, what is in English often confusingly referred to as the ‘subject’, i.e. that which is subjected to the actions of the participants of the practice. That which is being taught and perhaps learned. Secondly, the activity of schooling itself is objectified as a form, a method, a kind of intervention or practice, which is of course why it is possible for me now to refer to ‘it’ as an example. One can visualise the activity at a teachers’ college to get an image of this two-level structure. When we look more closely at the object handled in the schooling activity, however, it is clear that it is itself derived from, and presupposes, two levels of objects, even in the normal school: the objects of school activities are typically themselves theoretical or representational models (Wartofsky, 1979), which is why we can think of them as (being utilities for) holding some kind of knowledge (Ilyenkov, 1977a). This is in fact one way to approach the differentia specifica of schooling as a form of practice (Davydov, 1973; Davydov and Markova, 1983; Ilyenkov, 1991).

Further, if schooling is to be distinguished from other kinds of activity with theoretical objects, such as research, it is through the specificity of its aim (again somewhat confusingly, the English sometimes call this the objective, or even the object, or what it is ‘about’). Schooling is ‘about’ facilitating some participants’ learning of actions which are already mastered by others, and since the objects of those actions are knowledge objects (models), what is to be learnt is a pre-specified kind of knowing. In other words, the social differentiation between those who know and those who learn means that school learners approach knowledge primarily as social conventions, as curricula. This works both ways: historically, schools arose with ‘tertiary artefacts’ (Wartofsky, 1979) that are intrinsically conventional (artefacts that model social relations and de-/pre-scribe activity symbolically, such as writing, money, etc), and school activities at once reproduce the conventions, the artefacts, and the very conventionality itself. This raises the political question of whether the conditions of production and the conditions of relevance of the curriculum are included in the knowing or whether it is only mastered in its immediate abstractness, as the inculcation of an academic discipline. But in either case, learning in the context of schooling is essentially self-reflexive, because of the tensions and movements between knowledge as an external social convention and knowing as a feature of the learner’s own activity. Self-reflection takes the form of comparing one’s activity to the socially valid yardstick (as when the making of a sound is symbolised with a letter), and this includes, in principle, evaluating social relevances of acquiring knowledge and monitoring power relations. This is a constitutive ‘(techno-) logical’ feature of the structure of schooling.

An interesting implication of this reflexivity inherent to schooling...
participating in further educational collectives which in turn grant access to various social opportunities. Or the way that contingency of participation can itself be objectified into gradations and differentials of participation which, in turn – as ‘success’ and ‘failure’ – co-constitute subject-positions, possible trajectories, and premises of participation (Varenne and McDermott, 1998).

The subjective and the objective sides of schooling are inseparable. Thus, the ‘we’ that lives for 45 minutes in a simple biology lesson is a very complex achievement where all participants must continuously handle the relations between the specific curriculum (biology) and the social form (schooling) to realise themselves as productive and self-reflective subjects, both as individual participants and as a collective. But the subjective side is hard to grasp because the ideology of schooling is structured by what can be called a ‘boundary objectivity’ that seeks to hide subjectification behind the normalising judgement with which it is realised, so that the objectivity of school knowledge appears, in and of itself, naturally, to lead to that distribution of individuals among collectives which is the key sanctioning power in the school (Nissen, 2003). The ideology – the objectification of subjectivity itself – performs, mirrors, and forms participants as endowed with internal intelligences, talents, proclivities and so on, and collectives as organised by the juxtaposing of those features of participants with the structures of natural reality represented in knowledge. This juxtapositioning, further, is based on an epistemological structure of participation so pervasive that it is very hard to unthink: knowing staged as the pupils’ mass of individual gazes at the displayed or modelled object, the teacher’s simultaneous panoptical view of the object and of the pupils, realising and objectifying identification (with the collective embodied by the teacher) as the ‘correct view’ of the object, meaning both a gaze and a way of representing it verbally; and the (utopia of the) ‘community of scholars’ at the top hierarchical echelon where debate is finally allowed among free witnesses to the events of nature (cf Olesen, 2003). And, on the side of error, there is the idea of distortion or deficiency as being entirely traceable to the features that make up the ‘subjectivity’ of the individual pupil: natural endowment, position, need. It is this structure that forms the ‘we’ of schooling which is reproduced in the pupil’s self as well as in numerous academic relations such as the conventions governing the writing and reading of academic texts such as this (viewed as a genre in Bakhtin’s sense, cf. Holquist, 1990).
An ideology critique of schooling would have to transform both sides at once: the core idea of knowledge, and the core power relationships inherent in the ways collectives are constituted and participants aligned in them and distributed among them. This appears a daunting task; however, a basic CHAT legacy here would be the hypothesis that such practical ideology critique is not something which I or anyone else have to invent and begin from scratch, but that, rather, it is itself a substantialisation and realisation of what it really means to teach – at once a utopia and a generic feature of existing schooling – and thus identifiable as a living possibility or tendency.

