Identity after psychoanalysis

Stephen Frosh

Historical and intellectual development

If identity is one of the most hotly contested aspects of the post-structuralist and postmodern era, then psychoanalysis, which might be expected to have much to say about identity, is equally polymorphous and contentious. Both are clearly constructs – the former as a way of characterising the experience of drawing together the elements of a subject (of a life, one might say) to create an ‘essence’, a core of consciously recognisable selfhood that defines the situation of a subject as a certain kind of being. Psychoanalysis, too, is a construct, nowadays (actually, for a very long time) hard to consider as a ‘science’, but more thinkable as a narrative or discourse – a way of articulating the subject under the conditions of modernity, as a place in which the criss-crossing vectors of various forces (desire, wish, language, otherness) collide. Psychoanalysis deals with the materialisation of the subject into language, quintessentially in the consulting room where patient meets analyst, but also theoretically, as a structure within which the subject is interrogated and interpreted. As such, it should have much to say about identity, because in its own way it confers identity onto the subject. That is, people come to know themselves largely through psychoanalysis, which provides key notions used to make sense of the experience of being subjects. What is ‘identity’ here? Something that has to do with how we cope with having an unconscious life that we can be at variance with (so that disturbances of identity are possible), having a private internal arena that others do not necessarily know (hiding one’s identity), having a capacity for narcissistic masquerade, lying to oneself, being mis-recognised, losing any sense of one’s boundaries when, for example one is in a crowd. Without psychoanalytic concepts it would be significantly harder to think each of these things, to discuss how one’s identity is under attack, or how one’s sense of belonging can emerge, or what it might mean to say that one is in search of one’s self, trying to find an identity that makes sense.

Yet, there is rather little, at least in classical psychoanalysis, that deals with the notion of ‘identity’ as commonly understood. As noted elsewhere (Frosh 2010), Freud himself seems only once to have used the term in the social psychological sense of belonging to something that gives rootedness to one’s life, and this in a distinctly personal comment. In a letter written on the occasion of his seventieth birthday to the Vienna Bnai Brith, the Jewish ‘lodge’ which had
sheltered him when he felt rejected by the medical society of Vienna in the late 1890s, Freud tries to give an account of what had drawn him to this organisation, of what it was that had made him feel at home amongst his fellow Jews. Rejecting the possibility that it might have anything to do with religious or Zionist belief, he comments:

But plenty of other things remained over to make the attraction of Jewry and Jews irresistible – many obscure emotional forces, which were the more powerful the less they could be expressed in words, as well as a clear consciousness of inner identity, the safe privacy of a common mental construction.

(Freud 1926: 273–4)

The ‘safe privacy of a common mental construction’ is a nice phrase when linked to the notion of ‘inner’ identity, because it connects this ‘internal’ world with the external one, with the positioning of the subject in a social nexus with others with whom he or she might identify. Freud is claiming that there is something automatic, something received, familiar and ‘safe’, in his contact with other Jews, and that this derives from a common ‘mental construction’, a way of thinking, a cognitive or unconscious framework, which allows immediate understanding of each other to come about. The bond is not that of shared belief (neither Judaism nor Zionism), but of a commonality of mental structure that allows things to be easily understood, that signifies familiarity and belonging. Erik Erikson, in his most important paper on identity, reads this quotation as evidence that identity is necessarily tied up with the social environment, that ‘It is the identity of something in the individual’s core with an essential aspect of a group’s inner coherence which is under consideration here’ (1956: 57). Certainly this is the gist of Freud’s comment: in his ‘core’ he is aligned with his social group, the Jews (and misaligned with the rest of his society, it seems). But this does not seem adequately to capture the subtlety of what it might mean to have an ‘inner identity’, nor does it flag up its problems, so we must seek further than this.

What is distinctive about a psychoanalytic approach to identities is the main subject of this chapter, but the question of what it might mean to frame this as ‘identity after psychoanalysis’ is worth addressing at the start. ‘After’ suggests something has passed, as if psychoanalysis has come and gone and we are now in another of those ‘post-’ periods with which the contemporary social scene is saturated (post-structuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernism). In certain respects this is true. Psychoanalysis is well past its clinical heyday, suffering badly from criticisms concerning elitism and its failure to provide a convincing evidence base for its interventions; and if there is a continuing profligacy of psychoanalytic publications, it is not necessarily in the sphere either of the clinic or of direct studies of identity that its creativity can be observed. One could therefore say that we are ‘after’ psychoanalysis in the sense of a clinical discipline with recognisable autonomy and standing. However, there is also a continuing and variegated use of psychoanalysis, often drifting a long way from its origins into work ‘outside the clinic’ that makes some considerable assumptions about the transmissibility of concepts such as the unconscious, transference or repression into the social field. This work suggests psychoanalysis continues to be as source of intrigue and fertile speculation, drawn on by social scientists and others who are on the whole outsiders to the institutions of psychoanalysis, but somehow are seduced into it and see it as having something important to offer to their work. In this sense, we are ‘after’ psychoanalysis: psychoanalysis has happened, and whether or not it remains in force in the same way that it did half a century ago, it has changed the landscape irretrievably.

