

On the formation of identity: Fact and fictions

Book review

Walkerdine V (1990) *Schoolgirl fictions*. London: Verso.

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Using a combination of theoretical pieces about the production of masculinity and femininity, and intensely personal reflections, Valerie Walkerdine tells her **Schoolgirl fictions**. The book reads as an intellectual autobiography and a collection of ten years of her academic writings. She looks at the formation of identity - how gender and class come to be lived as real, distinct categories. She argues that in fact they are "fictions", created in and suffused with fantasy. She describes how these fictions are produced and inscribed in regulative social practices, using the school system as her primary example. At the same time she presents the way in which she herself has lived out these fictions.

Walkerdine presents ten years of her own writings, her own "fictions". At the beginning of the book, she quotes Foucault: "I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions ... It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or 'manufactures' something that does not yet exist, that is, it fictions it" (pxi). In this view, fictions or theories are both generative and generated. They are produced by the very social environment they aim to change. Similarly, people are both social products and producers, complex and contradictory. They live the fictional identities that are produced by social practices and dominant ideologies, but there is a poor fit, they do not live their roles comfortably. Therefore, one person might simultaneously encompass the role of the oppressed and the contradictions inherent in that role that reinforce the possibility of resistance.

Foucault speaks of the possibility of a "true discourse", and perhaps Walkerdine means to take a step towards that possibility in this book. The title of the book, **Schoolgirl fictions** and the quote from Foucault that she uses at the beginning of the book suggest that she wishes to question the accepted notion of what knowledge is and what academic writings are, and what kinds of experience provide a suitable basis for these writings. These statements that provide one's first impression of the book imply a view of knowledge based on the belief that we cannot know the "truth" or "reality", only versions of it, fictions about it. The way in which Walkerdine has written the book seems to be an extension of this theoretical position. The book involves an intertwining of two different narratives, one academic, theoretical and relatively impersonal, the

other autobiographical and highly personal. She uses this eclectic style as a technique to comment on the nature and status of "truth" in academia.

Implicitly, she questions what is considered as evidence in psychology, what kinds of facts are acceptable as a basis for "knowledge". The interweaving of often contradictory personal and academic reflections highlights these issues: who is to say which is more "real", more factual or more "true"? Many would find the multi-textured and uneven style and structure of the book unacceptable by academic standards, since it does not have the necessary methodological rigour to be admitted as knowledge. It is this very rejection of certain kinds of evidence, this "will to proof", that Walkerdine contests, sometimes explicitly in her theoretical pieces, but mostly implicitly, through the way she has written the book.

She places herself explicitly at the centre of the book. One is constantly aware that she is the narrator, telling the stories, interweaving the narratives of her own life and creating the structure. She argues that the traditional understanding of empirical observation is that the observer only minimally effects the dynamics of the interaction s/he observes. She maintains that this seeking for an objective truth or knowledge is voyeuristic, it attempts to know all but to remain untouching and untouched. She argues that this kind of detachment is impossible, since one becomes unwittingly and inextricably entangled with the interactions one is studying, changing the dynamics of the process and influencing its outcome. In contrast to this, she explicitly inserts herself into the text. One is constantly aware of the presence and influence of the author and her concerns in the interpretations she imposes on her own and others' experiences.

The way Walkerdine has written the book seems to have been greatly influenced by postmodernism. She has collected and presented a set of what she describes as "fictions", different voices, personal and political, autobiographical and academic, about education, gender and class. There is no explicit structuring argument, simply the statement that these are the fictions that form their narrator and that the book represents a journey from "schoolgirl" to "woman". However she makes no statements about how she, as narrator has formed the texts. She makes no explicit comparison between her own struggles and that which she writes about and makes no explicit statements about the contradictoriness of her different narrative voices.

Generally however, the method works well, though the author's aims and the flow of the text do suffer as a consequence, and are sometimes lost completely in a personal and self-serving outpouring. Also, although one is aware of certain overarching themes in the book, these are never made specific. In fact, one's general impression of the book is a vague, blurry feeling of not being exactly sure what it is that Walkerdine is aiming to do with the book. Even the methodological points made above had to be pieced together from the text as her methodological assumptions are not really made explicit.