If we turn a genealogical eye toward contemporary schooling – only one eye, since this is bound to be a gross simplification in the space of this argument – the pattern that virtually leaps into our critical eyes is the movement toward an increased emphasis on general individual reflexivity and responsibility (rather than specific knowledges) and life-long and life-wide learning (rather than singular and finished trajectories through secluded schools) (Popkewitz and Fendler, 1999). It is no great challenge to identify a neoliberal governmentality that highlights the subjectivist ‘romantic’ side of Enlightenment, the idea of ‘Bildung’, general education or formation of personality (Hofmeister, 1998). Clearly, here, the subjectivity that had been repressed with a ‘boundary objectivity’ re-emerges. It is equally clear that it overwhelmingly reappears as privatised, as the holistic-subjective counterpart to a market of atomistic instrumental knowledges. Yet this very movement not only restates the question of how the subjective and the objective sides of schooling (and knowing) might be related, but also necessarily involves reconstituting collectives and relevances of knowledge. For example, there is a tendency in the reforms for the first years in Danish primary schools towards the dissolution of the structure of classes and disciplines and the integration of after-school pedagogy. Despite today’s extremely individualistic discourse, schooling practices may hold a collectivist ‘shadow side’ that is consistently misrecognised – from the perspectives of traditional schooling, contemporary ideological progressivism, and purely negative critics alike. Like every individualisation in modernity, the contemporary focus on self-responsible learning is also a renewed socialisation. It is such possibilities which have been (of course, always: only partly) actualised in revolutionary schooling experiments (such as those one can read about in Davydov et al, 1983; Freire, 1996; Haug, 2003; Solis, 2002). At their best, such ‘prototypes’ show how schooling can be transformed by critically ‘emancipating’ its core of a collective reflexive modelling of social relations in tertiary artefacts.

What does the example of schooling teach us about the subjectivity of participation? First of all, as might be expected, since objectification transforms, rather than offering itself as a simple clear-cut illustration, the object dragged us into a veritable universe of further complexity. Second, the objectivity that allowed us to approach it as a culturally given general form, known to the reader, can be seen to have historically preceded and facilitated the project of an abstract ‘objective’ conception of collective subjectivity – the relevance of which is inevitably a kind of social engineering – which I (we?) have undertaken. The technology of distributing individuals according to ideally defined tasks always implied that of creating appropriate collectives, from the drawing-board; and the specific educational aims provided for the conventionality, and thus a certain looseness of criteria for what exactly counted as appropriate.

Thirdly, the subject-object-dichotomy revealed itself as implicated directly in constituting collectives as types of practice, in the shape of the ideological self-misrecognition of a ‘boundary objectivity’. Though essentially conventional, the objects of schooling are typically used to screen the subjectification they realise and thus to naturalise it rather than to problematise its relevance as a social practice.

To provide an analytical counter-example, I suggest we ride the pendulum across the chasm to a station on the other side, a place where subjectivity reigns: psychotherapy, the practice form that appears to be cleared of any specific objective content to constitute merely a curative intersubjectivity. Yet, interestingly, it is also an important site of development of those technologies of collectivity which for so long had depended on the subject being eclipsed by the object.