As noted above, however, the question of ‘after’ goes further than this acknowledgement of its effects on scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. This has to do with the issue
of ‘reflexivity’, which emphasises the effects on, and of, knowledge arising from the meaning-making activities of human subjects. At its most mundane this produces a requirement within the social sciences that the investments and actions of the researcher are included in the scrutiny of the research process (Frosh and Baraitser 2008). However, of potentially greater significance for discussions of the legacy of psychoanalysis on identities is the way in which human subjects utilise social knowledge as part of their lived experience of accounting for themselves – something the ‘discursive turn’ in the social sciences has revealed very compellingly (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987). In the case of psychoanalysis, which has saturated Western culture to a degree matched by very few other intellectual systems, ‘after’ means that people make use of routine modes of broadly psychoanalytic understanding when accounting for their own and others’ actions (Parker 1997). These include, notably, the motivated nature of human action, the importance of early childhood experiences and the existence of wishes and impulses of which individuals themselves may have little awareness. If one is thinking about ‘identity’ as a constructive process in which a sense of inner coherence is achieved through piecing together aspects of a subject’s experience, then this kind of utilisation of the meaning-making resources made available in a culture will be an activity of central importance. That is, the lens on identity offered by psychoanalysis is inescapable, even if particular subjects resist it: every identity judgement is made in its wake. The main idea here is that we cannot know ourselves; translated into the terms of identity, this means that our identities may be striven towards, but not ever fully achieved. Even a particular subject’s complacent refutation of this notion, her or his claim to fully inhabit a particular identity, has to happen in the light of what psychoanalysis suggests is the alternative. ‘I am what I am’ is, indeed, how the Bible conveys God’s distinctiveness from His human subjects (Exodus 3, verse 14), perhaps recognising what would be required for someone to adopt a truly secure identity position. It is not only psychoanalysis that has revealed this, of course (presumably the Bible was not written by a psychoanalyst), but psychoanalysis is one ‘hegemonic discourse’ feeding into people’s self-constructions, and even creating the identity positions that are available to them. The Romantic ideas of ‘child as father to the man’, of affective complexity and of motivational depth controlling the surface of behaviour, are drawn together in psychoanalysis and distributed so thoroughly within Western culture that no self-constructive process by its subjects can escape their influence.

Psychoanalysis has, as a matter of necessity as well as choice, transformed itself since its early days, in ways which again have considerable significance for identity studies. The key moves here have been from the drive model deployed by Freud to a now dominant relational model, though this move has been neither smooth nor total. As has been described in numerous writings (e.g. Frosh 1999), there are considerable variations to be found in the assumptions, emphases and formulations of differing approaches – all of which would call themselves psychoanalytic. Some of these reflect significant differences of theory and practice amongst adherents of different schools of thought. In fact, some critics of psychoanalysis have used this variability to pour scorn on psychoanalytic claims in general: ‘the existence of assorted orthodox, deviant, neo-, and post-Freudian schools that all regard themselves as psychoanalytic points unmistakably to an absence, within the movement at large, of any clear path connecting facts to suppositions’ (Crews 1995: 19). In itself, however, this variability is to be expected, given the accidents of choice of analysts’ own analysts, of the school of thought in which they become immersed through training or reading, and perhaps particularly of the individual cultural circumstances making one or other analytic position fashionable. Putting this in a positive light, the close relationship between the specific problematic experiences with which people are engaged at any one time, the kinds of patients who come to analysis, and the development of new psychoanalytic theories, can perhaps be seen as testimony to psychoanalysis’ capacity to remain open to the
pressures and alterations at work in the surrounding culture. Freud was dealing with a situation primarily of repression, in which sexual and aggressive urges were constrained until they could be held in check no longer, and then burst out destructively across Europe; his ‘depth model’ of the psyche reflects this in a highly evocative way. Post-Second World War analysts, on the other hand, have been dealing more with a culture in which the major difficulties – which can certainly be termed difficulties of identity – lie in the formation of rewarding relationships, which means that interest has been focused on the necessary psychic conditions that make this possible. Thus, clinical concern has moved largely away from hysteria, obsessive-compulsive neurosis and phobias understood as failures of repression, and more towards narcissism, borderline states and melancholy, which can be seen as disorders organised around relational disturbances and loss (Frosh 1991). This leads additionally to an interest in ‘otherness’ (e.g. Laplanche 1999; Butler 2005), which asks what it is about the so-called psychoanalytic ‘object’ that infects the subject through processes of identification and internalisation, shaping and constructing personal as well as social identities.

Because of the developing interest in relationality, the clarity of differentiation between the various schools of psychoanalysis seems to have become less apparent in recent years. In fact, as I have previously noted (Frosh 2006: 18), ‘To a considerable degree, all the mainstream psychoanalytic schools, including those in the U.S.A., have turned their attention to what is best termed “intersubjectivity” – the ways in which mental representations of relationships are formed and the effects these have on the development and actual social relationships of individuals.’ Intersubjectivist theory builds upon object relations theory with its emphasis on the relational capacities of the human subject, but spotlights the question of recognition, of appreciating, accepting and relating to others as ‘like subjects’ (Benjamin 1995). Its language of objects, of representations, of ‘inner worlds’ in which relational constructs dominate, and of ‘intersubjectivity’ to reference particularly the interweaving of the ‘subjective worlds of child and caregiver or of patient and analyst’ (Stolorow 2006: 250), is now central to the vocabulary of psychoanalysts of all persuasions. Stolorow comments (ibid.: 250), ‘Recognition of intersubjectivity does not entail adherence to or rejection of any specific psychodynamic theory. In fact, acceptance of the foundational significance of intersubjectivity enables therapists to employ the various psychodynamic concepts with greater discrimination and effectiveness.’ This might not actually be completely true, with the Lacanians coming in as an exception to this generalisation. Nevertheless, outside Lacanian thought, it is fairly hard to find any contemporary psychoanalyst who does not accord central significance to object relationships, even if they differ on many other aspects of theory or practice. Included in this is the notion that ‘bridging’ difference is key; that is, that the task is to find ways to link with others, to translate their needs and one’s own into something that can form the basis for relationships that can be mutually fulfilling. The self consequently can be seen to arise out of a process of recognising the intentionality and agency of the loved other and identifying with this. This idea emphasises people’s active agency in their lives, as well as directing theory and research towards the infant’s incipient self and in so doing communicating the significance and centrality of the appreciation of other people’s minds – an issue that has been taken up in much Anglo-American developmental psychoanalysis (Fonagy and Target 1996).