In the content and theoretical assumptions of the book, Walkerdine again seems to have been influenced by postmodernist ideas and themes. She speaks of people as a "nexus of subjectivities", as opposed to the modernist perception of the individual as "real", a true (and in Marxism, revolutionary) self, enveloped by the social roles imposed upon it. People may struggle from position to position, powerful in one position and powerless in another, but there is no core, no "true self". While

Walkerdine accepts that the person's materiality does have some effect, she maintains that the meaning of this material position is determined by the discourse in which it is read. *Schoolgirl fictions* traces Walkerdine's movement from one "fictional identity" or "subject position" to another. Her transition from "struggling schoolgirl" to "educated working class woman" is not a move towards finding a true and revolutionary self, but rather a shift in position, a movement into a new discourse, a move which gives her a new voice and a new power, which enables her to speak in a new way. The approach she takes is very descriptive and evokes some sense of what it feels like to live as a woman in the world today, but it does have problematic aspects. Viewing the person as a collection of fictions implies that people are entirely produced and constituted by social processes, and inscribed in relations of power through discourse. The source of potential resistance is removed away from the person herself. There is no centre, no core, simply a collection of fictions, permeated with sociality.

The question she asks in her preface is "How can it be that femininity is a fiction and yet lived as though it were real, felt deeply, as though it were a universal truth of the female psyche?" (pxiii) To answer this question, she says, we must not look, as many feminists have, to some essential female voice that has been silenced, but to those expressions of opposition, however quiet and ineffectual, that women do make. Women are not simply "oppressed", but can occupy numerous positions in constantly shifting power relations, sometimes powerful, sometimes oppressed. Walkerdine maintains that we are not passive recipients of social roles and stereotypes, but take on certain fictional identities, produced and enmeshed with fantasy material and written into the powerful social practices which regulate us and through which we educate ourselves. Walkerdine writes that we should look at the sites of resistance, the fissures, the weak spots where our "socialisation" has not been completely effective. She writes "We can tell other stories. The stories can be very frightening because they appear to blow apart the fictions through which we have come to understand ourselves ... The stories of our subjugation do not tell the whole story: our socialisation does not work." (pxiv)

She presents her own fictions, her own stories in her book, her academic and autobiographical texts. They are contradictory in meaning and in texture. In this way it seems, she is trying to trace a history of her own seizure of power, her movement from a "schoolgirl", struggling, silenced and infantilised, to an "educated working class woman", powerful and with a voice of her own. She is looking for the cracks, the weak spots in her own fictional identities, the contradictions and complexities that made her own resistance possible. She presents herself as produced in the fictions of femininity and class. In addition, she is "fictioning" something else into being - a fictional self that is more able to speak and to be heard. She writes: "Now I have learned to speak, now I have stopped being a schoolgirl, have uttered words that would shock the teacher, I am no longer prepared to be silent." (p158). She attempts throughout the book to articulate those aspects of life that are not spoken about, either because of their "ordinariness" or because they are "taboo". She takes issue with the way people's entire lives are written off as having no interest because they are concerned only with the everyday business of living. She uses a variety of techniques - interview, observation, analysis of cultural artifacts (comics, books, movies) and autobiography in an attempt to access these hidden aspects of women's experience - women's sexuality, women's anger and resistance, women's reasoning. For it is in articulating these hidden realms of the taboo and the ordinary, that women often find the space for resistance, that the

cracks in socialisation begin to show. Her method highlights this: her combined use of the autobiographical and the theoretical, the personal and the public, emphasises that these neglected aspects of experiences are significant, that the personal is truly political and is worthy of being taken seriously as knowledge.

While Walkerdine's book works well as a descriptive work, and while it gets its theoretical points across eloquently, its implications for methodology and for the production of knowledge are less clear. Since "fiction" implies an absence of fact, it seems that if all academic work is a fiction, we can neither generalise from, nor legitimate our writings. Any basis for criticism is removed. Her designation of all her writings places her academic works and her personal experiences on the same level, both equally worthy of serious consideration. In theory, this principle is true enough. However, the way Walkerdine has put this into practice in *Schoolgirl Fictions*, placing her personal writings, unexplained, side by side with her theoretical pieces, seems to assume that knowledge lies transparently in the stories that we tell about ourselves, and that it requires no exegesis. The designation of both kinds of writings as fictions strips her theoretical work of its explanatory power and makes it merely an interesting description, a narrative.