Counter-example: psychotherapy

Of course, again here, the institutionalisation of the practice means that all participants deal with its objectification on a simple everyday basis; for instance, it typically shares with schooling the time-space slot format that delimits its collectives as well as its processes. But what is the object of the activity thus institutionalised?

One answer could be that the client is the object of the activities of the therapist. That would seem to be the original medical perception which reduces the patient to a body that can be manipulated. Even here, a complex structure would emerge, since there is still also the
whether or not she knows it or likes it. It is the self that emerges, as simply and purely reflected as the therapist is able, and it seems not to be mediated by any objectivity. The collective of psychotherapy is thus formed with a self-denying ideology. That is to say, participation vanishes because actions are mainly interpreted as expressions of the participants’ individual subjectivity, either to be dealt with in the ongoing process or, in the case of the therapist, to be delegated to supervision. In psychoanalysis, the concepts of transference and counter-transference carry this function (and, one can speculate, the psychoanalytic ideas about groups as mega-individuals express the transformation of the collective into the individual self, cf. Parker, 1997).

Yet that self-denying transformation itself is an achievement of the specific process of objectification that institutionally defines the collective. The formal delineation of the practice form, the therapeutic space, shapes any actions as models or representations that move between the ‘problem’ and the totality of the individual participant’s life situation. The logic is: ‘since this is psychotherapy, we must interpret what you do or say as indicative of your problem – and of yourself’ (Goffman, 1986). So, like in schooling, there is a modelling going on, a representation. But while the modelling in schooling, the knowledge, tends and seeks to exclude subjectivity (since subjectivity means imperfection), the modelling in psychotherapy seeks to exclude objectivity, even that of the modelling itself. Psychotherapy does employ various representational, ‘secondary’ or ‘tertiary’ artefacts (dialogue, writing, drama, drawing, play, etc), but achieves its proper specific end by transcending the mundane conventionality of those to stage a human encounter. The rules of any such genre are systematically bent to serve the needs of the subject’s self-reflection. Both the objectivity of the problem and that of the representational artefacts are thus pushed to the background. What tends to remain is only the ‘frame’ itself as the primary representational artefact, the conventional context with reference to which participants (not just the therapist) can achieve the essential going-beyond the conventionality of ‘the problem’ and its representations. That ‘frame’, then, continuously reappears – even if only in glimpses before being repressed – from an implicit indexical reference to some kind of explicitness, some meta-objectification (e.g. the classic talk-about-talk, like ‘I sense that you are reluctant to talking about x ...’).

Thus, we end up with the paradox of an endlessly reflexive yet (or precisely since) self-denying collective. This may be why
psychotherapy, most clearly realised in systemic-constructionist variants, could develop into a kind of applied frame analysis par excellence. Since both the collective and the objectivity are being denied, the practice can only be reflected – when it is not simply referred back to its individual participants – as a purely ideal phenomenon, an epistemological pattern, a cognitive frame, a system of communication, etc; in short, as the kind of reflexivity that never achieves closure because it is not anchored in a practical question of relevance. The ‘idealism’ of psychotherapy – as a ‘talking cure’ that pivots around the tensions between the client as talked about, as talking, and as a contingent participant in establishing the collective of talking (in a real world where it must prove its relevance), yet must remain ignorant of those same tensions in order to shape subjectivity – is constitutive and prevails no matter how many layers of meta-reflection are piled up.

Crossing the chasm to the site of cultivation of subjectivity, then, taught us more about the origins and the relevance of analyses of practice forms. Just beneath the surface of psychotherapy’s self-denial, a generalised self-reflection of the practice of reconstituting collectives seems to hatch, though still frustrated with the obligatory performance of the subject-object dichotomy. While the collective and its power relations, in schooling, could hide behind the putatively self-sufficient object, it seems, here, to be able to use an absence of any objectivity as a smoke-screen no less efficient.