As in many other things, Lacanians are an exception to the relational trend. Although this is not the place to develop the Lacanian position in any detail, it is worth holding in mind their rigorous critique of object relational ideas. This is not because they deny the importance of social relationships, but rather because they are antagonistic to the idea that mature relationships are possible in any straightforward sense – or that knowledge of another, that is, intersubjectivity, is an achievable state of human affairs. For Lacanians, all interpersonal relationships, and
indeed the structure of the individual human subject as well, are penetrated by cultural and social forces with distorting and obscuring effects. It is therefore not possible to achieve unmediated knowledge of the other of a kind that could give rise to the types of resolved, reciprocal relationships postulated by object relations theorists and often taken as a loose yardstick of mental health. Moreover, Lacanians suggest that even in the intimate and intense encounter of the psychoanalyst with the patient, something interferes with the capacity of either protagonist to understand or recognise the other. Intersubjectivity even here is blocked by some other feature – the limits of language, the structure of authority, the impossibility of being fully at one with any other person.

Major claims and developments

This set of issues surrounding relationality, otherness and alienation reflect importantly on the psychoanalytic contribution to identity studies. Here, there are a number of key concepts at play. The first is simply that of the dynamic unconscious, perhaps the single idea that actually binds together psychoanalysts of all the different schools. The core notion is very well known (e.g. Frosh 2002) and probably does not require amplification here; it is hopefully sufficient to note its very radical nature. First, postulation of a dynamic unconscious that runs through the subject is also a claim about the impossibility of an identity based on an integrated self. In making behaviour comprehensible only through reference to a site other than consciousness, a site which is hidden yet still ‘internal’ to the person, Freud argues that behind the experience that we may have of ourselves as coherent psychological beings there exists a basic split in the psyche. We may think we choose what to say, select what to do (the ‘we’ here being our conscious, articulated selves), but in fact our choices are constrained and determined by forces which lie outside of conscious control or easy access. Second, Freud’s description of the unconscious is an explanatory account, claiming to tell us what causes our behaviour and how and why these causes become hidden. Unconscious wishes are disturbing, so they are kept repressed; this means that they continue to operate, but are not controlled (or at least are not fully controlled) by the ego. Psychoanalysis thus challenges the view that the distinguishing mark of humanity is reason and rationality, arguing instead that the human ‘essence’ lies in unacceptable and hence repressed impulses towards sexuality and aggression. As Freud himself noted, this represents an attack on the narcissism of the individual because it displaces each one of us from the centre of our own agency, proving ‘to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind’ (Freud 1917: 285). Psychoanalysis insists on there being always something else speaking in the place of the subject, which means that there may be a fantasy of coherent identity, but it is undermined, dispersed, even mocked by the relentless pressure that comes from unconscious life. It is as if the human subject is plugged into something else that gives it its energy ‘from outside’, yet presents the fiction that this comes from within. Identity thus becomes an artifice, giving leverage to those who are interested in how it is developed, and what alternative truths it might hide.

Within this general framework of disruption of claims for integrated identities, psychoanalysis might crudely be thought of as offering three general strands of commentary on the construct of identity, loosely implicit in different psychoanalytic models. These are:

- ego identity as mastery (ego psychology);
- identity as relational accomplishment (object relations, Kleinian and intersubjectivist theory);
- identity deconstruction (Lacanian theory).
Each of these can only be dealt with briefly here, but it is worth teasing out some of the most significant claims that they make.

**Ego identity as mastery**

Ego psychology has been under strong criticism in the last twenty years or so, and has as a consequence lost its position of unquestioned dominance in the American psychoanalytic world, and has had its influence reduced elsewhere (Frosh 1999). In Britain, major adherents of Anna Freud’s approach have become enamoured of attachment theory, cognitive extensions of psychoanalysis through ‘mentality’, and neuropsychology (e.g. Fonagy and Target 2007; Allen and Fonagy 2006). The classical focus on drives and the analysis of the ego can be seen at work in a diffuse way in this. For example, mentalisation, which concerns the ability to imagine others’ mental and emotional states, is a concept that includes unconscious levels of functioning but focuses more strongly on capacities that can be made conscious and are more like cognitions than phantasy states. As implied above, the shift to a more relational stance in psychoanalysis has affected ego psychology very greatly in the USA, where the influence of self psychology and the growth of the relational and intersubjectivist movement has been very marked. This has also brought about a slight rapprochement between object relational and Anna Freudian analysts in the UK.

Despite this watering down of ego psychological orthodoxies, there remain some important issues in relation to identities. The first concerns the emphasis on closely observed development throughout the span of childhood, not just in early infancy. For example, Anna Freud’s own tendency to think of child development in terms of ‘basic interactions between id and ego’ (1966: 59) produced the concept of developmental lines: sequences in which particular aspects of personality gradually unfold, always from a position of relative dominance by the id to relative control by the ego. Thus, even though numerous different developmental lines can be described (for instance, from infantile sucking to organised eating, from wetting and soiling to bladder control and bowel control, or from erotic play to work), they all follow the same path: ‘In every instance they trace the child’s gradual outgrowing of dependent, irrational, id- and object-determined attitudes to an increasing mastery of his internal and external world’ (ibid.: 60). The notion of developmental lines has proved to be an important addition to the psychoanalytic vocabulary. Descriptively, its assumption of continuities in development moves the theory away from the traditional Freudian concentration on fixations and regressions – that is, it is not so reliant on the idea that there is an undiluted retention of the past in everything that happens throughout life. Regressions do occur; in fact, they are predictable consequences of stress. However, the thrust of development is cumulative: at every point, the child is shifting along a graduated course, each step produced by past steps and by the current state of the drives and the environment. This approach has considerable practical utility; for instance, making it possible to offer guidance on particular children’s developmental problems. It also presents a fuller psychological account of development than is possible from the pathology- and drive-oriented approach of Freud himself. In relation to identity formation, it suggests the gradual coming together of cognitive and social competencies attuned to unconscious drives and their implication in networks of social relationship. It thus has something to say both to studies of personal identity and to those which focus on identity as a phenomenon of group adaptation.

It is in the ego psychological work of Erik Erikson that the most extensive psychoanalytic discussion of identity can be found. This work has been much criticised both from within psychoanalysis, where it has often been regarded as more social-psychological than properly psychoanalytic (e.g. Jacobson 1964), and as normative in its implications that somehow each
subject ‘must’ adapt to the surrounding culture (Frosh 1999). There is something to be said for both these criticisms, which flow from the way in which the developmental history that Erikson produces is one firmly centred on the ego: how the individual struggles with the issues presented at each stage of the life cycle and makes sense out of experience. That said, however, there is much that is of interest in the Eriksonian account, and it looks as though a slight revaluation of his work has been going on in both psychoanalytic and psychosocial circles (e.g. Wallerstein 1998). As described elsewhere (Frosh 2010), Erikson’s (1956) discussion of ‘ego-identity’ is particularly interesting as an attempt to account for identity in its various registers: as a conscious state of personal self-naming; as a relationship to the social environment; and as an unconscious process of striving. He writes: ‘At one time . . . it will appear to refer to a conscious sense of individual identity; at another to an unconscious striving for a continuity of personal character; and, finally, as a maintenance of an inner solidarity with a group’s ideals and identity’ (ibid.: 57). It is also a process that is never completed, but instead comes to the fore at all those moments where the individual (developmental) needs of the subject interface with the culture in which she or he lives; at those moments, what matters is both that the individual is responsive to the culture and that the culture recognises the individual for what she or he truly can become.

From a genetic point of view, the process of identity formation emerges as an evolving configuration – a configuration which is gradually established by successive ego syntheses and resyntheses throughout childhood; it is a configuration gradually integrating constitutional givens, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favored capacities, significant identifications, effective defences, successful sublimations, and consistent roles.

(iband.: 71)

In Erikson’s formulation, cultural considerations, particularly as revealed in differing child-rearing techniques, influence the manner in which common problems such as autonomy and separation or the generative demands of adulthood are coped with, with the crucial issue being the extent to which each individual can absorb the available cultural values and internalise them to produce a set of ego functions that are at one with the surrounding society. Mental health is basically a product of successful adaptation to culture or, rather, a successful use of cultural resources to enable integration of the ego as a centre of a coherent personal identity.

Erikson’s focus on process across the lifespan has proved to be a productive one for social psychological researchers; and if its limitation lies with the assumption of a fundamentally benevolent environment which can make identity flower, it is not naïve. Indeed, one might suggest that implicit in it is a critique of totalitarian and other societies which are at odds with the identity needs of their subjects. That is, it poses a question about failures of identity-formation that may not be reducible to individual pathologies of adjustment. This might also connect with an element of ego psychology that is only slowly being reclaimed from the over-generalised complaint about its conformist characteristics. It is true that the focus on the ego leads to an over-reliance on rationality and hence a neglect of what might be thought of as the true core of psychoanalysis – its appreciation of the way in which irrationality operates at the heart of the human subject. However, the impulse to work in this way, to turn one’s back on the irrational, arose in part from the particular conditions of post-Second World War society, with its appreciation of the enormous costs of the outburst of irrationality represented by Nazism. The aspiration to articulate a model based on the mutual support of a balanced identity with a reasonable and tolerant society was not necessarily totally misguided, even if it also produced a blindness towards ways in which such liberalism could itself be mis-used.
The point here is that the impulse to mastery to be found in ego psychology speaks quite powerfully to a familiar aspect of identity: that it is a way of drawing together heterogeneous forces and impulses in the subject and her or his environment, and making of them some kind of integrated, rational whole. This has benefits, but it also has drawbacks; specifically, it allows one to conceptualise identity as a process of overcoming of splits and deficiencies, but it also produces a model of covering-over of antagonism which may miss the more profound insight psychoanalysis offers, which is that splits and contradictions are of the very essence of subjecthood.

Identity as relational accomplishment

The second broad group of psychoanalytic positions can be gathered together in what is here termed the ‘relational’ school of thought. This is a very large grouping with some significant differences between sub-groups – for example, some of the American ‘intersubjectivists’ are highly critical of Kleinian approaches to clinical work. Thus, Benjamin (2004: 35), echoing a long tradition of British debates between Kleinians and their more environmentally oriented object relations colleagues, objects to what she sees as the Kleinian analysts’ refusal to become relationally involved with the patient, and their insistence ‘that the patient is ultimately helped only by understanding rather than by being understood’. What she is referencing here is a question about how ‘real’ the analyst can be to the patient, how active a presence in the treatment. Nevertheless, everyone in this group, from object relations theorists and Kleinians in Britain, through to the interpersonal and intersubjectivist analysts in the United States, is united by adherence to a model postulating that relationality is the primary concern of psychoanalysis, and also the major motivational and explanatory concept to be used both in clinical work and in broader theorising involving psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis from this perspective involves a focus on the quality of the contact between analyst and patient as a way of addressing unconscious features of the patient’s relational practices. How such unconscious features are theorised and exactly how psychoanalysis addresses them varies considerably. For example, Kleinians focus on ‘inner world’ features of the patient, understood to be built up out of a complex mixture of psychological drives and relationships with internal ‘objects’ (crudely, representations of people or parts of people). For them, the way in which unconscious phantasies attached to objects operate within the patient is demonstrated through transference-countertransference exchanges in therapy, and the analyst’s task is to utilise these exchanges to help the patient recognise and work through the conflicts produced by these phantasies (Frosh 1999). In the context of identity, the Kleinian perspective is one in which the early or ‘primitive’ tendency towards fragmentary, split modes of relating are gradually replaced by more integrated ego-object relationships as a consequence of the internalisation of relatively benign environmental (that is, relational) experiences. So, ‘paranoid-schizoid’ functioning, which is characteristic both of early infancy and of regressed states of mind throughout life, has the subject unable to manage her or his destructive and loving impulses together, but rather placed in a phenomenological state in which these are felt to be bearing down on the ego from outside, as a hostile (paranoid) world that is more-or-less ameliorated by the presence of caring objects (mother or analyst). The fragmentation of identity is a way of defending it against being ruined by the envious, deathly elements in the mind’s own structure; optimal development involves a gradual lessening of the force of these negative elements as they become mitigated by contrary loving impulses and gratifying experiences. In the subsequent ‘depressive’ position, the subject is more capable of tolerating ambivalence both in the drives and in the object. Whilst this is never a final process (the fissiparous tendency remains throughout life, activated when the subject is under stress or
in boundary-disturbing situations such as masses or large groups (e.g. Frosh 2008), it means that identity is forged as a process of gradual working through of destructiveness and of splitting to produce a more integrated being, capable not only of conscious reflection on itself but also of the lived experience of being ‘together’, with relationships to itself and to others characterised by balance and depth.