In both cases, a major condition was the spatio-temporal delimitation juxtaposed with a teleological framing, its, as it were, micro-‘heterotopian’ setting24 – the classroom and the therapeutic space, the lesson and the session. It may be instructive, then, to review collectivities in kinds of practice which are not constituted thus, even if it means going beyond the (‘micro-sociological’) analytic level of immediate interaction to a somewhat different field of knowledge.

The example to break down ‘examples’: social work and the bourgeois family

Social work could be such a practice. It seems to be precisely the kind of practice that deals with subjectivity, even in its collective form, without staging it in an intellectual or emotional space.25 It would appear that the movement out of the enclosed space of the talking cure takes us out into the real world and into more objective and material matters. Indeed, social workers are often critical of the idealism of psychotherapy. Yet if the already fragile and almost invisible objectivity of psychotherapy lies in the ways it is itself ‘framed’, objectified as a method and reapplied to form activity, then the transcending of the limitations of that form in social work can be regarded as exactly the opposite: as the epitome of subjectivist practice. This is why the form of knowledge in social work can be diagnosed as rent by the paradox of attempting to create an objectivity out of an abstract humanist subjectivism (Philp, 1979).

Social work, in a sense, is the holistic subjectivism of psychotherapy but without any therapeutic space to mediate it and shape it. As a social therapy, it has the same movement from the ‘boundary objectivities’ of certain problems (such as crime, drugs, etc) and towards the general subjectivity of the client. As a social pedagogy, it builds on the most romantic subjectivism of ‘Bildung’ since the skills that are taught are only ‘life skills’, the competences only ‘social competences’, etc Thus, in social work, the issue of subjectivity is evident and direct. But the loss of the objectivities of specified knowledges, problems, diseases, and even of the ‘frame’ of a secluded space, only brings us closer to the objectivity of subjectivity itself: to power and ideology.

Social work is ideally the work of a humanistic empowerment, but at the same time an often openly moral subjectification; it is the formation of responsible citizens out of the socially excluded non-subjects, based on, and never very distant from, the organised work of differentiating subjects from non-subjects. Intrinsicly critical, split between an ‘authentic’ humanistic ideal and an ‘inauthentic’ realisation, social work is realised in a cycle of continuous utopian renascences of sociality that are subsequently substantialised and contradicted in objectifications (Donzelot, 1979; Nissen, 2003; Nissen, 2004a; Philp, 1979; Stenson, 1993).

Even if, politically speaking, the humanism in social work is often utopian, it would not be true to reduce the objectivity of empowerment to subjection. Social work realises itself just at the intersection that distinguishes a mere subjection from an interpellation that implies a certain mutuality. This is a way of conceiving what is implied in the point about the work being ‘social’ as a social engineering, a formation of artificial collectives as well as their participants, the humanist utopia of social work are not (necessarily or essentially) realised (and perverted) in fixed heterotopian spaces. Social work should not be regarded in isolation from issues of social policy, or more general political issues, nor discarded beforehand as an adaptational technology. Rather, social work forms part of political struggles at the cutting edge.
of state intervention into civil society (and is even sometimes aware of that). Viewed thus, as a work on ‘the social problem’, its scope goes all the way, not only to the various indistinct communities of ‘community work’, but actually to the emerging and self-transforming welfare state.26

I hope the reader can appreciate the way in which the theoretical problem of constitution of particular collectives as subjects who interpellate participants as subjects finds a specific relevance in social work. Precisely the tendency to a ‘critical’ transcendence of any given form – which, despite the worldliness of its salvation, genealogically reminds us of the Christian charity from which social work developed – recurrently poses, to all who still hold allegiance to that worldliness, the question not just of how an artificial collective can be designed, but also how it can transcend the limits of specialised design and become an instance of the social as indistinct society, or of everyday life. Against this background, the question of its particularisation – such as in collectives of social work – is as paradoxical in practice as in theory.