For other analysts of the British object relations school (e.g. Casement 2002) and the American intersubjectivists (Benjamin 2004, 2009), there is relatively more interest in the ‘reality’ of the relationship between subjects, including patients and analysts. What is of interest here is that whereas for Kleinians paranoid-schizoid functioning is a ubiquitous and necessary state of development that is overcome only partially and at the expense of a great deal of intersubjective work, for traditional object relations theorists the early ego is a whole – at least potentially – and is brought into the disrepair of a psychic split as a result of a kind of environmental failure. The classic case here is that of Winnicott, for whom destructiveness takes the form initially of an ‘aggression’ that is ‘almost synonymous with activity’ (1960: 204). In this account, aggression and eroticism are two components of an initially unified ‘life force’ which splits in early development before, all being well, becoming the basis of an integrated or ‘fused’ self. The aggressive component has the important function of allowing the infant to establish its opposition to – or difference from – the external world, thus helping to establish the boundaries of the self. As Phillips (1988: 110) notes, Winnicott is much more interested in this differentiating facility of aggression than he is in the traditional Freudian concern of erotic life:

There is in Winnicott’s account of the early pre-fused era a distrust of the erotic and a curiously idealised nostalgia for the unfused ruthlessly aggressive component. . . . Vitality and the sense of being really alive are clearly bound up for him with the aggressive component.

Thus, aggression has in many respects lost its destructive elements in Winnicott’s account, reflecting the object relations tendency to see the developmental process as one of active striving with external objects in the service of an integrating relational urge. There is also a very strong presentation here of the central role of the subject’s surrounding environment in recognising her or his psychic needs. This is achieved through a peculiar process of ‘mirroring’, in which the subject’s uncertain and seemingly fragmentary experiences become bound together in the gaze of the other, who lends it the meaning that it actually has – in other words, who translates it from something pressing and potentially disturbing to something that has integrity and makes psychic sense. This idea permeates much of Winnicott’s thought, and in different ways is central to his continuing influence. For example, Winnicott (1960) presents a notion of a ‘true self’ as a subject’s in-built potential for growth that will naturally unfold under the right circumstances, and that can be damaged or hidden in a hostile environment. The mother’s capacity to recognise and reflect the infant’s needs allows them to be translated into something safe and comprehensible, and provides the necessary scaffolding for the self to develop as secure, integrated and creative. Spontaneity, the capacity to be alone or to be in states of ‘disunity’ out of which new modes of experience can emerge, follows from this. Denial of this recognition, however, means that the infant is unable to organise her or his experience and leads to anxiety about total disintegration. This results in a defensive hiding away of the child’s spontaneous desires in the form of a secret true self, which avoids expression because of the danger that it will be destroyed by the inadequate environment. To enable transactions with reality, a conformist and inauthentic ‘false self’ is formed, split off from the true self and protecting its integrity by adapting itself to the demands of the other (the depressed mother, for example) and consequently lacking in depth and autonomy.
The structure of this argument is one in which a naturally developing process – the emergence of a true self and an integrated identity – is watered by the careful, synchronising care of another who can recognise the subject’s implicitly expressed essence, and accept it. Identity-formation thus becomes the realisation of an authentic state of being, founded in a secure self that has the capacity to recognise its own needs and the confidence to express them with an assurance that they will be met. Interruptions to this process result in distortions of selfhood characterised particularly by a thinness of identity in which the subject is always trying to second-guess what is required of it, to adapt to a world that never seems quite right. This is a powerful portrayal of a certain kind of identity crisis symptomatic of an alienating society, in which the needs of the subject are systematically distorted and left unmet, and it also offers a seductive set of images to describe the needs of the healthy, autonomous subject. However, it also perhaps warrants criticism as an idealisation, implying that each subject has an inbuilt tendency towards wholeness and integrity, and that it is possible for this to be recognised under conditions of perfect care. What this might miss is the extent to which all ‘translations’ are provisional and approximate, that is, in naming others’ needs to them, one might be providing them with a code which makes those needs manageable and meaningful; but the ‘name’ is still coming from without, from the place of the other, and not from the subjects themselves. This basic point, which argues that mirroring is not a matter of reflecting what is ‘really there’ more or less accurately, but instead is a process of colonisation, in which the subject becomes infiltrated, or structured, by and through something that lies outside it, is a powerful insight of several other psychoanalytic theorists, including (in different ways) Jean Laplanche (1999), who emphasises the ‘untranslatability’ of many of the messages received from the mother in early life, their ‘enigmatic’ nature, and Jacques Lacan. In relation to identity, this raises the question of whether the Winnicottian idealisation may be a smokescreen obscuring a darker realisation – that the subject can never be known – and that identity is consequently an attempt to pull together things using the ‘bric-à-brac of its props department’ (Lacan 1954–5: 155) as a defence against falling apart.

Jessica Benjamin’s take on intersubjectivity is an especially significant contemporary variant of the general approach described here. For Benjamin, the intersubjective stance is a specific move within the general domain of relational theorising, one which holds onto a position in which the other is related to but is not appropriated. It is a stance that understands the appeal of omnipotence (in knowing the other we come to colonise her or him) but works against it. The manner in which omnipotence is contested is through a process of recognition that acknowledges the other as a source of subjectivity and gives rise to what Benjamin (1998) calls a ‘subject–subject’ psychology. This stance echoes the ‘I–thou’ relationship described by Martin Buber (1959), a mode of reciprocity in which there is engagement with the other as a full being, in contrast to the more instrumental ‘I–it’ relationship in which the other is a means to an end. It is also closely connected to the kind of Winnicottian mirroring described above, but with the difference that ‘subject–subject’ recognition is built out of an understanding of the other’s continuing otherness, maintaining the subjecthood of both participants in the exchange who are thus autonomous and yet also exist in relation to one another. In ‘the intersubjective conception of recognition’, writes Benjamin (1998: 29), ‘two active subjects may exchange, may alternate in expressing and receiving, cocreating a mutuality that allows for and presumes separateness’. Benjamin’s approach seeks a balance between theories that emphasise difference and those visions of subjectivity that implicitly require disappearance in or of the other, either through self-effacement (as in many theories of mothering), or through instrumental use of the other (the main thrust of rationality). Recognition staves off the absorption of self into the other just as it prevents the other being colonised by the self; it is, in this sense, a process in which what is found in the other is also cherished specifically for its capacity to be different, and its otherness.
In her analysis of the implications of Benjamin’s theory for mothering, Baraitser (2009) describes how Benjamin’s account draws on Winnicott’s (1969) ideas about a developmental phase that involves ‘object use’. Winnicott’s argument is that what he calls the use of an object is made possible through seeing that the (paradigmatically, maternal) object survives unconscious destruction. Assuming that the infant, through frustration and also the expression of ‘natural’ aggression, attacks the object, Winnicott claims that the infant’s perception of the existence of a real external other is enhanced so long as the mother survives and is non-retaliatory in her response. That is, what the infant is supposed to discover is that the mother is not subject to the infant’s ‘internal’ experience of having destroyed her, and hence is an object with more than merely imaginary existence. Benjamin builds on this idea by suggesting that recognition depends on processes of destruction in the form of ‘negation’ which test the reality of the other by establishing the degree to which it is resilient and hence has a subjective trajectory of its own. Baraitser (2009: 30) comments: ‘In Benjamin’s view there is an ongoing and endless cycle of the establishment of mutual recognition followed by its negation, constituting a never-ending tension between complementarity and mutuality, between relating to the other as object or like subject.’ This might mark up one of the deficiencies of relational theory in the context of the revelations of psychoanalysis about the passionate feelings so often associated which destructive urges. It sometimes seems as if the humanistic component of relational work trumps its analytic rigour; even the notion of ‘destruction’ lacks the passion of, for example, the Kleinian concept of envy, with its connotations of greed and murderous violence. Judith Butler comments on this:

Although Benjamin clearly makes the point that recognition risks falling into destruction, it seems to me that she still holds out for an ideal of recognition in which destruction is an occasional and lamentable occurrence, one that is reversed and overcome in the therapeutic situation and that does not turn out to constitute recognition essentially.

(2000: 273)

This translation of destruction as a fall from grace that can be overcome by a reparative relationship is perhaps part of the legacy of an object relations position which assumes the existence of an integrated psyche at birth that then becomes split because of frustration and loss (Frosh 1999). In contrast, the Kleinian view is that destructiveness is a basic force that always has to be contended with and can never be fully resolved. Without being a Kleinian, Butler picks up this issue to wonder about the authenticity of an approach that assumes destructiveness can be overcome. Addressing Benjamin’s use of negation, she asks:

And if negation is destruction that is survived, of what does survival consist? Certainly, the formulation implies that destruction is somehow overcome, even overcome once and for all. But is this ever really possible – for humans, that is? And would we trust those who claim to have overcome destructiveness for the harmonious dyad once and for all? I, for one, would be wary.

(Butler 2000: 285)

This criticism, which in effect charges Benjamin with idealising human relationships, is akin to the one outlined above. It suggests that in their keenness to instate the intense, authentic encounter at the core of psychoanalysis, relational theorists might be missing the, at times, dispiriting way in which relationships are mediated experiences, refracted through a lens that always ‘distorts’ them, that always blocks absolute recognition. If this is so, then identity too is
constructed from reflections in a dim glass, not quite true, not quite in tune, disturbed by something enigmatic that can never fully be translated.

Identity deconstruction

The criticism developed above of the relational strand in psychoanalysis is closely linked with thinking produced outside psychoanalysis in post-structuralism and postmodernism, and within it in the wake of the Lacanian school. The complex and evocative stance of Lacan on the ego and what he terms the ‘Imaginary’ has been described in detail elsewhere (Frosh 2006, 2010), where what is drawn out is the difference between the Lacanian theorisation of ‘mirroring’ and the Winnicottian and intersubjectivist versions. In brief, whereas Winnicott proposes that the infantile self is secured through experiencing accurate mirroring of its true needs, in a kind of affective ‘naming’ of its inner reality that recognises it and allows it to self-organise and grow, Lacanians dispute the authenticity of this process. ‘In’ the mirror, the subject sees not its ‘real’ self, but an image of what it would wish to be. This comes from outside; the mirror/other/mother cannot know the ‘reality’ of the subject because that reality does not exist in a knowable form; moreover, all knowledge is in any case mediated by the materiality of both language and the unconscious. Recognition is always ‘mis-recognition’. In the famous ‘mirror stage’ paper, Lacan writes:

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as a Gestalt, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him.

(1949: 2)

Unpacking this, what is being described is a process whereby the subject ‘anticipates’ something that does not yet exist, seeing it in a ‘mirage’ – that is, formulating a fantasy of future deliverance. It is a ‘Gestalt’, a whole, but it is ‘exterior’ rather than interior, something which delivers identity as ‘constituent’, as ready-made. Most importantly, it is ‘fixed’, obviously distorted (contrasting size and inverted symmetry), but relieving the subject of the stress that is placed upon it by its own ‘turbulent’ movement. Perhaps here can be seen not only how the Lacanians draw attention to the exteriority of identity, but also to the stasis it produces: the subject is always in motion, riven by drives that do not organise themselves into a satisfying whole; identity, in this model, is one way of alleviating this, but it does not speak its truth.