Nevertheless, it has its tradition. The institution par excellence which can be said to paradoxically specialise in everyday life is the family, ever since the modern bourgeois nuclear family was developed as a site of intimacy and subjectivity – distinct and often dichotomised from an array of productive activities that are increasingly delegated outside the family to become specialised practices with their instrumental rationalities.27 The object that members of a family share is a very elusive thing: everyday life itself; the heterogeneous totality of objects and practices that comprise the life of each of its members as particular and unique persons. It builds historically on the politics of lineage, but retains in modern times its ‘natural’, biologically derived identity, perhaps because of the lack of any other organising and differentiating feature (anyone is qualified, under any conditions, etc) – even if that identity is so frequently proven arbitrary, and, of course, even if numerous kinds of discursive links can be made or broken between blood and intimacy (Foucault, 1985). That is what makes it so precarious and vital as a collective, at once so fragile and so enduring.

This cultural form is the root of the characteristics of family relations which we have learnt about in psychology (a knowledge largely based on practices of psychotherapy in the above broad sense). For instance, the reduction in psychoanalysis of intersubjective relations to ‘object relations’ reflects the ideological ‘loss of the shared object’ in psychotherapy, but also in the family. When the intimate other is reduced to an object of desire, it may reflect and affirm the inherent possibility that intimacy is in fact reduced to privacy in the bourgeois family, so that intersubjectivity is primarily that of a power-relationship, and it may then perform that affirmation through the ideological form of psychotherapy for which the only existing – if vanishing – objects are those of individual participant subjects with their traits, problems etc 28

Social work models the cross-contextual scope of the family in ways that are quite different from those of psychotherapy. Historically, the ‘policing’ of or standing-in for families (Donzelot, 1979) has always been a central task in social work, something that implied the full-scale arranging and regulating of everyday life for persons. Generally, this has been tightly legally regulated and conditioned on the sanctioned reduction of civil and social rights, among other things to protect the autonomy of the citizen and the institution of the family (the form of ‘privacy’); in addition, attempts to impose professional standards have supplemented legal standards as regulation has become increasingly ‘productive’ or positive. The rule has been, then: either individuals enjoy recognition as unique subjects, or they are subjected to a social engineering of family or everyday life. So the ‘pseudo-family’ collectives of social work have been stripped of precisely the particularity and transcendence of instrumental logics into everyday life that would have been their most vital characteristic had they in fact been families. In other words: the socially engineered family of social work is yet another kind of ideologically self-denying collectivity.29

But of course, this problem still presupposes the cultural form of the nuclear family, as part of the overall modern or bourgeois cultural structure which Hegel described with the triangle of State, Civil (Bourgeois) Society, and Family, representing the General, the Special, and the Singular/Particular, respectively (Hegel, 1968). Once we realise this – and as a kind of unintended cultural-historical consequence of this – we can also begin to see how social work historically forms part of the problematisation and reworking of that very structure which has taken place with the welfare state. Rather than viewing the particular collectives of social work as flawed profane copies of either God-given or utopian-humanistic forms, they can be viewed as prototypical practices embodying and dealing with some aspects of the question of how post-nation-state society can (best) be constituted as particular collectives – and how that process can integrate instrumental rationalities as well as holistic singularity.
Likewise, as the (direct, sovereign) exertion of power gradually retreats from the family as well as from the utopian-humanist collectives of social work, to assume an increasingly ‘external’ character, foundational yet distant from the intersubjectivities of free private individuals (in safe Western enclaves) and their psychologising ideologies, the critical reconstitution of social work as forms of political empowerment, if it actually engages with those constitutive material Others of social work – the penal/judiciary system, the regulations of immigration, the medical regulation of deviant bodies, etc – may address basic aspects of Modern state collectivity in an equally positive fashion, that is, by way of creating prototypical collectives that challenge the prevailing ideology by mobilising to alternative political projects.

Conclusion
The overall ideological dichotomy of subject and object is also a form of distribution of particular ideologies across particular collectives and kinds of collectives. This became evident in the contrast between schooling and psychotherapy. If it is true that social work is a kind of practice that tends to transcend those boundaries, it can be said to be a reflexive potential of social work to develop the demand for a general theory of particular collectives as subjects. Perhaps the objectification of holistic subjectivism, and the universalising particularisation of everyday life, which are paradoxical philosophical requirements and fragile occurrences in social work practices, repeatedly resituate the dichotomy and lead the way to its transformation. Each time the ‘social problem’ is addressed anew, and broken apart in objectivist and subjectivist practices, the shadow sides of those practices may be brought to resurface along with their collectivities.

By the same token, however, the abstract idea of a social engineering of collectives that allows us to manipulate that theoretical object freely, is fundamentally questioned. That object becomes relevant in the same socio-culturally specific processes that produce and perform it in institutional practices, and carries the same limitations. It is only when social work, in a very ambitious version of a welfare state, takes the ‘social problem’ as the occasion to formulate the daunting task of creating collectives that embrace power, production and everyday life, that we can begin to see the depths and the scope of collectivity, and thus objectify the subjectivity of participation.

Thus, the substantialisation of the theory sketched here, towards its fullest realisation, is also a transformation of the idea of theorising implied. It must move on from the deadlock opposition of ‘positive’ machination and ‘negative’ transcendence that is so often included in either of the terms ‘psychology’ or ‘critical’ or both; it must perform an ideology critique that realises its own historicity without falling for the usual contemplative academicism that amounts to a fetishism of academic texts; finally, it must rework its own conceptual foundations, not as a utopian celestialisation, nor as a heterotopian ordering of a secluded space, but as a contribution to a reflexive prototyping that is a child of its time – growing up to change it.

Notes
1. An effort that might be witnessed by consulting such (otherwise quite diverse) works as (Billig, 1991) (Dreier, 1992; Dreier, 1999; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Engeström, 1987; Holland and Lave, 2001; Middleton and Brown, 2004a)
2. I cannot unfold, in the space of this article, how these basic categories theoretically imply other basic features of the concept of the subject, such as reproduction, need, will, finitude etc
3. One tricky issue has been whether ideology should be posited as a universal process (thus itself transcendental), or rather whether it should be contrasted to some (even more transcendent) pre- and/ or post-ideological realm. My position is that ideology can be usefully treated as omni-historical, provided that so is its productive transformation. Thus, no particular ideology is as universal as it believes itself to be, but the idea that ideological particularity is universal matches all evidence and seems relevant to overcome specific kinds of utopian blindness. Specifically, it would be a disastrous utopianism to reserve the concept as an analytical resource to those empirical collectivities and meanings which are deemed ‘bad’ beforehand. It is another matter altogether that ideology is only identifiable as ideology from the point of view of its transformation – self-consciousness is radically decentred as a perpetual self-overcoming (Nissen, 2004b; Nissen, 2004c).
4. The internal dialectical relations of form and transformation imply that we cannot simply distinguish between ideology =reproduction=stasis and class consciousness=transformation=development, or the like. Reproduction is as necessary and constitutive a moment of subjectivity itself as is transformation. But ideology, when abstracted from its movement and context, from its immanence in social practice – that is, when viewed in itself (Zizek, 1994), from the inside or from an absolute outside – performs and creates persistent dichotomies that tend to entrap even the project of overcoming it. Thus, for instance, in CP the distinction between restrictive action potency (the attempt to defend a relative level of action potency) and expansive action potency (the endeavour to overcome the
conditions and powers that limit action potency to a definite level) was carefully articulated (in, for example, Osterkamp, 1976) as an analytical concepts for a subject’s reflection of her own situation, beyond a mere separation of reproduction from production; yet in practice, the concepts have been repeatedly counterposed and used in empiristic classifications – perhaps because of the way those concepts, and the constitutive relation between pure (and relentlessly purifying), revolutionary theory and an imperfect practice – in bourgeois-conditions, served to define politically-ideologically a community of CP (Nissen, 2004b).

5. This aspect of collectivity has been extensively investigated in the CHAT tradition. This version of a conceptual structure for understanding activity modifies and critically appropriates Leontiev’s original theory (Leont’ev, A.N., 1981) in a way very different from Engeström’s ‘extended triangle’ (Engeström, 1987) which in some places is (mis-)taken as almost synonymous with CHAT as such. It is developed through going back to Leontiev’s (and others’) background in a Hegelian-Marxist theory of practice (Bernstein, 1971; Højrup, 2003; Ilyenkov, 1977b; Jensen, 1987; Jensen, 1999; see also Axel and Nissen, 1993; Nissen, 2002a; Nissen, 2003; Nissen, 2004a; Nissen, 2004c; Nissen, 1999a).