The emphasis on division produced by the mediation or insertion of ‘external’ structures is a major thrust of Lacanian thought. As discussed in the other sources referenced above, this appears both in the notion of the Imaginary and in that of the Symbolic, the Lacanian reworking of the Oedipus complex as a principle in which the unconscious is formed out of the split induced by confrontation with the law of culture. In relation to identity, the Imaginary is a stage or way of relating that is dominated by narcissism, the fantasy being that completeness is possible and that the other can become absorbed into the ego to make a whole. The search for a totally satisfying identity, just like the search for any other full ‘answer’ to the questions of existence, is an Imaginary search, constituted through a wish that the internal and external blocks and splits would go away. The theory of the Symbolic emphasises that the positioning of the subject with respect to language requires an encounter with otherness in a way that fractures the omnipotence of this mirrored ‘I’ in the Imaginary, just as the father blocks the incestuous
relation of mother and son in classical theory. Once the ‘accession’ to the Symbolic occurs, there is no way back: the division it produces, coded most notably in sexuality, results in a region of the left-out and unsymbolisable (the Real, in Lacanian terminology) that is always present just out of sight, disrupting the hope of a settled existence in which everything is static, integrated and known – but also keeping alive the hope that something might happen.

If the emphasis on ‘structuration’ in Lacanian theory is highly distinctive and also damaging for representations of identity as indicating some kind of personal truth, it also blocks the adaptational attitude that sees identity as social belonging. Or, rather, it makes problematic the assumption that an alignment of the subject with ‘society’ is possible in ways that are not intrinsically alienating – whatever the nature of that society might be. The Symbolic always interferes with integrity and autonomy; it cannot be otherwise. Some of the force of this can be seen in the Lacanian emphasis on lack, which has been taken up not only in clinical work, but also in the application of psychoanalysis to politics. As noted already, the division between the registers of Imaginary, Symbolic and Real classifies a discrepancy between what is imagined to be true (the holistic fantasy of an ego that can function autonomously and with integrity, of a subject that can fully know the truth); what can be symbolised and consequently manipulated, investigated and analysed (so psychoanalysis itself operates in the domain of the Symbolic); and what can never be known, or can be known only at the edges or by its sudden appearance in moments of breakthrough, never fully symbolisable, always at work but never quite there. These elements of the Lacanian scheme frame a set of ‘lacks’ contributing in different ways to the subject as a social and political entity. One is the theorisation of the subject as riven with splits; a second portrays the subject as intrinsically lacking in the sense of being cut off from the source of power, which always lies outside it as an Other that gives form and force to the subject’s being. Both these types of lack are central to the Lacanian account of how the human subject is constituted. Indeed, the second type, which is essentially a description of how the Symbolic works, is vital to Lacanian ideas on sexual difference and on the construction of the subject in language. It stresses that the subject is not a centre to itself, but rather, in line with Freudian theory, is displaced and inhabited by something outside it. The subject is always constructed according to the desire of the Other, always answerable to a ‘big Other’ that is over and beyond itself and can perhaps be thought of as ‘society’ (amongst other things).

A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. In the intervals of the discourse of the Other, there emerges in the experience of the child something . . . namely, He is saying this to me, but what does he want? The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject . . . in the lacks of the discourse of the Other, and all the child’s whys reveal not so much an avidity for the reason of things, as a testing of the adult, a Why are you telling me this? ever-resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult’s desire.

(Lacan 1973: 214)

Hook draws out the political implications of this position, commenting that:

Once we realise that the linked questions of desire (‘What do I want?’) and social location (‘What makes sense of the position I occupy in society?’) are really unanswerable – because they always rebound in the form of another question – then we start to understand the futility of such recourse to the Other, at least within the realm of the signifier, and the alienation of the subject that inevitably results.

(2008: 279)
The interesting point here is that the Other is conceptualised not as a solid structure of power that acts over and against the subject, but as lacking, as having a desire of its own, which the subject is also immersed in. If the Other is lacking (if ‘it needs me’), then the subject is faced with the question of what it is in the subject that is desired, and hence of what kind of lack in the Other can be filled by the (also lacking) subject. This is linked to the Lacanian notion of the object a as the object cause of desire – the thing in the other that provokes the desire of the subject, that moves it into action.

Identity then arises in this complex array of interlinked abstractions surrounding lack: the mutual construction of lacking subjectivities produces a play of investments that circulate between subject and Other and operate in the social field. This perspective is not confined to the Lacanians. For example, the theory of otherness propounded by Jean Laplanche (1999) has become increasingly significant in contemporary psychoanalytic and social thought; one indication of this is that it forms a core thread in Butler’s (2005) examination of ethical relationality. Laplanche’s ideas here are posited as an alternative basis for an understanding of identity-politics that conceptualises the subject as split and socially riven from the start. The extrinsic formulation of the subject is expressed in the theory of enigmatic signifiers, untranslatable messages from the adult which become the foundation for the infant’s unconscious life and which are the residue of the process of unconscious seduction passed on through generations from parent to child. This adds a strand of ‘alienness’ at the core of subjecthood: central to each subject is an unconscious dimension, as psychoanalysis always asserts, but this unconscious does not ‘belong’ to the ‘person’, but rather arises from an act of mis-communication, a mode of unwitting seduction, in which the parental desire excites the child, without being understood.

So we have the reality of the message and the irreducibility of the fact of communication. What psychoanalysis adds is a fact of its experience, namely that this message is frequently compromised, that it both fails and succeeds at one and the same time. It is opaque to its recipient and its transmitter alike.

(Laplanche 1999: 169)

It is no longer a matter of intention; what comes from the other to the subject is something unknown to both, yet is intense in its effect (and affect). The infant is invaded by an unconscious message, its private spaces inflicted with the sense of ‘something else’, something excessive and too strong, always hinting at its presence without ever letting itself be fully known. The adult, too, holds an alien message inside: there is something no one can ever properly know. If this model has force, it is very difficult to imagine what a personal, authentic presocial space can be; however ‘deep’ we go, we find the other already there. In contrast to the object relational stance, the split human subject ‘hidden’ behind the ego (which is really a Lacanian formulation, but has influenced a generation of French analysts), is brought into being by the other. It is not excisable from the other and hence is ‘always-already’ social. Identity struggle is consequently never going to be a matter of striving for recognition of what one authentically ‘is’; it is rather a matter of producing a subject in line with certain aspired-for values, creating a subject with force in the world. Specifically, recognition of the subject as a being with rights, for instance as ‘black’ or ‘gay’, is not a matter of putting a name to a mode of authenticity that is pre-given, but rather of creating the conditions under which discursively constructed possibilities are given shape and allotted agentic power. Psychoanalysis of this kind would not by any means preclude identity struggle; but it also places under scrutiny the notion of ‘identity’ itself as something constructed rather than basic, something importantly flawed rather than assumed to be ideally whole.
Challenges and future developments