6. I am aware that the temporality of Althusser’s concept of interpellation is complex. Rather than simple linear time, Althusser operates a dichotomy of two timeless zones: on the one hand ‘inside’ ideology, where the subject is always-already there and the unconscious is eternal, and on the other hand the ‘achronous’ logic of theoretical determinations which is ‘outside’ ideology. If breaking down the dichotomy allows the daylight of real time, the issue of subjectivity itself complicates matters beyond any simple sequence of events. In my view, the only possible solution is to embrace potentiality: the idea that subjects can only be approached in their becoming, and fundamentally normatively, ie in the light of what we want or do not want them (or us) to become.

7. This mutuality is logically immanent to participation, no matter how ‘asymmetrical’ the intersubjective relation between community and participant (think of an individual and the superpower state of which she is citizen).

8. This ‘first-person-(plural)-perspective’ is in fact in many ways indebted to ethnomethodological and interactionist analyses, perhaps in particular a Goffmanian frame analysis (Goffman, 1981; Goffman, 1986).

9. It is interesting to note how sociology was founded as an endeavour that reconstructed society at its most abstract level, in a science that was supposed to evolve sui generis from it, yet treated the processes that differentiated society into societies – and thus gave that science all the empirical objects that defined it, as completely external or accidental. Cf Højrup, 2003.


11. In Agnes Heller’s terminology (Heller, 1981; Heller, 1985), the backbone of everyday life are objectifications-in-itself characterised precisely by heterogeneity and comprehensiveness.

12. Perhaps an odd term, but one that does not, like the more familiar teaching or (school-) learning, assume the activity as fundamentally either one of non-learning or one of non-teaching, and one that designates its socio-historical institutional context.

13. Which sometimes leads to terminological confusions, especially in analyses using Engeström’s triangle model (Engeström, 1987), since this curiously does not include a concept of aims or goals, and also (particularly as taken up in numerous secondary texts) tends to perform as an empiristic classificatory system.

14. The question of theoretical or empirical thinking, according to Davydov, expansive or defensive learning in the theory of Holzkamp (1993).

15. Another way of putting this is to say that schooling appears when learning is disentangled from everyday activities that are governed by multiple aims and comes to exist as a ‘learning for itself’ in a context and a collective of its own. This is, incidentally, a simple explanation of why learning has been historically conceived as a product of teaching: a theory of education presupposes the formal social determination of an object to be learnt, a curriculum. The resulting tensions between the learning-in-itself that characterises the general process, and the learning-for-itself that realises it in relation to specific objects, leads to the recurrent critical movements that can be witnessed in pedagogical discourse. See Nissen, 2002a; Nissen, 1999a.

16. Thus, the struggles over what the activity is about, reported by Eckert (1989) or Willis (1977), are not necessarily outside of schooling itself, even if, of course, each participant has her own trajectory of participation (Dreier, 1999) with which to make sense of teaching.

17. This example is borrowed from Holzkamp (1993), who criticises that practice because it is control rather than joint learning. But my approach is quite different from Holzkamp’s in that characterises the general process, and the learning-for-itself that realises it in relation to specific objects, leads to the recurrent critical movements that can be witnessed in pedagogical discourse. See Nissen, 2002a; Nissen, 1999a.

18. Conflict and co-operation between families and schools have been to a large extent mediated by regulations of pupils’ movements between institutions and institutional spaces; this feature results from (and necessitates) the basic time-space structure of the classroom and itself contributes to objectifying knowledge as something that moves around with the pupil.

19. The ‘we’ of academic texts is not only the writing professor including (but rarely mentioning) his subordinates, but also the classroom collectivity under his authority.