This chapter has emphasised the fecundity of psychoanalysis in disturbing the parameters of identity studies, in particular querying assumptions of psychic and hence identity integrity. There are many remaining issues, which concern not only differences within the psychoanalytic field over questions of agency, subjection, structuration and otherness, but also whether psychoanalysis can ever speak convincingly of the inter-relation between identity as ‘social belonging’ and as ‘personal being’ – a particular case of the general problem of whether psychoanalysis is always psychologically reductionist. In this regard, by way of a kind of evaluative conclusion, it is perhaps interesting to see how some psychoanalytic thinking has come to permeate theoretical work on identities even when the position taken up by the theorist is not initially rooted in psychoanalysis. For example, Judith Butler’s (1990) relatively early work on gendered and sexed identities had an enormous impact because of its vivacious presentation of the performativity of gendered identity, an approach which on the face of it was not well attuned to psychoanalysis. In later work, however, she has consistently drawn on different modes of psychoanalysis to elaborate an account of the ‘melancholy’ aspects of gender (Butler 1997), culminating in her masterly application of Laplanachian theory to present the thinking on ethical relationality mentioned earlier (Butler 2005). In another major area of identity studies, that of diasporic identities, some similar features can be observed. For many of the most important scholars on diaspora (e.g. Hall 1990), much of the analytic thrust of diaspora studies is given by explorations of art works of various kinds, including music, writing, performance and installations as well as visual arts. The reason for this is that for many such writers, the ‘voice’ of diaspora has often struggled to be heard in academic work, and instead is expressed through modes of representation that trigger affective rather than ‘intellectual’ responses. Despite harbouring doubts about the applicability of psychoanalysis to this area, Couze Venn nevertheless develops a productive account of the relationship between psychoanalytic thinking and the social discourses more characteristic of diaspora studies, as follows:

[E]xpressive or creative media such as novels, painting, film and so on are themselves the means or vehicles whereby what cannot be presented in the form of critiques or sociological data can be intimated or presented at the affective and emotional levels. The importance from the point of view of transformation in subjectivity and identity is in emphasising the aesthetic-affective labour which is necessary for this to happen, in the form of an anamnesis, that is, a process of working through that produces a rememorisation . . . and in the form of self-reflection working at the thresholds between unconscious psychic economy and conscious activity, individual identity and collective identity, the process of individualisation and the trans-subjective domain.

(2009: 15)

What might be meant by this kind of ‘aesthetic-affective labour’ and how can psychoanalysis contribute to its promotion as well as its comprehension? Venn himself draws on the work of a psychoanalyst who is also an artist, Bracha Ettinger (2006), whose theory of the ‘matrixial’ as a kind of intrauterine-originated connective network offers a way of thinking about subjectivity and identity that immerses them in a pattern of connectivity and encounter. The emphasis here is on what is shared, what links across subjects, and it is characteristic of a mode of psychoanalytic reasoning that has moved away from the classical ‘closed’ system of mainstream Freudianism and also from its focus on ‘depth’, and towards issues of relationality and intersubjectivity. What is additionally specific to psychoanalysis is the constitution of affectivity as that which ‘fuels’
subjectivity, that is, in this context, as a mode of investment which promotes the materialisation of identity as linked to specific practices of belonging and becoming. ‘Affective labour’ does not have to be theorised psychoanalytically: the Deleuzian turn is a major example of an alternative tendency in the social sciences. However, the psychoanalytic apparatus allows it to be conceptualised as a process in which the different specific forces acting in and on the subject—drives, bodily experiences, social positions, ideologies, practices of oppression and emancipation, phantasies and fears—can be brought into contact with one another as the framework for an understanding that is genuinely ‘dynamic’, in the sense of being ‘on the move’. Venn refers to ‘a process of working through that produces a rememorisation’; these terms (‘working through’, ‘rememorisation’) are saturated with psychoanalytic resonances. Indeed, one might argue that psychoanalysis makes such ideas thinkable.

In relation to the impact of this work on psychoanalysis itself, it is clear that the emergence of theories stressing migrancy, unsettledness, fluidity and networks shifts attention away from drive models and towards relational approaches. However, there is nothing cosy in this. If psychoanalysis allows space for such moves, through its object relations and more recent intersubjectivist traditions, it also maintains an investment in fields of force that interrogate and disrupt, that puncture even the most carefully maintained relational networks. Many theorists emphasise the reimagining of identity that is constantly demanded in the light of contemporary subjectivities. In so doing they advance a critique of theories—including psychoanalysis—that seem to neglect the social and historical forces operating on the subject, and also to focus only on loss and lack rather than on the transformative fullness of subjecthood. Psychoanalysis has to respond to this if it is to continue to contribute to identity studies, but it also has something additional in its armoury. This is linked to its understanding of what Lacan (1959–60: 139) calls ‘extimacy’, which refers to the problematisation of the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘out’ and the way the ‘centre of the subject is outside; the subject is ex-centric’ (Evans 1996: 59). But more than this, it also resides in psychoanalysis’ fascination with what is disruptive and uncertain, so that disturbance in the stability of what is taken to be identity is at the core of its concerns. Psychoanalysis certainly must develop its awareness of how the positioning of the subject in historical and contingent networks of relations produces identities of various kinds, fluid and partial in their nature. If it can do this, it can then offer back to the field its own peculiar expertise: that of a discipline that knows about unsettledness, that has marginality and diaspora as part of its own source (in the historical development of psychoanalysis out of certain Jewish diasporic experiences—see Frosh 2005), and that is always reminding its acolytes that nothing can be taken for granted, that no self-definition or affective state is ever quite what it seems.

Note


References