20. Of course, the school, in this respect, both learned from and exchanged with other institutions such as the military, the convent, and, later, the industrial organisation.
This priority implies disattending – and techniques for disattending – both the various ‘irrelevant’ intersubjective relations that are realised, such as customer/user-provider, citizen-public servant/institution; citizen-citizen; man-woman etc etc, and the professional expertise of the therapist, which is in the same process de-personalised (Dreier, 1992).

In psychoanalysis the idea of a ‘communication between unconsciousnesses’, in client-centred therapy ‘involvement’, gestalt therapy ‘awareness’, in narrative therapy ‘unique outcomes’, etc... See also Georgaca, 2003.

Heterotopia, in Foucault (Foucault, 1986), ‘... are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’. Much has been made of this idea as capturing not only modernist modernistic places such as political communes or deviant enclosures, but also postmodern paradigms of endless heterogeneity and pure processuality (Hetherington, 1997)). I find it more useful as a tool to investigate the many forms of spatialised (and temporalised) differences that are unfolded in various institutional practices throughout Modernity and in certain predecessors such as convents or theatres.

Of course, social work takes place in all sorts of spaces, frames, institutions, etc, that each house specific collectives. The point, here, is that it is not defined by and does not necessarily employ one of these; often, social work is the general name for the work that includes specialised practices in specialised places such as therapy, teaching, etc. In terms of dialectical logic, social work can be regarded as the germ cell that may subsequently be objectified and negated in specialised interventions; the general kind which exists as a moment in all its special forms and all its particular instances, but which may also be realised in-and-for-itself as a particular (Ilyenkov, 1977b).

This is vital to understand and highlights some ways in which the dominant, primarily Anglo-American scientific ‘community’, even as critical discourse analysis, genealogy etc (Cruikshank, 1999; Donzelot, 1979; Rose, 1999; Stenson, 1993), may be a poor guide to understanding social work in a Nordic welfare state where, first of all, universalism has meant the building of comprehensive state institutions much more, for example, than in France or the UK. The Nordic phenomena of eg universal state-organised coverage of pre-school child care, or health care, or after-school facilities etc, are quite substantial social facts, and the issue of universalism/particularism is still recurrent in all fields of social work. More generally, the totality of society achieves an important kind of closure as particular and self-conscious collective in the shape of a state, at least given the structure of boundred nation-states that prevailed in Europe and its colonies between the peace of Westphalen in 1648 and until the advent of superpowers with nuclear weapons. Given that the subject-position of the state underlies the emergence of (modern) social theory as well as educational, therapeutic and social work practices, a theory of participatory subjectivity, even one based on a CP, cannot escape engaging with a theory of state. To this purpose, I have been engaged in an interdisciplinary project on the culture and history of the (Danish) welfare state (see Højrup, 2003).

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27. A split which has been reproduced in organisational theory between the rationalist tradition aptly summarised by (Mintzberg, 1993) – collective organised by distribution and coordination of given tasks – and the abstract sociology of institutions portrayed by, for example. Ahnre (1990) – collective as organised reproduction of patterns of interaction. In fact, this whole article could have been developed through a discussion of organisational or management theory, rather than schooling, psychotherapy and social work.
28. The opposite side of that coin, identification, which is a simple implication of the structure of participation (‘We’ are both ‘I’ and ‘You’), was highlighted but never explained in psychoanalysis; it is either completely eclipsed by ‘object relations’ or suddenly appears out of nowhere. It seems evident that the more all-encompassing the common object and thus the collective, the deeper the identification will be, the more precarious the tensions between power and co-operation, and, consequently, the greater the potential tendency to shift abruptly between total identification and total reduction of the other to an object, and between an extreme fixation to the particular and a complete substitutability.
29. A special prototypical instance here is the foster family, the very image of a ‘pseudo-family’ collective, appropriated by legal and professional regulations, and deprived of the lasting, (next-to-) last-instance responsibility that the state delegates to ordinary families, yet precisely enrolled to supply family love.
30. Even if my own collaboration with experimenting social workers in Copenhagen has only, of course, provided glimpses of such possibilities, I would maintain their relevance as ideal points...


